

Aaron S. Williams Oral History Interview
Returned Peace Corps Volunteer Collection
Administrative Information

Creator: Aaron S. Williams
Interviewer: Julius Sztuk
Date of Interview: January 16, 2020
Location of Interview: Washington, D.C.
Length: 41 pages

Biographical Note

Aaron S. Williams served as a Peace Corps volunteer in the Dominican Republic from December 1967 to June 1970 in a teacher training program. He was appointed Director of the Peace Corps during the Obama administration.

Access

Open.

Usage Restrictions

According to the deed of gift signed March 11, 2020, copyright of these materials has been assigned to the United States Government. This interview is in the public domain.

Copyright

The copyright law of the United States (Title 17, United States Code) governs the making of photocopies or other reproductions of copyrighted material. Under certain conditions specified in the law, libraries and archives are authorized to furnish a photocopy or other reproduction. One of these specified conditions is that the photocopy or reproduction is not to be "used for any purpose other than private study, scholarship, or research." If a user makes a request for, or later uses, a photocopy or reproduction for purposes in excesses of "fair use," that user may be liable for copyright infringement. This institution reserves the right to refuse to accept a copying order if, in its judgment, fulfillment of the order would involve violation of copyright law. The copyright law extends its protection to unpublished works from the moment of creation in a tangible form. Direct your questions concerning copyright to the reference staff.

Technical Note

This transcript was created by Sonix software from the MP3 audio recording of the interview. The resulting text file was lightly edited and reformatted according to a standard template.

Suggested Citation

Aaron S. Williams, recorded interview by Julius Sztuk, January 16, 2020, page #, Returned Peace Corps Volunteer Collection, John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum.

DISCLAIMER

This transcript was generated automatically by Sonix software from the audio recording. The accuracy of the transcript cannot be guaranteed. Only the original audio recording constitutes the official record of this interview and should be used along with the transcript. If researchers have any concerns about accuracy or would like to recommend corrections, they are encouraged to contact the library reference staff.

Oral History Interview

with

Aaron S. Williams

January 16, 2020
Washington, D.C.

By Julius Sztuk

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

SZTUK: [00:00:02] Today is January 16, 2020. My name is Jay Sztuk. I'm a RPCV from Fiji and today I'm going to be interviewing Aaron Williams, who was a Peace Corps volunteer from 1967 to 1970 in the Dominican Republic, working in a teacher training program, and later served as a director of Peace Corps. Thanks for agreeing to be interviewed, Aaron.

WILLIAMS: [00:00:28] My pleasure, Jay. Looking forward to our conversation. Always great to talk about Peace Corps.

SZTUK: [00:00:33] So let's go way back to the beginning and start out. Tell me about your background and what got you interested in Peace Corps? Why did you join?

WILLIAMS: [00:00:41] Well, I grew up in Chicago in a working class neighborhood on the south side of Chicago. My father worked at the Post Office in downtown Chicago for many, many years and retired from there. My

mother had lots of different jobs, dental assistant, secretary. I was the first person in my family to graduate from college. We lived in a blue collar neighborhood primarily, and there was really no one in my orbit who had had any engagement with the outside world except for my father and some of my uncles who had served in World War II. So my father was a veteran and served in the Pacific, in Australia, India, and Burma, and my uncles had served in Europe. So that was the extent of my outside knowledge of the world. But it's interesting to note, as I'm sure you will find out when you talk to many children of World War II veterans, they really didn't talk about it. World War II is not something that people talked about. The veterans came back and moved on with their lives. And so even if you ask questions, you would get one word, one syllable responses. I'd rather not talk about that service.

SZTUK: [00:02:00] Nothing.

WILLIAMS: [00:02:01] Yeah, I mean, it's obviously a very traumatic time in their lives. My father had grown up in Mississippi in the segregated South. My mother was born and raised in Chicago. And so we spent our lives, of course, in Chicago. We only went south a couple of times. My mother never wanted to travel to the South in those days in the fifties and the sixties for obvious reasons.

WILLIAMS: [00:02:25] So I grew up in a large extended family and lots of uncles and aunts, cousins. My grandmother lived a couple of blocks away. We spent a lot of time with my grandmother, especially during the major holidays during the year. So it was a very reasonable, comfortable, loving environment, and I grew up with the idea that I would be a teacher because I'd had some really wonderful teachers in Chicago and my mother and father were very, very, very focused on education as a way to have a good life. And so I focused on education and did very well in school, and my objective when I graduated from college was to become a high school teacher. I went to a combination of Catholic schools and public schools, and then I did my college education. I got at a place in those days which was called Chicago Teachers College. It's now called Chicago State University.

WILLIAMS: [00:03:27] And it's like many, like in many major cities in America, there's always a large urban metropolitan university, a college, that provides affordable tuition to people from working class backgrounds. You know, like, for example, City College of New York City that had a whole series of Nobel Prize winners, and people like Henry Kissinger and Colin Powell went to that. So Chicago Teachers College was very much in that same vein and very affordable and I worked on my way all the way through school and didn't have any debt when I graduated from college. And people who were trained at Chicago State or Chicago Teachers College were automatically provided with opportunity to. So people who graduated from College Teachers College were considered to be some of the best qualified people in the city. And so you were pretty easy to find a place in Chicago public school system.

SZTUK: [00:04:33] Mm hmm.

WILLIAMS: [00:04:33] And in my case, I had studied geography because geography was in an area of shortage in terms of Chicago Public Schools. And plus, I really loved learning about the rest of the world. And I was very fortunate that at the time, my advisor and ultimately the chairman of the geography department at Chicago Teachers College was the distinguished well-known geographer Irving Cutler, and he was really magnificent in helping me look at the kind of courses I need to study to broaden my understanding of geography. So I was keenly aware of the outside world and studied every region of the world. The soils, the climate patterns, the people, the culture. It was something I was very familiar with in terms of academic background, and I was all set to teach in the city of Chicago.

WILLIAMS: [00:05:21] But during those same, my last couple of years in college, I had, I was still very young when John Kennedy was president, but I had read his speeches, had heard some of his recordings. I learned quite a bit about Sargent Shriver and his work in creating the Peace Corps. I talked to a Peace Corps recruiter by the name of Janet Sledge, who had served in Jamaica. I think she also, if I remember correctly, she also went to my college and she was very encouraging about the idea of going to join the Peace Corps. So that's when that idea entered into my mind.

SZTUK: [00:05:55] Is that the first time you'd heard about Peace Corps?

WILLIAMS: [00:05:57] The first time I heard about it was in the Kennedy speech and a Shriver speech. And then I inquired a little bit more and met her because she was a recruiter on campus.

SZTUK: [00:06:07] OK.

WILLIAMS: [00:06:10] So but I didn't tell a lot of people that I was interested in the Peace Corps because this would have been seen as something breaking what appeared to be a life that was going to be well-planned. And I would be a high school teacher, probably eventually get a graduate degree and become a high school principal in Chicago, which was considered to be a very wonderful place in our society, a great career and settle down. A normal life.

SZTUK: [00:06:33] Sure.

WILLIAMS: [00:06:34] Like so many of my classmates and alums of Chicago Teachers College did. My best friend also did. So I confided to two people that I was going to think about joining the Peace Corps. First of all, my mother. And interestingly enough, Jay, she was really, she was really excited about the idea. She had never traveled anywhere outside of the country at that time, but she thought it was a good idea. Government program. I would learn a foreign language. She figured I'd be in a secure place. And the other person was my best friend from high school who also we went to college together, as my friend Harry Simmons. He thought also it was an interesting idea. Everybody else in my family and circle of friends, they thought this was a crazy idea.

SZTUK: [00:07:25] Including your dad?

WILLIAMS: [00:07:26] Now my dad was noncommittal. But my mother had a weighted vote in our family, both in terms of our nuclear family and also our extended family. And I needed that because, you know, in holidays, people would ask me what I was going to do next. And I talked about maybe thinking about the Peace Corps, which no one knew what that was

or why would you do that? Where would you go? I never heard of some of the places where they wanted to send me, etcetera. But they had never heard of some of those places. So it was, I kept it pretty tightly held idea I was going to join the Peace Corps. But I decided more and more as I learned more and more about it that I wanted to try this. And so I signed up. I applied and I was accepted. And I was accepted into a program that was going to send me to Central America. I was accepted into a program for certified teachers are going to be in teacher training programs in El Salvador and Honduras, two places that I had never imagined going to.

