

**Bruce Lang Oral History Interview**  
Returned Peace Corps Volunteer Collection  
Administrative Information

**Creator:** Bruce Lang  
**Interviewer:** Katie Langland  
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**Biographical Note**

Bruce Lang served as a Peace Corps volunteer in Costa Rica from 1968 to 1971 on a cooperatives project.

**Access**

Open.

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Oral History Interview

with

Bruce Lang

June 7, 2008  
Denver, Colorado

By Katie Langland

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

LANGLAND: [00:00:03] Today is June 8th, 2008. This is Katie Langland, and I'm interviewing Bruce Lang, who was a Peace Corps volunteer in Costa Rica, August 1968 until approximately July of 1971, and he was a co-op volunteer. So, Bruce, will you describe your present family, work, current resident, and interests?

LANG: [00:00:38] I live in the Portland, Oregon, area. My wife, Phyllis and I have a daughter, Mackenzie, who's going to high school in September. I have a daughter who's a stepdaughter who lives in Naples, Florida, married to a firefighter, and they have four children. So that makes me a grandfather of sorts. I own a sales agency in the Northwest. We sell gifts, stationery, and scrapbooking material.

LANGLAND: [00:01:06] And what are your current interests?

LANG: [00:01:08] Well, as far as hobbies are concerned, I play golf, I've been playing golf for a long time and I was thinking about this. I really garden and I'll don't think about it as this garden, I just think about making the place nice. So I garden and I coach my daughter's softball. And for anybody who's got a teenager who has other interests, I'm a taxi driver. It's family as well.

LANGLAND: [00:01:33] Good. So now I'm going to ask you to think back to the year before joining Peace Corps. Talk about your life then.

LANG: [00:01:41] I was in college. University of Akron. It was a liberal arts, but actually three majors, because everything bored me to tears, so I had three majors and two minors, if I remember correctly. And I made application to join the Peace Corps and I didn't want to go into the Army and fight in Vietnam. The idea of leaving and going to Canada was just really scary. So anybody would come. We had a lot of recruiters come to campus for businesses, for large companies. A lot of the tire companies and Dow Chemical and General Motors. Ford did come in. They'd recruit and I never went to any of those recruiters. I just was not interested. The only one I went to twice while I was there was the Peace Corps volunteer, so I had an interest in it. And so I thought it would be an alternative. And so I made an application to join the Peace Corps.

LANG: [00:02:38] And one very snowy day I went out and got my mail and opened this fat envelope and it said, congratulations, you've been invited to join the Peace Corps to grow wheat in Afghanistan. So I was elated, but immediately went downstairs and got my, I had a full library, and I got my atlas out. And thought, where the heck is Afghanistan? There's Afghanistan. I was just familiar with Vietnam, in fact, I don't know. Let me look this thing up and looked it up, and I didn't really want to go to Afghanistan, which in retrospect was very smart. And so I called Peace Corps and I said, I wouldn't know wheat if it fell out of my cereal box. I'm from New York. They thought that was very funny. We'll reassign you. So I get reassigned to rural electrification in Uruguay. And then I started to see these little articles in the paper about these guerrilla groups, and they were called the Tupamaros, which ended up to be probably the arguably the most vicious communist terror group ever in Latin America.

LANG: [00:03:33] So as they started to march towards the front page and I kind of got this feeling, you know, what's going to happen? And I got a call or letter, I don't remember, saying that basically programs, all Peace Corps programs in Uruguay were canceled. So I got out of college and I was back in New York where I grew up and an aunt's house, who was very excited and impressed that Washington, D.C. called, somebody from the Peace Corps. That was, my aunt was so excited. So I got on the phone and they said, we need you to make the decision, you know, where you're going to go, Colombia or Costa Rica? And I'm thinking like, oh jeez, where's Colombia, where's Rica. You know what? Costa Rica is a little closer and a little smaller. Why don't I go to Costa Rica? And all of this is such, it was so fate. So, you know, unbelievable. So I joined Peace Corps to go to Costa Rica.

LANGLAND: [00:04:25] So how long was that process then from when you had applied?

LANG: [00:04:28] A long time. Well, it was, you know, I don't know. Months. Probably months, not a year. And I think it's six, seven, six months, maybe five months. I don't remember how long, but it was long enough to be nervous. But it was wintertime. It was like maybe January or February, and I was graduating in a few months and things are getting tight. Yeah.