SZTUK: [00:08:33] Right.

WILLIAMS: [00:08:34] When they asked me where I wanted to go, what my preference on, on the application, I said Brazil. That was a country I knew in Latin America. I thought, well, it would be good to learn Portuguese or Spanish, and I study a lot about Brazil in geography, so I was pretty intrigued about that.

SZTUK: [00:08:49] It would be an intriguing country for a geographer.

WILLIAMS: [00:08:51] At the time, it was one of Peace Corps' largest countries, largest programs. In those days, the big programs, Jay, were Brazil, Philippines, India. Indonesia, not being Indonesia, was still thought of Indonesia. So that's how I ended up being accepted into the Peace Corps. And I was sent to San Diego State College in San Diego, California, for training, along with a hundred other people who were going to be divided between those two countries. So off I went, my first airplane, my first jet airplane trip to San Diego. I left Chicago in early, I guess in October or September, flew out to California and started what was going to be, as it turned out, one of the most momentous decisions of my life.

SZTUK: [00:09:40] Yeah. So how long was your training?

WILLIAMS: [00:09:43] It was 14 weeks.

SZTUK: [00:09:46] 14 weeks.

WILLIAMS: [00:09:47] Yep, 14 weeks. And from August, actually from August to December. And it covered a wide range of things. It covered both area studies and technical studies. We learned Spanish, student teaching, science and education theory, reading, language arts, general curriculum, community development. We also had a really interesting component of kind of survival training, field training in Mexico. It was in Baja California.

SZTUK: [00:10:17] Oh, so you went down to Baja?

WILLIAMS: [00:10:19] Yeah.

SZTUK: [00:10:20] Which was an easier thing to do back then.

WILLIAMS: [00:10:23] Yeah, that's right. But it was also the toughest part of a Peace Corps training because we were just dumped down there with a few dollars and told to find our host families and arrange with them to stay with them. And then we would also be assigned to teacher training slots or teacher internships, if you will, in Mexican schools. So that was quite an eye-opening experience. That was the toughest part of our Peace Corps training. It was cold in Baja California. We didn't have much money. I slept in bed with seven children. That's all the families could offer. You know, it was not much food. And my Spanish was rudimentary at best at the time, so it was an eye-opening experience. But so was working in the San Diego County and in Chula Vista schools. That was also eye opening, right?

SZTUK: [00:10:50] Yeah.

WILLIAMS: [00:11:24] So it was really quite an interesting experience. Of course, all of us were trained teachers or had graduated education, and so we all felt very comfortable in the classrooms.

SZTUK: [00:11:34] So Chula Vista is close to the border and there's a very large Hispanic population there?

WILLIAMS: [00:11:39] Yeah.

SZTUK: [00:11:40] So you were teaching in schools.

WILLIAMS: [00:11:42] We're teaching kids who were somewhat bilingual, but not entirely. Spanish was really their first language.

SZTUK: [00:11:49] Let me back up a minute. So your mother was supportive of this? What if she wasn't? What would you have done if she had told you you're crazy?

WILLIAMS: [00:11:57] It would have made it harder but I'm pretty sure that by that time, I was pretty much really intrigued by the Peace Corps concept and idea. And I had read a lot about the Peace Corps. The more I read, the more enthusiastic I became, and I don't think it would have changed my decision. Luckily, I didn't have to face that.

SZTUK: [00:12:15] And did the rest of your friends and family kind of come around after a while?

WILLIAMS: [00:12:18] Not really, no. Not until I've been overseas for about a year.

SZTUK: [00:12:21] Yeah.

WILLIAMS: [00:12:21] You know, because this was a big mystery. And also, why would somebody who just achieved a great feat of a college degree and had a really great job, which would put me on track to having a great middle class life? Why would I give that up to go to some strange place that no one had ever heard of? To do something they didn't know quite what was going to be the outcome? It was a mystery.

SZTUK: [00:12:43] Yeah, yeah. Well, back in the, this would have been what, 1966, '67?

WILLIAMS: [00:12:47] '67. Yeah.

SZTUK: [00:12:50] That was the time when people didn't travel overseas as much as they do now.

WILLIAMS: [00:12:55] That's right. Yeah, travel on an airplane there was, people wore suits, it was very, you know, very formal. You know, you got served your meals on china and glassware and fine silver. So it was a totally different world.

SZTUK: [00:13:08] Yeah. Great. So and then you got assigned to Dominican Republic.

WILLIAMS: [00:13:16] Well, that's an interesting story. So the Dominican Republic was not one of the countries programmed for our group. It was El Salvador and Honduras. So about two thirds through our training, we were visited by a woman who was the deputy minister of education from the Dominican Republic, a woman by the name of Victoria Sanchez. And she came and she said that the Dominican Republic needed a cadre of certified teachers to come and continue to support the teacher training program in the Dominican Republic that was being funded by USAID, the U.S. Agency for International Development. And so Dr. Nardelli, the head of the training program, asked if 12 people would volunteer to go to the Dominican Republic instead of going to Honduras and El Salvador.

WILLIAMS: [00:14:14] Now this was a big deal because we had been studying for many weeks now. I was assigned to Honduras. I was assigned to a place called Choluteca in Honduras. I knew where that was, I had done my research. I knew who was going to be stationed with me. My roommate in Peace Corps, Dennis Kroger, was going to Honduras also. So this was, you know, I felt like I was already assigned. But Victoria Sanchez was very, very convincing, and she talked about this wonderful country, which I had really very little knowledge of, except I knew we had invaded them in 1965. The United States invaded in 1965 to stop the so-called Dominican revolution. During the Johnson administration, we had sent Marines in and I had vague, a vague notion of that, but not great information. I was still pretty young. But it was something about the way she presented, the way she talked about it, and I decided that I would volunteer. So 12 of us agreed, of the hundred, to go to the Dominican Republic.

SZTUK: [00:15:21] And you were the first group to go to?

WILLIAMS: [00:15:23] No, we weren't the first group. They had had volunteers. It's one of the first programs that was established.

SZTUK: [00:15:28] Oh, OK.

WILLIAMS: [00:15:29] So volunteers are already there working in this USAID program, but they had a shortfall. They needed 12 certified teachers. So we were going to make up for the shortfall in the previous groups. And so I volunteered, much to my surprise, and it was one of the best decisions I could have made. Second best decision I made, to go to the Dominican Republic. So we wrapped up our training. We went to Mexico in San Diego, we went to our field training in Baja California, you know, nearby near into Nevada. And then we were prepared to take our final Spanish language tests to see who was going to be able to go. And I had been struggling with Spanish my entire training. My language that I had learned in high school and college was German. So German did not help me much with Spanish. And I was struggling and I probably was not studying as hard as I should have in retrospect. So I really sweated the final exam. But fortunately, I somehow managed to eke out the lowest possible passing grade. In those days it was one to four.

SZTUK: [00:16:50] Right.

WILLIAMS: [00:16:51] Five being native speaker, four being proficient, and so forth. And I got a one plus. It was probably more like a one minus somehow. And but I was certain that I probably got, I was selected because, first, I had volunteered to go to the Dominican Republic, and secondly, because I was a certified teacher.

SZTUK: [00:17:14] OK.

WILLIAMS: [00:17:14] So I was very confident for some unknown reason that once I got to the D.R., I was going to be able to become more proficient in Spanish. I was just, I had a feeling about that.

SZTUK: [00:17:28] Right.

WILLIAMS: [00:17:28] So I left with probably the lowest score of anybody of my 100 colleagues, right, and went to the Dominican Republic.

SZTUK: [00:17:37] It was sink or swim.

WILLIAMS: [00:17:39] Sink or swim. So off we went to the Dominican Republic, right? We arrived there. I remember arriving there one dark night. This is, you know, in 1967. Way before the Dominican Republic became a tourist destination.

SZTUK: [00:17:53] And you arrived at night, so you didn't get to see the country.

WILLIAMS: [00:17:56] No, we arrived at night. Peace Corps insisted that we go down there before Christmas, which was really a surprise. We couldn't figure out why we had to be there before Christmas. Why didn't we have a chance to go home and share Christmas with our family before we went overseas? But they insisted that we get there before Christmas. Of course, anyone who works and knows Latin America knows that from the 15th of December to the 20th of January, Latin America shuts down. It's a holiday. It's the Christmas season, not just the Christmas. There's also the celebration of the Kings, the Three Kings. And so it was not the greatest time to get the Dominican Republic. So but we went. And so we were sent down around, you know, early December to the Dominican Republic.

SZTUK: [00:18:43] Was it planned that way so you would have some transition time, and not schools?

WILLIAMS: [00:18:48] Schools were closed. Yeah. You know, most of the volunteers were gone on traveling around the country on vacation. You know, because those days people didn't leave the country, they didn't leave like they are now. They travel anywhere they want to travel. So people weren't around and it was a, you know, a small group of people. But luckily, the Peace Corps staff was there and we were met by two real outstanding staff members. Henry Reynolds and Kyra Eberly met us there that night in the airport, a small, you know, very dark old airport in Dominican Republic. And they put us in a Peace Corps vehicle and drove us down to the old colonial city in the dark. And it was, you know, very dark in colonial city.

Took us to the Peace Corps pension hostel more than anything else, and there we were, our first night in the Dominican Republic.

SZTUK: [00:19:47] So do you remember, you must've been excited to be on that plane and land here in a new country?

WILLIAMS: [00:19:53] We were all excited. We all, of course, everybody was wondering, did we make the right decision? Should we have stayed with our group and gone to Honduras and El Salvador? You know, was this the right thing to do, after all of this bonding with our group over the 14 weeks in California, right? But you know, we've instantly formed a very tight group among the 12 of us, right?

SZTUK: [00:20:14] Mm hmm.

WILLIAMS: [00:20:15] And so we arrived and started our Peace Corps orientation to the Dominican Republic. I remember that first night we slept in bunk beds and two people to a room with bunk beds. And it's really, you know, rudimentary hotel, shared bathroom down the hall. And I remember crack of dawn I heard this rooster outside my window, and I was like, why would there be a rooster in the middle of the city? And so that was my rude awakening to the Dominican Republic, right? And we started our routine, you know, learn how to, where we were going to bank, where are we going to get our continuation of our Spanish language training. You know, how are we going to move around the country. We've got our our site assignments. I was assigned to a place called Monte Plata, which in Spanish is white mountain. Small town of about two thousand people about 70 kilometers north of the capital Santo Domingo. It's now a large provincial capital of about 200,000 people. It was a small town when I went there.

WILLIAMS: [00:21:27] And we were assigned to sites that were the sites of the teacher training program. There were eight sites around the country where volunteers would teach the Dominicans who were in this program. And this is a very interesting program. So this is one of the things also that was interesting when Victoria Sanchez came to talk to us about it. In that the program was designed to give rural school teachers in the Dominican

Republic a chance to obtain their high school diplomas. Because the average rural school teacher in the D.R. at that time had about a third grade education.

SZTUK: [00:22:04] Really?

WILLIAMS: [00:22:04] So they were barely ahead of their classes they were teaching. So the idea would be they would, number one, get a high school diploma over a course of two years. They would then be able to get a chance to be assigned to a school in a metropolitan area or a larger town that would improve their working conditions and also receive a salary increase. To do that, they had to come to the training centers every weekend, they gave up their weekends for two years.

SZTUK: [00:22:34] So they were working.

WILLIAMS: [00:22:36] In service, in service training. Yeah, they had to give up their weekends and they had to give up their summers for two years. So those are real sacrifices for poor teachers who had families out in the countryside, had to travel back and forth. Then so we taught those in the capacitation centers as we called them. And then we taught all the courses, right? We taught language arts, history, geography, all the math courses, we taught all in Spanish.

SZTUK: [00:23:06] And these people would have been in their twenties, maybe early 20s?

WILLIAMS: [00:23:09] Oh no, they were from the early twenties to late fifties. Most of them were much older than we were.

SZTUK: [00:23:16] Most of them were older.

WILLIAMS: [00:23:16] Cause I was very young. I was only 20 years old. So this was quite a challenge, especially with my rudimentary Spanish. So I had to really accelerate my language skills, which I did. One of the things I did is that every morning I would buy the newspaper there, the Listín Diario. And that was the equivalent of the daily, and one of two daily newspapers in

Santo Domingo. And it was about the, I would say it was about the size of an average New York Times. Full length. And so I would get my Velasquez Spanish diction, Spanish English dictionary, had to sit down and I'd go through it word by word. And every word I didn't know, I looked up. So I started out, it would take me four hours to read the entire daily newspaper. Then it got down to three and a half. I got it down to two and a half, and I got down to one. And pretty soon, within a few months, I was reading, just like I read The New York Times.

SZTUK: [00:24:21] Really?

WILLIAMS: [00:24:22] So I really, in Spanish, you know, and my ability to acquire the accent in Spanish and to understand that, I always had good comprehension. And the acid test in language for me, Jay, I don't know how you feel about this, but is when you're able to converse easily over the telephone. Once you can do that, you've mastered the language because you have no visual clues, right?

SZTUK: [00:24:50] Right, right.

WILLIAMS: [00:24:51] So I would say within eight to 10 months, I was pretty fluent in Spanish.

SZTUK: [00:24:57] Great.

WILLIAMS: [00:25:00] Because I had to be, had to teach these courses.

SZTUK: [00:25:02] Sure. And their level of English was what? Did they speak English at all?

WILLIAMS: [00:25:07] No. Very little. Because we're in the rural Dominican Republic and these are people who have a third or fourth, fifth grade education. Very few had a high school education. But they were a wonderful group of people. And so each of us in my center, there were three other, two other volunteers. Three other volunteers. Actually four or five of us at first, then it became three. So we each were assigned an average of 10 to 12 teachers that we were responsible for. So during the week when they

were teaching, we would visit them on a circuit by motorcycle or horseback or walking, to observe their teaching methods in their schools. And we spent two or three nights with them. So I actually stayed with the teachers. You know, they fed me, they offered me housing, and I often slept in their houses or ate their food. They really opened up their homes and their hearts to us. We developed a really close working and personal relationships.

SZTUK: [00:26:09] And you got to see more of the country at the same time.

WILLIAMS: [00:26:12] Oh yeah. And all, you know, I mean, I walked I rode a horse, had my own horse. Here I am from the south side of Chicago, and I had to learn how to ride a horse and take care of a horse.

SZTUK: [00:26:22] I was going to ask about that. So coming from Chicago and going to a place like Dominican Republic, now this was all new to you.

WILLIAMS: [00:26:28] Totally new, yeah. And I never spent any time except on a couple of trips to Mississippi in any rural areas.

SZTUK: [00:26:36] Do you have any things that stand out in those first few days that you were there that really?

WILLIAMS: [00:26:42] Oh, sure. I mean, you know, like all Peace Corps volunteers, I had to find my own housing. I had to, you know, deal with getting a latrine built and learn how to use it properly.

SZTUK: [00:26:55] So there wasn't much support from the Peace Corps.

WILLIAMS: [00:26:58] Well, Peace Corps, well, there was a shortage of housing in my town. So I was taken out to the town by my good friend over time and associate program director, Henry Reynolds. And he told me to talk to the other volunteers to find out how they had found housing and they would help me. So it worked out pretty much that way.

SZTUK: [00:27:24] Yeah. So there were some other volunteers out there.

WILLIAMS: [00:27:26] But housing was short in a town, in that size town.

SZTUK: [00:27:30] What was your house like? You said you had to get a latrine built, so there was no indoor plumbing?

WILLIAMS: [00:27:34] Well, first of all, I couldn't find my first house. I couldn't find a decent house. So what happened is that I negotiated a deal with a guy who had a deserted house where he was keeping goats. So I negotiated with him that he would remove the goats and I'd take over the house and I would put in the electrical wiring and the indoor plumbing so I'd have running water. But no toilet or like that, no toilet at all. I'd have a shower and running water in the sink.

SZTUK: [00:28:07] Right.

WILLIAMS: [00:28:07] And so I had to, first of all, clean that house thoroughly after goats had been living there for about a year. I had to share my latrine with a pig that lived right next to the latrine. And I had to learn how to wire a house.

SZTUK: [00:28:21] Oh, so you did that.

WILLIAMS: [00:28:24] And get, you know, get myself connected to the central grid, and, you know, I was busy. And of course, also help my Spanish because I had to learn.

SZTUK: [00:28:35] Sure.

WILLIAMS: [00:28:36] All of those different, all that different vocabulary to do all that, right? Negotiate with lots of people, carpenters and plumbers.

SZTUK: [00:28:43] Yeah. So you were really roughing it there?

WILLIAMS: [00:28:45] Oh yeah.

SZTUK: [00:28:46] And like you said, a big change.