LANGLAND: [00:04:51] So the most common question from 1961 to present is, of course, why did you join the Peace Corps?

LANG: [00:04:58] Well, I just answered that. There was an alternative to going to Vietnam into the service.

LANGLAND: [00:05:03] And the recruiters that came on campus, was that the first time you had heard about Peace Corps or when had you first heard about it?

LANG: [00:05:11] Well, when it first started with JFK. Of course, everybody, in my generation Peace Corps in everybody's imagination was magical. So

there was a predisposition, a very positive one about Peace Corps just, you know, leading up to this.

LANGLAND: [00:05:33] So what were your friends, family or your reactions when you were accepted?

LANG: [00:05:38] Besides my aunt being so impressed that someone from Washington, D.C., would actually call the house for me, you know, I don't remember any big reaction. My parents were behind me 100 percent. And I really don't remember much input. This is a long time ago, it's 40 years. I don't remember any friends saying, are you crazy? Or that's good. It was just, you know, I was leaving college, which is in Ohio. I grew up in New York. My parents at that point had relocated to, they were relocating to Florida. And so it was a lot of people I was leaving that I probably wouldn't see in a while, maybe ever. And so there was really no significant reaction to, you know, either way.

LANGLAND: [00:06:26] Do you remember if there were any reservations on your or their part?

LANG: [00:06:31] No, no. Nothing like that at all. Nothing negative, ever.

LANGLAND: [00:06:37] So what project were you invited to join?

LANG: [00:06:40] Well, I didn't have one. It's one of my complaints in the Peace Corps is that they could do a lot better at that sort of thing. It's an organizational thing. You know, it's not like I was going into a country that there wasn't things to do. Like, we got these people coming, what are we going to do with them? Well, there are a lot of things that could be done. And so basically, I was told to go to this town called Santa Cruz. There were two volunteers that were leaving soon and they were going to meet with me and talk to me. But there was no project. And basically, they said, we'll find it.

LANGLAND: [00:07:11] And the two volunteers had previously been there for two years.

LANG: [00:07:15] Yeah, they were two years and one of the guys named Larry Rosenberg, I think his last name was, going back a long time. He had just started the remnants of a co-op of some campesino farmers whose main crop in the dry season was watermelons and cantaloupes. And in the wet season, they did rice and corn and soy, stuff like that. And the co-op is, I mean, I don't know, a few months old. And he said, you know, they asked me to come down and just help a little bit. But he was going to another project in another town. And I did, but I really didn't do much. But it's there. You might want to go. I think the people are really cool. There's potential there. So I went there and I went to one other town and did the interviews in terrible Spanish and then decided that there's really nothing in that other town that was organized at all. No idea what that town needed. And here there was just something, an entity that was started. And throw my line with them, which was another great bit of fate, I mean, stars were lining up, if you believe in that, the stars were lining up.

LANGLAND: [00:08:22] I know you said you had no experience with wheat. Did you have any experience with watermelons and cantaloupe?

LANG: [00:08:27] Yes, I used to eat them with regularity. No, I hadn't. But I, you know, I was a kid who grew up in New York, from Long Island. I didn't know anything about agriculture. Nothing.

LANGLAND: [00:08:37] So how did you learn?

LANG: [00:08:39] There's a lot of things that I learned. So this is very personal, I've never told this to too many people. But when I got out of college, I felt that I didn't do as well as I could have. And I was not much of a student in high school. When I hit college, it was a shock and I really, really had to dig deep to to stay there and get grades. And I did. And then once I kind of got the gist of it, I started getting really good grades. But at the end of it, I always felt that I could have done better, you know? And so I said to myself, you know what? This is crazy. I said, you're going to make a success of this or die trying. Little did I know that there's nothing harder than I ever tried in my life than this project. And I was going to do it no matter what. I was really trying to prove it to myself. So,

so I did learn, you know, I don't know how you're going to progress in this, but as you progress, I've learned all kinds of things I have to do. I mean.

LANGLAND: [00:09:33] We can go there.

LANG: [00:09:36] OK. Um, I can just dive into the co-op then if you want?

LANGLAND: [00:09:39] Yes.