WILLIAMS: [00:28:47] Big change from Chicago. But also I had other volunteers who lived in the town, you know, wonderful people. Judy Thoms was terrific. Actually, Judy Johnson, Thoms is her married name. Victoria Thomas was there. She was very good. And so it was a, we had a good group of people who all worked together. Very collegial.

SZTUK: [00:29:18] So how were you received by the folks in the local community there?

WILLIAMS: [00:29:23] It was wonderful. They were, you know, first of all, they were very tolerant of my rudimentary Spanish at first. They thought it was great that I was trying to speak Spanish and they knew how much I was trying. And the biggest thing of all is that children, the children support you and you can understand children, right? And so they're very patient with you when you learn a new language. So they were a big source of support.

SZTUK: [00:29:44] Yeah.

WILLIAMS: [00:29:45] And I had a big entourage that followed me around to listen to me maneuver my way in their society.

SZTUK: [00:29:52] I think you might have mentioned this, but tell me again, how big was this town that you lived in?

WILLIAMS: [00:29:55] About two thousand people.

SZTUK: [00:29:56] Two thousand people. Well, pretty small community.

WILLIAMS: [00:30:00] Yeah. So, you know, it was a, you know, it was a very busy job. We had a lot to do. We had worked all year. In the summers, we brought them together and they lived in the town or the community, back and forth to their, traveled back and forth to their rural communities, right? And so it was a busy, busy time and these teachers were sacrificing and we knew they were sacrificing. So we were determined to do everything we could to offer the best possible, highest quality of instruction that we could we could provide. And we had great technical support from the Peace Corps in Santo Domingo.

SZTUK: [00:30:37] And do you feel like you accomplished that? Did you have a high passing rate out of the school?

WILLIAMS: [00:30:43] We did. I think that as I look back and forth, I stayed in touch with some of these teachers over the years. I'd say that probably 70 percent of them went on to become established teachers or went to higher education, went to university or college. Changed professions. I can think of two or three outstanding cases of that, and they were grateful. Unfortunately, the government of the Dominican Republic reneged on their promise, and many of them did not receive their salary increases because of budgetary, national budgetary constraints, so that part of it was not fulfilled for many years until. It actually wasn't fulfilled finally until after our group had departed the Dominican Republic, but we didn't know that at the time.

SZTUK: [00:31:32] Sure. Now were there other local staff at the school as well as the Peace Corps?

WILLIAMS: [00:31:38] Oh yeah, we also worked with Dominican counterparts, and they were crucial. As a matter of fact, I tried to recruit a certain young lady by the name of Rosa Mustafa to be our one of our teacher, we used to call them master teachers. She was a very experienced science teacher in the local high school, the regular normal high school in that city. And she refused to work with us. And eventually I married her.

SZTUK: [00:32:11] Oh.

WILLIAMS: [00:32:16] So I was unhappy that she decided not to work with us, but I was very happy that she became my wife. We've been married for 50 years.

SZTUK: [00:32:27] At least your recruitment was successful in some way.

WILLIAMS: [00:32:29] That's right. But we had really marvelous Dominican counterparts who were our master teachers. They worked with us also. So

the combination of American teachers, volunteer teachers, and Dominican teachers.

SZTUK: [00:32:41] And then did you establish some good relationships with those folks there?

WILLIAMS: [00:32:46] Oh, yeah, yeah. Very much so. It was a very warm, welcoming community. The Dominican society at that time was still suffering from the invasion, and there was a certain degree of anti-Americanism, but it was primarily in Santo Domingo. I didn't experience any of that per se in my town, nor did the other volunteers per se. But the invasion was in 1965, so it wasn't that far removed. Sometimes when you'd go to the capital and people heard you speaking English and knew you were an American, you know, they'd hassle you. There was still some lingering resentment. But overall, it was a very welcoming environment for the Americans, the Peace Corps volunteers.

WILLIAMS: [00:33:35] Also Peace Corps volunteers were highly regarded in Dominican Republic because during the revolution in 1965, Peace Corps volunteers had actually helped and worked with the rebels because they felt that this was a justifiable revolution. And so their reputation was, they were highly regarded. They had a great reputation in the Dominican Republic. They were, Peace Corps volunteers were highly regarded.

SZTUK: [00:34:05] Really.

WILLIAMS: [00:34:06] Nurses that helped wounded rebels. Some Peace Corps volunteers organized feeding centers in areas that were blockaded by the troops.

SZTUK: [00:34:17] So Peace Corps wasn't pulled out during the revolution.

WILLIAMS: [00:34:21] They were. Some were, but some stayed.

SZTUK: [00:34:24] Some stayed. They stayed on their own?

WILLIAMS: [00:34:26] Yeah, no. Not on their own, they stayed with Peace Corps staff.

SZTUK: [00:34:29] Oh, OK. Interesting.

WILLIAMS: [00:34:32] But that was before I had arrived. So I benefited from that goodwill that was generated by the volunteers who had aligned themselves with the rebel cause.

SZTUK: [00:34:43] And obviously.

WILLIAMS: [00:34:44] Much to the consternation of the U.S. government.

SZTUK: [00:34:49] And obviously the local, your local counterparts respected your abilities and your efforts and were grateful for your efforts?

WILLIAMS: [00:34:58] Yeah, they were.

SZTUK: [00:34:58] You felt like your job was meaningful?

WILLIAMS: [00:35:00] It was a meaningful job. It was a wonderful time for a young person to really, you know, think of. The great thing about Peace Corps, as you know, you're a returned volunteer, is that number one, you develop resiliency, right? Because you have to face tough situations all the time by yourself primarily. And you have to dig deep and learn a lot about who you are and how to deal with adversity and develops resilience. In my case, it was who was a wonderful experience to learn to speak fluently a foreign language. And so after two years, I had a really amazing opportunity to present itself to me. So I had married Rosa. We were about to leave Dominican Republic and go back to the United States. This is in 1969. And Henry Reynolds, my boss and associate program, uh, Peace Corps associate, Peace Corps program director, asked me if I'd be willing to stay on a third year if I could get a new job in a new city. And I told him I'd be interested in talking to him about it.

WILLIAMS: [00:36:18] So it turns out that there was another USAID program in the Dominican Republic that needed Peace Corps volunteers. And this was with the Catholic university in the northern part of the country in a place called Santiago. And it was a program that was run by St. Louis

University, a Jesuit school, and the head of the dean of the faculty of education was a Jesuit priest by the name of Felipe Arroyo. So Father Arroyo, who had been Fidel Castro's headmaster in high school in Cuba, had been one of the last priests to have been forced out of Cuba. And he moved to the Dominican Republic and he created a marvelous scholarship and faculty development program in conjunction with, supported by USAID.

WILLIAMS: [00:37:21] So in the process, a number of Dominican professors were sent to the United States under a program called LASPAU, L-A-S-P-A-U, which was a joint program between USAID and Harvard University. And they were sent to various universities in the United States under full scholarships to either get their master's degree in certain areas or a PhD. So there was a need for a few teachers, professors, to come in and cover their classes while they were away in long-term training.

SZTUK: [00:37:55] Oh, OK.

WILLIAMS: [00:37:56] And so they selected four or five volunteers who were fluent in Spanish and had the technical expertise to come teach at the Catholic university. So I was one of the individuals that they asked to go and teach. And I was assigned to the faculty of education. And so in the faculty of education, I designed a student teaching course for the seniors at the university, which was very similar to the student teaching that I had experienced at Chicago Teachers College in the city of Chicago. So it was an incredible opportunity that only the Peace Corps could offer someone who had didn't have a lot of experience like in my case. But by that time, of course, I knew the Dominican school system very well, K through 12. I taught all the subjects and I knew a number of the officials in the Dominican Ministry of Education. And so Father Arroyo interviewed me and decided to give me a chance. And so Rosa and I moved to Santiago, which was also the region of the country where she had been born. It was her native area.

SZTUK: [00:39:11] Oh, OK. So she was happy to go back.

WILLIAMS: [00:39:13] She was happy to go back.

SZTUK: [00:39:14] I wonder now, how far into your volunteer term were you when you got married?

WILLIAMS: [00:39:22] The last year.

SZTUK: [00:39:23] So it was in your second year there.

WILLIAMS: [00:39:25] Second year, yeah.

SZTUK: [00:39:25] Been in country for a year and a half or so.

WILLIAMS: [00:39:28] Two years, yeah.

SZTUK: [00:39:30] So I think that your life changed or your situation changed, being married.

WILLIAMS: [00:39:41] Dramatically.

SZTUK: [00:39:41] Being married to a local.

WILLIAMS: [00:39:43] That's right. Yeah.

SZTUK: [00:39:46] Well, in what ways do you think it was different after being married?

WILLIAMS: [00:39:51] Well, I mean, it wasn't that different because we were both educators and we were starting out a new experience at the Catholic university, right? So I think that she was in school and also teaching in a high school in Santiago. I was at the university. It was an exciting time. We were, of course, surrounded by young faculty just like ourselves, many of them recently married. We made great friendships that lasted our lifetime. The university was a special place because the idea was to create a modern American style university in the Dominican Republic. In those days in Latin America, many of the teachers or professors were part-time because you really couldn't earn a decent living as a full-time university professor. So the idea was to create a cohort of well-paid, highly

educated, highly trained university professors that would provide, that would create the faculty for the Catholic university. And to this day, the Catholic university in the Dominican Republic, the University Madre y Maestra, mother and teacher, is one of the finest universities in the country, if not in all of Latin America.

SZTUK: [00:41:08] What's the name of the university?

WILLIAMS: [00:41:11] UCMM, UCMM. The Catholic University Mother and Teacher [Pontificia Universidad Católica Madre y Maestra]. It was a very successful program, one USAID, one of the U.S. government and USAID. Real success stories. And many of the leaders in government and business, politics and NGOs, people who are trained at that university. And so I was there at the time when the future leadership of the Dominican Republic was launching their careers. It was a wonderful time.

SZTUK: [00:41:50] So in your initial assignment, you were working with people who had low level of education and kind of bringing up the minimum standard. Then when you move to Santiago, you were working with.

WILLIAMS: [00:42:01] Some of the elites of the country.

SZTUK: [00:42:03] And university graduates who were well educated.

WILLIAMS: [00:42:04] And working for one of the most dynamic educators and leaders in Father Arroyo, who was a Spanish priest, a Spanish Jesuit priest, who was a great visionary and had put together a really outstanding program with support of St. Louis University and USAID funding. So it was a wonderful turn of events which really gave me a tremendous chance to grow in my career. And I started thinking about my life after the Peace Corps and what would I do after the Peace Corps.

SZTUK: [00:42:37] So you got to do some really big things there that if you were teaching at a high school in Chicago, you wouldn't have.

WILLIAMS: [00:42:43] Never would have had a chance to do. Create my own course, you know. The university, the Catholic university, sent me to the United

States to do some basic research on how did I want to design and implement a student teaching program, which was the first of its kind in the Dominican Republic. And then I had to sign up local high schools who would provide places for our graduates or our soon to be graduates to practice their teaching. We had to put together supervisory protocols. It was a design the whole program from A to Z with my Dominican counterparts.

SZTUK: [00:43:21] It sounds like it would have been a very busy time for you.

WILLIAMS: [00:43:23] Very busy time.

SZTUK: [00:43:24] A lot of hard work.

WILLIAMS: [00:43:25] A lot of hard work, yeah.

SZTUK: [00:43:26] So what do you feel like are your main accomplishments, your biggest accomplishments that you remember?

WILLIAMS: [00:43:36] I would say that, um, personally I would say the learning a foreign language and becoming fluent in a foreign language is a major accomplishment.

SZTUK: [00:43:48] Yeah.

WILLIAMS: [00:43:50] Being tested and I was still very young, you know, I had completed high school and college in three years each, so I graduated early. So I was only 20 years old and going out into the world. And so I was able to develop into a much more mature person and person who accepted a lot of responsibility as a Peace Corps volunteer. Secondly, I was able to do a lot of very creative things because Peace Corps, as you know, gives you a lot of room to grow and explore and do things that are non-traditional. I was able to do a lot of that in my job teaching in this teacher training program. I like to think that I, from the Dominican standpoint, helped a lot of people who are striving to improve their lives and do better for their children, for their community. And I was able to see that evolve before my own eyes. I think we made good recommendations

and contributions to the Dominican primary and secondary education system.

WILLIAMS: [00:44:54] So, you know, I think we made a big difference. All of us, all of us volunteers who worked in these seven or eight centers around the country. We all made a difference. I think we were led by really outstanding leadership in the Peace Corps. We had an outstanding director guy by the name of Tom Gibbons, who was a terrific country director. We had great staff in Henry Reynolds and Kyra Eberly, who went on to have great careers in the State Department and USAID. So I felt it was a it was a good time to be in the Dominican Republic, without a doubt. Also at the university, I was able to make, to contribute to an amazing Dominican institution that has continued to be a leader in all aspects of Dominican society.

SZTUK: [00:45:54] Yeah.

WILLIAMS: [00:45:55] And to engage with and become friends with a group of people who went on to become the leadership of that country where I remained in contact with throughout my career, because I continued my career subsequently with USAID, eventually as a Foreign Service officer, and served primarily in Latin America. So I remained friends with them for throughout that period of time.

SZTUK: [00:46:19] Do you think that if you hadn't joined Peace Corps, do you think your career would have been in that international arena or not?

WILLIAMS: [00:46:31] Well, I don't. There's no chance that I probably would have entered into the international arena because I didn't have a a channel to enter into that arena. There was no door, no window. Joining the Peace Corps was the most important decision I've ever made in my life. Everything that I've done in terms of a profession and my personal life, all of that emanated from the decision I made to join the Peace Corps in 1967.

SZTUK: [00:46:57] Yeah.

WILLIAMS: [00:46:58] It changed everything. I became a person who was steeped in foreign affairs. I learned to speak another language. I met my wife, partner of 50 years. We've raised our children, who are also bilingual, in that environment subsequently. It opened, expanded my mind to look at the world from a totally different angle. I ended up going into business because I now had a different perspective and a different view of the world. I never would have gotten an MBA if I'd gone into teaching high school in Chicago. I probably would have gotten a graduate degree in education and probably become a high school principal, which would have been a perfectly respectable and good thing to do, but it wouldn't have led to the life that I've had.

SZTUK: [00:47:47] Yeah.

WILLIAMS: [00:47:48] Without a doubt. So that decision to join the Peace Corps was transformative in my life, without a doubt.

SZTUK: [00:47:55] OK, very much so. You didn't extend for a full year. You were there for about six months extra?

WILLIAMS: [00:48:03] No, it was a full year, a full academic year.

SZTUK: [00:48:06] Oh, OK. And then it was time to leave. Did you consider extending longer?

WILLIAMS: [00:48:11] I did. The university offered me a full-time position at the university, right? And I thought about doing that. But I also recognized at that point that I needed to go back and get my graduate degree, even if I was going to return and teach at the university. So that was important. By that time, I decided I was going to get a degree in business because I thought, I wasn't certain if I was going to have a career in government or in business, but I thought an MBA would be practical way to be able to engage in a productive way in either career, in government or in business. So I decided to get an MBA, which was certainly not on my radar in my earlier years.

SZTUK: [00:48:57] And when you left Dominican Republic, did you return to Chicago?

WILLIAMS: [00:49:01] I did. But first of all, I didn't know what I was going to do in terms of school and employment when I left the Dominican Republic. But Tom Giddens, our country director, suggested that I stop by Peace Corps headquarters here in Washington and see if there might be something that I could do with Peace Corps. Which is not unusual, as you know, many Peace Corps volunteers do that after their service. So I took Tom up on his offer. At that time Tom was then, as I remember, the head of Latin America for Peace Corps here in Washington. And so I came up probably arrived in Washington on Monday, and I met with a number of people, and by Wednesday I had a new job.

SZTUK: [00:49:49] Really.

WILLIAMS: [00:49:50] In Peace Corps recruitment.

SZTUK: [00:49:51] OK.

WILLIAMS: [00:49:54] So they asked me where I wanted to work in Peace Corps recruitment. I said, well, I think I want to return to my hometown and work in the Chicago regional office, which covered most of the Midwest.

SZTUK: [00:50:04] Sure.

WILLIAMS: [00:50:05] So I went to work as a recruiter in the Chicago regional office, and I was part of the new group that just formed under a guy by the name of Leonard Robinson, that was focused on minority recruitment because Peace Corps wanted to increase our diversity in Peace Corps in the time. This was now 1970.

SZTUK: [00:50:29] Yeah.