LANG: [00:09:40] This is about a town of 250 people, 25 families or so. They lived in wooden houses that had the boards were not. There was no privacy. The dirt floors and tin roof. Dirt poor, literally. Now I know what the phrase dirt poor is. When it rained and water came into their one room shack, two room shack. They had worked the land as sharecroppers for a wealthy family, a man who left, I think, his three sons and a daughter on the land and they didn't work the land. There was one son who wasn't bad and the other two were, they were just guys with money and they drank and they were. The woman was married and she wasn't there. So, you know, they paid outrageous rents and they scraped hard and they had these watermelon. And when I got there, they would take the watermelons in a truck over the Pan-American Highway, which at that point, there were parts of it that had was not paved. It was a scandal because the entire Pan-American Highway from Panama, well from the beginning of Costa Rica through Mexico to the U.S. was paved, except for almost where I was.

LANG: [00:10:53] So the first time I went into the market, I wanted to go in and they say, you really want to do this? Oh yeah, I was, I was going to get in there. And I was on the top of the watermelons as we went over the mountain at night on this road. I don't know how many hours, four or five hours. Thank God I was so young because if I did it today, I'd be crippled. Try to sleep or rest on watermelons, right? It was cold and we got there and I saw what they did in the marketplace. And I heard that they were getting killed in the marketplace by the Salvadorians, were bringing in a different watermelon that the marketplace liked. So that got my attention, and I asked the ministry there about the watermelons,

whether it was a hybrid or not. They said, no, you can take the seeds and grow it. So I said to everybody, this is a big deal. We've got to change the crop. These people have been doing the same watermelons for years, I don't know, a generation, and here I'm going to change the crop.

LANG: [00:11:49] But I said, don't do the whole thing. Just, you know, get some of the seeds. The next time you're in the marketplace, buy some of the watermelons with the profit. Take them home. Get the seeds out. Do a little bit of your crop this season and see what happens. Well little did I know, not only do they take the seeds, but they basically planted as much of those watermelons as their other work. And within a few months, when the watermelons matured, they were coming into the marketplace with a really improved watermelon. So that was really my first, um, positive improvement on the crops. Other than in the very beginning, I caught the manager of the stealing, which was very, very terrible because I had to, with my Spanish, negotiate telling the other people that. And he left in the middle of the night with his wife and kids and stayed in Costa Rica, but he never came back again. He was so ashamed. Then so I started to institute a bookkeeping system using a guy in the bank to help out, to watch the funds, and there was never any problems after that.

LANG: [00:12:56] So I guess that was the first thing I did, then the watermelons. And so we did watermelons, cantaloupes. We had a little hut on the road and we sold it there for cash. That's what a lot of people knew about them, but mostly the crop was thrown in the cattle truck and bring it into San Jose. A klutz, a guy that would come into San Jose and these peons, these little men, were just so strong. They were like five feet and they'd take these watermelons in baskets on their backs, and even the co-op guys didn't do this. And they'd come down a ramp, put it in like a warehouse, and a guy weighing the baskets. And they would write down a tally and they, you know, first agree on a price and then when they got the weight, pay him in cash. Well, I caught a guy stealing. What he did is he bellied up to that fat guy, bellied up to the scale, and he put his belly in the basket and lifted it up a little bit. And he went like this with the weight and the basket was coming up. So I saw him do that.



LANG: [00:13:57] So I went into the marketplace with one of my co-op guys and found a cop, this Costa Rican cop, a sergeant and a corporal. At that time in Costa Rica, only sergeants could carry weapons. Corporals had empty holsters. It was a hoot. So I called them over in my Spanish and try to explain this happened. But I said, don't walk in and look in the window. And there are these two cops, myself and a guy in a club looking at this guy doing that, and the cop walked in there and he read them the riot act. The guy said, no, he didn't. You could see the force of the police. He said, I saw you do it. He says, now you can either weigh all this or we can pick a number. And basically the co-op guy or I saw it and I said, let's pick a good number and we stuck it to the guy. And this was just *mulda*, I told them, cheating. And so we did real good on that particular truck of watermelons. But that taught them again, you know, you got to watch out for yourself in the marketplace.

LANG: [00:14:51] The only other time I did anything positive for the marketplace was that we had been in the market two years and they were starting to get real successful. And the agency, which is the Instituto de Turismo de, Instituto de Turismo de Organización or something. It was a land reform. It was a land use agency, the Costa Rican government working with farmers. And they came to the co-op around me and they said to the co-op, why don't you deposit your watermelons in our warehouse and we'll sell them for you? And they said, what do you think? I said, what do you think? Well, no, I said, I don't think so. I don't think that's a real good idea. I mean, you control your money. How can you make more money in this? You know, who knows what this guy is going to sell? And then I said, maybe it'll sit there for a week and a rot. And are they going to make good this? So they kind of, in a very nice manner, turned that down.