WILLIAMS: [00:50:30] And so I joined Leonard Robinson's group of minority recruiters, and we were based in in regional offices around the country, in San Francisco, in New York, in Minneapolis, in Chicago. And so my territory

was the entire Midwest. So I traveled to most of the major universities and colleges in the Midwest over the course of the year, recruiting for the Peace Corps, which was a terrific job. You get to tell people who are interested in the Peace Corps all about your experience in Peace Corps and encourage other like-minded people to join the Peace Corps. It was a wonderful, wonderful transition.

SZTUK: [00:51:10] And how long did you do that for?

WILLIAMS: [00:51:14] For one year. And of course, it also introduced my wife to my hometown of Chicago.

SZTUK: [00:51:24] OK, so now you've completed your Peace Corps service and worked as a recruiter for a couple of years. And as you noted, this decision to join the Peace Corps kind of shaped the rest of your career. I know that you've been involved in international work ever since then with USAID and RTI. And then in 2009, you became the director of the entire Peace Corps. Is that correct? And how did that come about?

WILLIAMS: [00:51:57] Well, it's an amazing, amazing opportunity, and I will be forever grateful to President Barack Obama and his foreign policy team for giving me the opportunity to serve as Peace Corps director in his administration. So after I entered graduate school and got an MBA, I went into business. I worked for a couple of large Fortune 500 companies, the last one being General Mills. I was a marketing manager at General Mills. We lived in Minneapolis. But because of my Peace Corps service, I always had heard the siren song of being in international affairs, foreign affairs.

SZTUK: [00:52:44] Pulling you back in.

WILLIAMS: [00:52:45] Pulling me back in. And I also wanted to use my Spanish language skills. So I got a call from my former boss and good friend Henry Reynolds, who was at that time working for USAID in Honduras. And he asked me. This was now 1977. And he asked me, 1976, if I would be willing to consider coming to work for AID on a short term consultancy to help them design an agribusiness project in Honduras, the country that I

was supposed to serve in in the first place. Now let me just add an aside on Honduras.

SZTUK: [00:53:26] OK.

WILLIAMS: [00:53:27] I actually had traveled to Honduras while I was a Peace Corps volunteer on vacation because my roommate, Dennis Kroger, had actually been assigned to Honduras, and so we agreed to meet there a year into our service.

SZTUK: [00:53:39] OK, your roommate from training.

WILLIAMS: [00:53:40] My roommate from training, who was, probably no one has ever had a better roommate to go through training. First of all, he was fluent in Spanish because he had studied abroad in Spain. He was a very warm and engaging person. You know, we really hit it off right away. And he tried to help me with my Spanish, and if I had not resisted, I probably could have made a lot more progress, right? If I'd listened to Dennis at that point in time. But anyway, and then we traveled in Honduras together, and we had a marvelous time traveling over the Christmas holidays after that first year. And so I had a good sense of what Honduras was all about, and I actually traveled to the town I was going to be assigned to, Choluteca.

WILLIAMS: [00:54:27] So fast forward. 1976. I'm working in General Mills in the dead of the winter in Minneapolis. And Henry says that there's an opportunity if I'm interested in being a consultant contractor with USAID. So Rosa and I agreed to take on this challenge. So I applied for a leave of absence from General Mills to see if I would like working for USAID. You know, of course, I worked for an USAID funded program as a Peace Corps volunteer. And so we, the two of us, we moved to Honduras and we were back in Latin America, and I really enjoyed the work. And I was able to get involved in a pioneering program that was created to assist small farmers in one of the large agricultural valleys of Honduras to begin to create an industry that would ship fresh fruit and vegetables to the United States in the winter months. The one part of the winter months when Mexico was not shipping fresh fruits and vegetables to the United States.

WILLIAMS: [00:55:41] It was a marketing opportunity there. And I had a lot of experience in the food marketing business, and so I was the guy they asked to come down and help design the project and implement the project. So that's how I got back involved in international affairs. So we really enjoyed living in Honduras. I enjoy my job there. And so that led to me becoming a Foreign Service officer and serving for 22 years with the U.S. Agency for International Development. And most of that being in Latin America, and I had, I was a program manager and office director. I was eventually ended up being the head of Latin America for USAID here in Washington. I was the head of USAID mission in the Caribbean. It was a marvelous career.

WILLIAMS: [00:56:28] And after that career, then I came and worked for an organization called the International Youth Foundation in Baltimore, where I was in charge of global partnerships for them and worked with many of the global corporations. British Airways, Nike, Nokia, The GAP, Johnson and Johnson, lots of global corporations and forming partnerships to support youth development in 20 countries around the world. Wonderful job. Great transition from USAID. After I did that for a while, then I was asked to come to work in international business development for the Research Triangle Institute, RTI International.

SZTUK: [00:57:14] Right.

WILLIAMS: [00:57:15] That's how I came to work in RTI International. So after my career in AID and my experience at the International Youth Foundation and then with RTI, I was very much involved in international development and foreign affairs. And so when the Obama team started their campaign for the presidency, I got involved in supporting Barack Obama. And then after he won the election and became president, I was invited to become part of the transition team. So I was co-lead for the Foreign Affairs Transition Team for the Obama administration and became very involved in that transition. And during the course of that transition, they asked me if I would be interested in being the director of the Peace Corps.

SZTUK: [00:58:09] Really. So you didn't lobby for the position or?

WILLIAMS: [00:58:12] No, not really, because I was focused on USAID and PEPFAR, the international AIDS prevention and treatment program. That was my purview, AID, PEPFAR, OPIC, the Ex-Im Bank and, I'm missing one other agency, um, and the MCC, the Millennium Challenge Corporation. That was the purview of our team.

SZTUK: [00:58:45] Mm hmm.

WILLIAMS: [00:58:45] So I really didn't lobby for the job, but something really marvelous happened because after a number of people in the Peace Corps community heard that my name was being proposed, there was a groundswell of support. A couple of people who I didn't even know put together a petition, and they wrote to the White House and endorsed me from the Peace Corps community.

SZTUK: [00:59:08] Great.

WILLIAMS: [00:59:09] As Director. So that was a wonderful, wonderful response from my Peace Corps colleagues.

SZTUK: [00:59:15] And you were happy to accept the invitation.

WILLIAMS: [00:59:18] Well, this was a dream come true. Someone who was a volunteer to have the opportunity to return and serve in the Peace Corps. You know this, this agency, which is an iconic American agency, which had transformed my life and transformed the lives of over 250,000 people over the last 50 years. It was a wonderful opportunity. So despite the fact that I promised my wife I was not going to go back into government, the Peace Corps was a job that she and I both agreed was something that was absolutely essential. Plus, I had the great honor and privilege of serving President Barack Obama. **

WILLIAMS: [00:59:59] That's how I ended up directing the Peace Corps.

SZTUK: [01:00:02] Yeah, and that's quite a different experience from being a volunteer and with its own challenges.

WILLIAMS: [01:00:08] Oh, it's a different perspective, right?

SZTUK: [01:00:10] Different perspectives.

WILLIAMS: [01:00:12] But one of the things that I learned and I saw, and one of the great things about being director of the Peace Corps, is that a chance to once again engage with these marvelous young people who were dedicating their lives to the people in the communities and the organizations they worked with in the developing world, right? And you know that Peace Corps spark is still there in Africa, Asia, Latin America, Eastern Europe, Pacific. Wherever you go and travel, you see volunteers and you can quickly connect with your own experience and see it in their eyes and through their own experiences. It's pretty amazing.

SZTUK: [01:00:50] As the Peace Corps director, where were most of your efforts focused? Was it necessary to keep selling the idea of Peace Corps to the politicians?

WILLIAMS: [01:01:09] And, well, Peace Corps has always enjoyed, to some degree, bipartisan support in the Congress, and has always enjoyed great support from President of the United States, no matter who's in the White House. So that's a great boon. And now, of course, we're a very large community, right, over 250,000 people served in the Peace Corps. Also, we were fortunate in that the, during my term as Peace Corps director, we celebrated the 50th anniversary of the Peace Corps.

SZTUK: [01:01:42] Right.

WILLIAMS: [01:01:43] So this is a chance to reconnect the American people with the Peace Corps and also to give the returned Peace Corps volunteer community and volunteers around the world a chance to celebrate this wonderful organization, which had contributed so much to their individual lives. And to give the host countries and the universities that have been involved in supporting and strengthening and engaging in partnership with the Peace Corps as a chance to celebrate. So it was a marvelous opportunity. So I was very fortunate to be the director of the Peace Corps during the 50th anniversary.

SZTUK: [01:02:21] Oh yeah.

WILLIAMS: [01:02:23] The other thing about the Peace Corps, which I think is not quite fully appreciated, is that as best as I can determine, the Peace Corps is the first, was the first, it might be the only, Federal agency that created a framework whereby women were always given equal status. Something that Shriver insisted on. And when he created the Peace Corps, not many people in Congress wanted American women to travel overseas to foreign countries and serve as volunteers in isolated villages. It was not something that was readily apparent or acceptable. Shriver insisted that women have equal opportunity in the Peace Corps. And because of that, from the very beginning, women were involved as volunteers and staff and continued to this day, continue to be the majority number of volunteers are women, 60 percent of them. You know, my staff, I think something like 40 percent of my senior staff were women. Overseas our country directors, a large percentage are women, and it continues to be the case today. That's because this visionary man, Sargent Shriver, insisted upon that from day one. I don't think any other Federal agency has ever had that in place.

SZTUK: [01:03:51] I'm sure. I've never heard that story before.

WILLIAMS: [01:03:55] It's something that people have not focused on, but was readily apparent to me when I became director. So it's a great tradition. And so I was really happy, pleased, and I got to work with, you know, a wonderful group of people at the cabinet level and subcabinet level in the Obama administration. It was a wonderful time to be director of the Peace Corps.

SZTUK: [01:04:21] And you were the director all under one administration?

WILLIAMS: [01:04:24] One administration. And the other thing at the time that you had, you know, the outstanding Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, who was a big proponent and supporter of Peace Corps. And you know, we had a wonderful working relationship with the State Department, with the ambassadors in various countries where Peace Corps served.

WILLIAMS: [01:04:43] So overall, I'm very proud of the fact that we had a chance to celebrate the 50th anniversary. And we celebrated it in a way that I thought was very unique. Number one, we traveled. I traveled. My deputy director, Carrie Hessler Radelet, who's also a returned Peace Corps volunteer and who also was my successor as director of the Peace Corps. And our chief of staff, Stacy Rhodes, another RPCV, who is also my former colleague at USAID. We traveled extensively during the 50th to make sure that we tried to represent the Peace Corps at the senior levels in many countries as possible. And so you think about it, we have this whole group of countries that were the initial countries that received Peace Corps volunteers under Shriver's leadership. So you had Ghana, Tanzania, the Philippines, Dominican Republic, Thailand. And so one of us went to those countries for the 50th anniversary celebration.

SZTUK: [01:05:49] Yeah.

WILLIAMS: [01:05:50] And the outpouring of affection and support and admiration and gratitude for the Peace Corps was just, it was just extraordinary. We always met with the president or prime minister or king or queen of the country. We met, of course, with our partner ministries that we worked with in the countries. We obviously had meetings with Peace Corps volunteers as a group. We traveled to volunteer sites. We met many parents who were who happened to be visiting, by coincidence, their children overseas, to see their children in place working in Peace Corps as Peace Corps volunteers. It was quite an amazing, amazing thing.

WILLIAMS: [01:06:32] We had wonderful experiences and I personally had a wonderful 50th anniversary celebrations in the Philippines with President Aquino. We celebrated both USAID's 50th anniversary and Peace Corps in the Philippines with my colleagues, Ambassador Thomas and Gloria Steele, who was the USAID director there. The same in Thailand. We had wonderful experiences there with the royal family and with the Peace Corps volunteer community. And in a place like Thailand, the Philippines, you have a lot of RPCVs who still live in those countries, right, or came back.

SZTUK: [01:07:13] Right.

WILLIAMS: [01:07:13] Celebrating the 50th. It was an amazing thing. Then we went to Africa and I had in Tanzania with a spectacular 50th anniversary celebration in all cases. We met with the leadership of the country and also the U.S. ambassadors gave us a warm welcome and had receptions, dinners, etcetera, to celebrate Peace Corps. The volunteers were amazing, putting on special presentations that welcomed the citizens of the country and told the Peace Corps story over 50 years. The same in Kenya, in Ghana. It was really quite extraordinary. And of course, I traveled to my own country where I served, the Dominican Republic. And then I was also asked by the White House to be the head of the White House delegation to celebrate the bicentennial of Paraguay. Paraguay is another legendary Peace Corps country, had a wonderful reception there. So it was really extraordinary in terms of our international engagement.

SZTUK: [01:08:19] Right. So this year for you, the 50th anniversary, must have been pretty much consumed most of your time for that year.

WILLIAMS: [01:08:28] It was a heavy travel schedule, but well worth it because of the opportunity we had to celebrate this iconic American institution and what it's contributed to the world in terms of peace and friendship. The other thing is that and how it transformed volunteers' lives. Then the other part of the 50th was celebrating in America. And so it was important to us to make sure that we had broad engagement with the universities. The universities have been instrumental in training Peace Corps volunteers, right? And so UCLA, University of Miami, University of Florida, University of Washington, University of Michigan. Literally hundreds of universities had events, and we tried to travel and participate as much as we possibly could, both me and my senior staff.

WILLIAMS: [01:09:18] A couple of things stand out. So in October 1960, Senator Kennedy had launched the idea of the Peace Corps in his famous speech on the steps of the University of Michigan Student Union. You know, how many of you would be willing to spend your time overseas serving your country in places like Guyana, etcetera, that famous speech. And so the University of Michigan and the Peace Corps decided that we wanted to

replicate that speech, or the moment of that speech in 2010, October 2010.

SZTUK: [01:09:56] Yeah.

WILLIAMS: [01:09:57] So we did. At two o'clock in the morning, same time that the Kennedy delivered his speech.

SZTUK: [01:10:01] 2:00 a.m.

WILLIAMS: [01:10:01] Ten thousand students who've been waiting for him all day to show up from his campaign and then in cold. He was cold. He wasn't feeling well. He gave those few remarks that, of course, launched this great idea. And so the legends of the Peace Corps, those who had been Shriver's colleagues and associates, we invited as many as we could to join us at the University of Michigan. It was a three-day seminar and symposium on Peace Corps and volunteerism. It was wonderful, wonderful event. Led by the president of the University of Michigan and we invited, for example, Jack Vaughn, who was the second director of the Peace Corps. The other side of the 50th, of course, was engaging with America generally, not just overseas. And so we reached out to universities.

WILLIAMS: [01:11:02] As I mentioned, we had this marvelous event at the University of Michigan to replicate the famous speech of John Kennedy. And we had individuals such as Jack Vaughn, who had been the second director of the Peace Corps after Shriver. And Jack Vaughn was a special person in my career because he also had sworn me in as a Peace Corps volunteer at San Diego State.

SZTUK: [01:11:26] Yeah.

WILLIAMS: [01:11:27] When he was director, and so it was wonderful to be back in touch with Jack. I had seen him over the years because he had gone on to have a continue a distinguished career as U.S. Ambassador to Colombia, head of USAID in Latin America, Assistant Secretary of State for Latin America, etcetera. So he was a very distinguished figure in American

foreign affairs. And there he was that night. We were out there at 2:00 a.m. in the morning. Oh, and then, of course, the other person who was with us was the distinguished Senator Harris Wofford. Harris Wofford, of course, had been one of the founders of the Peace Corps working with Sargent Shriver. And he had also served as director in Ethiopia in the early years. And he had become over, during my time as Peace Corps director, a mentor, confidante, friend, somebody who is just a historic figure in the Peace Corps community. And I was also very fortunate and privileged that Harris had introduced me at my confirmation hearing in the U.S. Senate.

WILLIAMS: [01:12:27] So I was with Harris and Jack Vaughn that night at 2:00 a.m. in the morning on October 20, 2010, at the University of Michigan. And it was a tremendous turnout of the returned Peace Corps volunteer community. Of course, University of Michigan has sent, you know, literally thousands of people to the Peace Corps over the years. And it was really gratifying to see the reception we received there. And we had other wonderful events such as at the University of Miami, we were hosted by Donna Shalala, who of course, was also RPCV. She had served in Iran in the early years, and she had gone on to become, of course, Secretary of HHS, president of the University of Wisconsin. And then at that point in time, University of Miami, and just a tremendous public servant leader. And, you know, very proud of her Peace Corps service.

WILLIAMS: [01:13:20] So we had a wonderful event also at UCLA. Again, you had many distinguished and prominent RPCVs who participated. The master of ceremonies that evening was Chris Matthews of MSNBC.

SZTUK: [01:13:35] Yeah.