LANG: [00:15:51] The main thing that this co-op did besides growing better crops and business practices that were better, is they, um, we have a land reform bill, which was really, really extraordinary, in fact, if I can say that. More stories. Pepe Figueres was the father of the Costa Rican democracy. He overthrew a military junta, would not run for president in the late '40s and had read the constitution, which some people instituted

a democratic government that right now I think is the longest living democratic government in Latin America. I'm not sure of that, but I think so. He became a great admirer of the Kennedys and the Kennedys admired him. He was a real funny little guy. And he was running for the presidency for the third time because he could never succeed himself. It was two terms, I think, and that was it. And he always respected that. He could have been president for life there if he wanted to. But he was building a democracy. You know, he understood that he can make a precedent like that. Very hard to break. And they haven't ever been close, as far as I know.

LANG: [00:17:00] He was running for president again. He came into my town and I happen to know somebody who was a big Liberaciónista. That was his party. And I said, I want to talk to Pepe Figueres with my co-op. We need some, we want land. He set it up. And here we are in this little house off of a rally that they had on the street, with my co-op in a circle and me and Figueres in the middle. And I'm trying to talk to Figueres in English, and he would have none of it. He was running for election. He was going to talk to this. No, I was trying, I'm sorry. I was trying to talk to him in Spanish to get the co-op guys involved in this. He would have none of it. He wanted to speak in English to the gringo because he wanted to impress the hell out of everybody. And he did. You could just see him, and I kept trying to get him into Spanish. He'd talk in English. His English, of course, was excellent. He was, I think he was a Harvard graduate or something. I think that's how he knew Kennedy.

LANG: [00:17:48] Anyway, he and I talked and he made a campaign promise. He said if I become elected president, we'll pass a land reform bill. And if he didn't do it. And I was in the Costa Rican Legislature as a visitor when they stood up on the vote, to vote this law in. It was phenomenal. And they sold bonds to raise the money, to buy the land from the owners. And in 1993, I understand, the co-op paid off the bonds. So this is not something that people, ripping rich people off from the lands. They took the land. It worked. It absolutely worked. And so today, those families are in houses with cement floors and cement walls that are painted and they have their house number on it. They have beautiful rooms and they have telephones. And the kids are eating and the next generation is

taking over. So, yeah, it was a wonderful, very wonderful, successful thing.

LANGLAND: [00:18:49] So did you work with the co-op the entire time that you were in Costa Rica?

LANG: [00:18:52] Yeah, I did, and at the very end, I pulled myself out of it because it was a thing. I don't know if I read it in a Peace Corps book or whatever. Saying one of the problems with volunteers is that they do too much. And when they leave the people who are there say, oh, Senor Bruce did that. What do we do now? So I had to pull myself out of that and I got some grief because of it. Senor Bruce doesn't care about us anymore. He doesn't come to the meetings, because they'd have a meeting and then come the next day and say, what happened at the meeting? How'd it to go? Oh yeah, he's a pain in the neck. And I'd just say that, oh, good, good, good. Well, maybe you know.

LANG: [00:19:23] And I just pulled away from it the last few months. It was kind of, I was really idle there. It was just time for me to go. And that was one of the hardest things is to pull away and that. There was a couple of, there's always a couple of key people there, just smart guys, and no education at all, but just smart and they knew what I was saying too. I can't do that. Well, I'm gone in six months. I'm not going to be around. You're going to have to do this yourself. So they, you know, were my point men, they would basically say, be quiet, he's doing the right thing. But I still felt like I got little grief for it. I thought it was, you know, not terrible.

LANGLAND: [00:20:00] But like you said, in '93, 25 years later, it was still going strong.

LANG: [00:20:05] Well, I was there with my wife and daughter, Mackenzie and Phyllis three years ago, I think it was, and met the co-op again. Most of them of there still, are older, and they brought us out to the land and showed me what they're doing with it. They're still there.

LANGLAND: [00:20:20] That's a good thing you pulled out. That's sustainable.

LANG: [00:20:23] Yes, it was. It was a very successful thing. But part of that, really, the people were like. I could never have done that with, you know, people that were less committed and that didn't believe in it, you know, and energetic and smart enough to do it. The credit goes to them. I mean, without me, probably couldn't have done it. But without those kind of people, that never would have happened. If I had done to that other town, you know, there are lots of other places in Costa Rica where this kind of thing could have taken place, and maybe some of them could have been successful, but it has to come down to the people there.

LANGLAND: [00:20:59] Hmm. So one last question about the land reform. Was that countrywide?

LANG: [00:21:04] Oh no, it was just in the area because there was the ranch that was quite large and they took part of it to get enough land to each farmer through the co-op. This is all came through the co-op and there's the co-op is responsible to pay the bonds back. If they hadn't paid the bonds back, they could have, you know, the government and the work that was done would have been a scandal, a *scandalosa*.

LANGLAND: [00:21:34] So going back a few steps, we talked about the project that you started or continued. Another question is how did you prepare yourself and others for your Peace Corps service? So your friends and family and yourself.

LANG: [00:21:51] I didn't prepare any friends or family. They didn't need the preparation, I did, and the preparation, as weak as it was, was done by the Peace Corps through the training on the mountain top of Arecibo, Puerto Rico, the rainforest.

LANGLAND: [00:22:08] So let's talk about that then.

LANG: [00:22:09] Oh boy.

LANGLAND: [00:22:10] How was your training and what did it entail?

LANG: [00:22:13] It was really screwy. It was basically a PhD dissertation for a guy named Mike Tucker, who was going for his PhD, and he used the training session as his thesis, I guess. And it didn't go real well because he had a thesis that people would deselect from Peace Corps training because, you know, they would think it's not for them, but no one did that because the Vietnam War was going on. He didn't understand why that wasn't happening. And he actually asked me over a beer with a couple other guys. Bruce, how come no one's deselecting? And I'm standing there going, like, what am I going to tell this guy? You know, I don't know. I don't want to get anybody in trouble because we're all on pins and needles. And I said, um, Mike, there's a war going on. Yeah, well, why doesn't anybody want to deselect? Mike, there's a war going on. Is that the reason? Yeah, Mike. I'm just thinking this guy's so out of touch. You just, you know, he's been in camp with us for I don't know how many weeks now, two months or something. And he doesn't understand us. So that was that.

LANG: [00:23:18] We had language training, intense language training. Sometimes we were hit with one, three or four days where we did eight hours a day in these little *casetas*, open little *casetas* and nothing more than a roof and a floor and some seats in the 120 percent humidity rainforest. And I had taken two years of Spanish in high school and two years of Spanish in college and spent three months in the rainforest in Puerto Rico learning Spanish. When I got to Costa Rica, I could basically, I could ask for a hamburger and the bathroom. I was such a dunce. In six months, I was making jokes in Spanish and dreaming in Spanish. So all that graphs about vocabulary really sunk in. And I just needed the immersion. And I became pretty good at it. Pretty good at it. There are other volunteers who are unbelievable at it. I mean, then they retorted quicker and better than.

LANG: [00:24:17] I could fool Costa Ricans for a certain period of time. They didn't know because I didn't look like a gringo. You know, I had dark hair, dark skin, dark eyes. And so they didn't, sometimes they didn't know I was American, which was a buzz for me. Yeah. Thinking I could ask for the bathroom, and now here I am fooling them. The preparation of was cultural preparation. That was somewhat helpful. You know, I had some

anthropology, it was one of my minors in college, and I understood the concept of culture. I thought I did. I really didn't until I was given a little glimpse out of Puerto Rico and saw it when I got there. And I think that was worthwhile because if you think you can just barge in and be yourself completely when you go into another culture, you're kidding yourself. That's a good way to turn them off and scare them away. You have to really be careful and kind of tiptoe in there and knowing that these people are different. And you just, you know, have to be sensitive to that. And I was not the most sensitive person when I was trying to.

LANGLAND: [00:25:18] So along those lines, you said that two volunteers were leaving when you went into this town. Had they had a lot of exposure to North Americans?

LANG: [00:25:28] These two volunteers didn't even live in that town.

LANGLAND: [00:25:30] OK.