WILLIAMS: [01:13:37] Chris had served in Swaziland, very proud advocate of Peace Corps. So it was quite an engaging time for Peace Corps as we celebrate around the United States, primarily at the universities. I was invited to speak in the graduation ceremonies of a number of universities, UCLA, the Monterey Institute of International Studies, North Central College. It was really a very diverse array of universities. Stacy Rhodes spoke at Duke University.

WILLIAMS: [01:14:16] And then we had another really interesting event with the Smithsonian. The Smithsonian also celebrated Peace Corps that year, along with the country of Colombia, because every year, as you might know, there's a Smithsonian Festival over the Fourth of July weekend. So that year, in 2011, it was Peace Corps Week with the Smithsonian and so tremendous outpouring of Peace Corps support, returned Peace Corps volunteers. Of course, thousands of people come to the Smithsonian Festival every year. Many people didn't realize the Peace Corps was still a viable operating organization around the world. So we had wonderful events during the festival. We had special presentations on various countries. We had cultural exchanges and people from those countries. It was a marvelous time.

SZTUK: [01:15:07] It was a great time to be director.

WILLIAMS: [01:15:08] It was a wonderful time to be director. And to be able to to honor this wonderful organization, to engage and honor and discuss the achievements of the Peace Corps community with the volunteers that contributed to world peace and friendship. It was an extraordinary moment. And we also, of course, had a wonderful White House event with President Obama to celebrate Peace Corps' 50th anniversary. He was very complimentary of Peace Corps and its contributions to America, and of course, throughout his administration, there were many RPCVs who served in his administration.

SZTUK: [01:15:55] So wrapping things up, I think over the years as a recruiter and in your other jobs and then as Peace Corps director, you've had the chance to advise would-be volunteers on many occasions. So what do you say to someone when they tell you they're thinking about joining the Peace Corps?

WILLIAMS: [01:16:15] Well, I say to a prospective Peace Corps volunteer, number one, that I want to tell you about my own personal experience and that it transformed my life. It opened my eyes to a world that I had not been able to comprehend before that. It gave me an opportunity to grow professionally as an individual. And it created the pathway to my future

career. So no matter what you plan to do in the future or what you think you might want to do in the future, serving as a Peace Corps volunteer can be a marvelous experience. You'll grow, you'll gain what I call cultural agility, the ability to move easily among different types of people and then walk in their shoes and understand their challenges and opportunities and to be able to assist them.

WILLIAMS: [01:17:08] You'll join an alumni association of tremendous people. I have never met somebody who served in the Peace Corps who I didn't like at some level. They all don't become your lifelong friends, but there's this connection that we have by having served in the Peace Corps, right? And the fact that they voluntarily decided to give up two years of their life to serve in a far-off place and how it transformed them as individuals. So I always encourage them to give it serious thought, and that reminds me of something else in this same vein.

WILLIAMS: [01:17:46] So when I was director of the Peace Corps and on university campuses, we had something called Family and Friends, where we would invite the family of currently serving or people who had previously served in the Peace Corps and the volunteers to talk to prospective volunteer Peace Corps volunteers and their families about their experience in the Peace Corps. And Jay, inevitably, during the course of these events, whether it was at University of Florida or Georgetown or UCLA or Berkeley or University of Washington, a parent would say, why should my son and daughter waste two years of their life to go to some faraway place when they can become, they can go to medical school or law school or complete their graduate training or get a job, start their career? Why is this a worthwhile endeavor?

WILLIAMS: [01:18:47] And I would say to them, let me just take off my hat as Peace Corps director because obviously I'm biased towards the Peace Corps. I'm a returned Peace Corps volunteer myself. It's certainly transformed my life. But so I want to talk to you as the executive of a global operation, a global organization, a global firm, that's looking for people to hire. If I see when I'm reviewing resumes of somebody that we're planning to interview, a group of people we plan to interview, and I see a Peace Corps volunteer service, I'm going to make sure that that individual is interviewed. Because

I know a few things about this individual sight unseen. I know, number one, that they are resilient because they've had to deal with adversity in their Peace Corps service. All of us have to. We're out there primarily alone working in a village or an organization, in a foreign language and a foreign culture. We've had to deal with challenges, so I know they're resilient.

WILLIAMS: [01:19:45] Number one [two], I know that they're a leader. Even if they don't know that they've been in a leadership position, they probably have been a leader in some aspect of the Peace Corps service. Number three, I know that they are team players because you have to be a team player to be successful in the Peace Corps. You've been on teams, you have to form teams. You have to do something that supported the team and be successful as a team or fail as a team. And then the last thing is that I know that they also have cultural agility, the ability to work at different levels in society with different types of people, different cultures. They understand how to be successful in a different environment. And so as the executive of a global organization, why would I not want to be sure that we interviewed such individuals? That usually ended any further commentary about why should one invest their time in being a Peace Corps volunteer.

SZTUK: [01:20:40] Well, that's very good. Is there anything else you'd like to add or anything we missed?

WILLIAMS: [01:20:45] Well, I'm happy that I was able to serve as director of the Peace Corps because also I was able to build a tremendous team in the Peace Corps. People who were really already accomplished in their careers and served at the highest levels of the Peace Corps. We really worked on diversity and an increasing number of women who served in the Peace Corps. It was important to me to look for ways to do that, and we did that in many, many ways. As I said, one of the things that's often overlooked in Peace Corps is that Sargent Shriver set the standard for making sure that women had an equal opportunity to serve in the Peace Corps from day one. And we wanted to continue that trend, and we did. And I'm also proud of what we able to accomplish in celebrating the 50th anniversary of the. We tried to come up with ways to modernize the Peace Corps.

WILLIAMS: [01:21:37] We were able to secure the highest level of funding for the Peace Corps in several years. And we really built a strong, bipartisan coalition with the U.S. Congress in support of the Peace Corps and that I will always be grateful for. The other thing is that we had tremendous support and engagement from the RPCVs who were serving in the Congress at the time I was director, led by people like Sam Farr, John Garamendi of California, Farr of California, Mike Honda of California, Tom Petri of Wisconsin and of course, the tremendous support of Senator Chris Dodd, who I had the honor of serving with in the Dominican Republic as a Peace Corps volunteer.

SZTUK: [01:22:27] Huh.

WILLIAMS: [01:22:28] So and who also chaired my confirmation hearing in the Senate. So it was a wonderful time to be director of the Peace Corps, and I'll always be grateful for having the opportunity.

SZTUK: [01:22:43] All right, Aaron, thanks for the very good interview, and thanks for all your years of service.

WILLIAMS: [01:22:48] Thank you, Jay, and thank you for arranging to have this interview and I've enjoyed talking to you.

SZTUK: [01:22:56] This is Jay Sztuk again. We're continuing the interview with Aaron Williams. Aaron's remembered something very important that needs to get on the record. So carry on.

WILLIAMS: [01:23:09] Jay, there's one addendum I want to add to my oral history regarding the Peace Corps, and it's really not about me. It's really about my youngest son. So my children grew up in the Foreign Service, and they both are bilingual and bicultural, Dominican and American, and they have a great appreciation for culture and the world that we live in. But my wife and I never encouraged them to consider serving in the Peace Corps. In many ways we thought maybe they had acquired their sensitivity and understanding of different cultures because through osmosis, because who they are. So and they both have pursued different careers. My oldest son is a medical doctor. My oldest son, Michael, is a medical doctor. My

youngest son, Steven, was pursuing a career in hospitality, working at the time for the Westin hotel chain, when he decided to change the trajectory and join the Peace Corps. This is before I became director of the Peace Corps.

WILLIAMS: [01:24:19] And when he told me about it, I was really, first of all, very pleased. I was happy. I was proud of him. And he had some very good reasons for joining the Peace Corps. And so I encouraged him to do so. And so I'm very proud that my son, Steven, served as a Peace Corps volunteer in Nicaragua in a small business development program for two years. And it changed his life because he also met his future wife, who is a Peace Corps volunteer, Nga Trang, serving in Nicaragua. And so we have very similar experiences in that we both got married in the Peace Corps. Nga and Steven got married. They now have three lovely boys, our grandsons, and they're pursuing their careers in the federal government. But that was a very special experience that we've had as a family. And again, we owe it all to the Peace Corps which transformed, not just my life, but also in this case, the life of my son, Steven.

SZTUK: [01:25:26] All right. Well, great. Glad to see that the legacy carries on.

WILLIAMS: [01:25:30] Thank you.

[END OF INTERVIEW]