LANG: [00:25:31] So no, I would say, you know, I don't think so. No. I would think that the co-op town had very little. They're not in contact with North Americans, a little bit, but very simple. But in that period of time in Costa Rica, it was a very pro-American. We were in an atmosphere where people really liked you, were interested in you, and cared about you. On a vacation, I went into Ecuador because one of the guys I was with, a volunteer, knew a married couple there. We got to talk to them. And anti-American feeling in Ecuador was very strong and they felt it. Even though their talent working at both the Indians and marvelous people in Ecuador are very positive towards a volunteer couple. The atmosphere a lot of times of Quito was bad. They just, you know, they could run into some, I don't think, any dangerous situation, but people just not liking them. I don't think I ran into that once in Costa Rica.

LANGLAND: [00:26:33] And so what was your living situation like?

LANG: [00:26:37] I did not live in Rio Cañas because they didn't have a place for me to stay. I lived down the road in a little bigger town called Santa Cruz. Santa Cruz had maybe a thousand people. I moved into a shared

a house. I had a room in a house with the woman who had a baby. And then another woman lived there and had a baby, and they rented me one of the rooms there, and I used their shower. And I lived in the room with a mosquito net, and I lived there for a while. It was like, you know, it was okay. It was clean and safe. Well, you know, hot, a little mosquito netting. And then after a while, I started to get my feel more comfortable in the culture, and I felt I could leave there and found a friend of mine there found a room that had just been built. And he was going to divide it up. And I went there and looked. I said, don't cut up that one room. And it was new, it was nice, it was in another part of town. I lived there for the rest of it.

LANGLAND: [00:27:33] So you lived by yourself?

LANG: [00:27:34] Oh yeah. I ate with the family, with a family there, who, um, the mother was arguably the worst cook in Costa Rica. And it was so hard to eat there, it was so bad. She couldn't cook rice and beans. And there was hardly anything else interesting in there. It was like that all the time. And I lost 20 pounds and I was skinny as a rail when I went there. Yeah. And then it took me awhile where I could feel comfortable to say, I'm working so late at the co-op. I can't make it for dinner, you know, so I'll come in when I can. And I just weaned myself out there, dropped in once in a while, just to be social. But I just had to start eating at restaurants. That's how I they were it.

LANGLAND: [00:28:16] So what was a typical day for you?

LANG: [00:28:20] There really wasn't a typical day. I mean, you know, I did go to the co-op every day. Well, the isolation boredom was, for me, was just as bad as anybody else. There were days where you could just scream out of it. Yeah, it was bad. Um, but I went to co-op. I'd take the bus there or later I got a motorbike. I had a horse there. I rode my horse in the jungle and the howler monkeys, tried not to fall off. If I did, I figured they'd never find me. It was beautiful there. So that was very good. I can say that the best adventuresome time in my life, and it's one thing I miss doing really was an adventure. I mean, so many. I could sit here, and we were talking last night about war stories. So this morning I'm thinking we

could spend days, days, maybe a week, all of us talking about all these war stories of those who went through it and it was the adventure. And I had my, I had my share of it. I really did. I didn't pine away. I mean, I went out there and just grabbed it.

LANG: [00:29:23] In the evening, I'd go to the pool hall, shoot pool with a couple of guys or they'd play poker or blackjack, and they had this terrible blackjack game with the dealer. The odds for the dealer was just so wrong. I couldn't do it all the time. I felt like it was stealing. They didn't know how to play. We played really small stakes cause I had no money. And then in the back room, there was a bigger stakes for the businessmen to play and every once in a while I'd sit in there because I used to love to play poker when I was a kid in New York, so I'd play that once in a while. Other than that, just went home, go to my room and read until I just went to sleep.

LANGLAND: [00:30:01] So were you ever in any danger?

LANG: [00:30:06] Physical danger? Well, I learned the word *pisoteador*, which means being trampled, because one of the guys who losing the land got drunk and was on a horse, a big red horse that they had there in the club, and I was on the road waiting for the bus. And he had a judge in the back of it to keep it from falling off, and he steered the red horse at me. And if it wasn't for the boy, I think the horse would have hit me. It came very close. So that was an instance of. I almost drowned crossing an estuary. That came very close. I had an attack of hives that were horrendous, that I stumbled into the one doctor they had in this town, he was a terrible doctor, and he shot me so full of anti-inflammatories that I basically fell asleep in a stupor, managed to get up and stumble my way to the airplane that day and get in the town. That was pretty scary. I never had an allergic reaction like that. I mean, I just exploded in hives. It's crazy.

LANGLAND: [00:31:20] Did you ever figure out? [tape break] So I had asked you if you found out why you had the hives, the allergic reaction?



LANG: [00:31:26] I think so. I think that I hadn't slept much. We went out to a beach and spent the night looking at the sea turtles lay their eggs. It was my only time I ever saw that, and I think I was very rundown. I didn't eat very much there and lost a lot of weight. I don't think I was very strong, and I think I spent the night out there and I was the only one that was awake to drive back in the Jeep. And I drove back and I got back exhausted and I just woke up and it just slammed me. I think I just, I think my body just kind of had it. That's my theory.

LANGLAND: [00:31:55] Did the Peace Corps provide medical care?

LANG: [00:31:57] Oh yeah. I mean, actually, we had an American doctor there. He was a guy, a Jewish doctor from New York, and his wife moved to San Jose, and he was the Nierenberg, something like that? And he was the Peace Corps doctor. Now they use Costa Rican doctors. But we had our own Peace Corps doctor there.

LANGLAND: [00:32:14] But you had to go to the capital by your own means to get care?

LANG: [00:32:18] Yeah, I did. I mean, there was a doctor like I said in town, but he was, they weren't very good. Medical care in Costa Rica is very poor, very poor. When he left, the Peace Corps doctor, they hired a Costa Rican doctor who went to school in the States, married an American. So he went to high school in Costa Rica and college and medical school in the U.S. And we felt he was very capable and he was a really good guy, and he had done a couple of things for me. I went on another adventure. One guy said to me, I'm going to go fishing with dynamite, which is terribly illegal. And I said, well, OK, I'll go to see what it's like. So I'm in this estuary. And if you've ever been around dynamite, it's unbelievable. I mean, we lit sticks and we threw them in the water and the whole place shook. Well, I guess I get paid off for being there. I didn't do any dynamiting. But just being there because I got a thorn in my foot that got infected, so I had to go to Costa Rica, I mean, go to San Jose and a doctor, a surgeon here, had to pull it out without any anesthetic. No local. Yeah, that was. I said, I hope your nurse doesn't understand English because I just cursed. It was terrible.

LANGLAND: [00:33:28] And did you have standard medical care? Did you have to go in at any certain times during your service?

LANG: [00:33:34] Yeah, we had the gamma globulin shots. Do you know anything about gamma? Oh my God. Horrible stuff. You've got to, it depends on your weight. But I was heavy enough where I had two injections because they were like, you know, four cc's each year. Eight cc's in the butt. And if you didn't walk after it, you were so cramped you were hard. You couldn't move. It was terrible stuff. And we had that every 12 months or something like that. Other than that, no physical. You get sick. They take care of you. Other than that, we're in our 20s. Nobody gets sick. We're bulletproof, man. As far as danger is concerned, the motorcycles. Yeah, there was times of motorcycles that did things that, you know, was lucky to be OK. And driving on roads that were, you know, drop offs that were horrendous. It was a great adventure. But I think probably the trampling was the closest anybody got to any violence.

LANGLAND: [00:34:35] So moving back to friends that you had. How often would you see other volunteers?

LANG: [00:34:42] There was a thing about not getting together, trying to stay by site because, you know, it was so lonely and so difficult that if they didn't make that rule, you know, we'd be there every weekend with each other. And a lot of folks did that. I didn't really. And there was a volunteer in the town and he was there for a little while before, when I got there, and he left. Over the years, there were volunteers close by, you know, a bus ride away, but basically, I was basically by myself.

LANGLAND: [00:35:21] So it sounds like your friends then were Costa Rican men mainly, from the pool hall and the co-op?

LANG: [00:35:29] Yeah, mostly guys. I was friendly with some volunteers. When we'd end up in San Jose, we'd go to movies and dinner and stuff like that. There was a couple of volunteers I was closer to than others, that I saw.

LANGLAND: [00:35:42] OK, can you think of any specific relationships with, for example, your Costa Rican friends and how that impacted your time there?

LANG: [00:35:52] A relationship in what way?

LANGLAND: [00:35:55] Friendship or people that you spent time with.

LANG: [00:35:57] Yeah, there was a guy there who I met when I was first there, named Cokie, he spoke some English. He had spent a semester at the university in America until he partied so much they had to send him home. But he was there and he was introduced to me my first day there. And he's the one who helped me find the house with the two ladies that lived there. And he's also the one who helped me when I moved. And his mother is the one who was a terrible cook. And so we became very close. There was a co-op of, I mean, an accountant named Fernand Perez, and he was a great guy and we became friends. He helped do the accounting for the co-op, and I think he still does. As a matter of fact I saw him on the way back three years ago, I saw him. Girls, you know, but not too many. Mostly, Costa Rican girls really couldn't date seriously because that had very strong ramifications. And yet, you know, feel responsible for some guy you just got there. So I had a lot of friends coming from the States to visit me, which happened. I had a number of friends come.

LANGLAND: [00:37:08] So how did that happen, first of all, how is your communication with the States? How did you communicate and how did your friends come?

LANG: [00:37:15] Letters. Matter of fact, the town of Santa Cruz did not have a phone until I was there for a couple of years. It had telegraph which had a whole other, there was no privacy in communications. There's a war stories about that you can relate, but mostly just by letters. It had to be read, corresponded by letters. You waited for the mailman to come. He'd ride up in a bicycle and hand me a letter.

LANGLAND: [00:37:36] And then how did your friends find you? Your friends from the States?

LANG: [00:37:40] Drew them a map. Said fly to San Jose and I'll pick you up. So they didn't go into my site. It was a couple of them over a period of time.

LANGLAND: [00:37:53] So let's talk about the end of your first year. What were some notable events or reflections, joys, woes, unexpected events, relationships?

LANG: [00:38:06] You know, I don't know if I could chronologically do this. In the first year, I don't know what I did. I knew in six months I was dreaming in Spanish and joking. I don't even remember, in the three years I was there, when Pepe Figueres came in. I have to go back and I'd have to look at that. So and the stories that I've been telling here are over the period of time, there's not necessarily a sequence of it, although there's some of that chronologically. But I didn't finish like one year and think about, oh, you know, I've been here one year. Now what are we going to do? It was just one day at a time.

LANGLAND: [00:38:39] So what about the end of your service?

LANG: [00:38:42] It was, uh. I always felt that I was emotionally a very strong person. I think I am today. But it was tough for me to go.

LANGLAND: [00:38:48] Tell us.

LANG: [00:38:48] I haven't talked very much about this, but the night before I left, I spent the night in the same hotel in San Jose that they put us up. It's a better hotel. And I said I spent that night by myself and I sat in bed and it was. I knew. It was time to leave. It took an emotional toll on me that I didn't really realize so much, like you'd think I did. But that night I just said, jeez, I don't think I can stay here another day. I just had to get out, I had to go home. And I had been home, it wasn't like I'd spent three years away from home. You know, my parents sent me plane tickets, I'd come back home for a few days around Christmas, maybe, or holidays.

They live in Florida so I can fly right to Miami and they'd pick me up. I'd be home in three hours by car once they got there. In one 24 hour period, I made sure that I rode a boat, a horse, a motorcycle, a car, and an airplane. I worked that out.

LANGLAND: [00:39:48] To go back to?

LANG: [00:39:48] The boat was the hard one, but I did everything. I think I got that horse, matter of fact, I had to get that horse in the afternoon to make it work. Yeah, that was kind of funny.

LANGLAND: [00:40:01] OK, so what about the last day in your town? Do you remember that at all?

LANG: [00:40:07] Yeah, they had a party and there was a teacher in the town who didn't involve himself much in the co-op, but he was very involved in the town and a great guy. And he was Casimiro Guadaloupe. I had to labor over that name. Casimiro Guadaloupe. What a handle. His name was longer than he was tall and he was the head of the, he did the master of ceremonies for myself and Sue Fagan, who was also worked in the town in the nutrition part of it. And they had a party for both of us. And Casimiro said, one day we're going to build a wall around the co-op and we're going to have Bruce and Susan's heads sculpted on the wall. I'll never forget that. I was sitting there going, oh my god, I can't laugh. So they're very, you know, part of the culture is very grandiose. You know, big. Everything is big. They didn't believe in crawl, walk, run, which I did, you know, let's crawl. Let's walk, then we'll run. No, let's run right away. So we're going to have my head and Susan's head on the portals of this wall going around the *finca*.

LANGLAND: [00:41:15] So three years ago, did they have your head somewhere?

LANG: [00:41:18] No. As a matter of fact, I feel so guilty because when I did go back with my wife and daughter, we met in this hall that they have there, and all the presidents of the co-ops photos are on there. I mean, why is my photo not up there, I didn't send them my photo. And one of the reasons is I can't find a photo of me then. You know, I could send a

photo of me now. I don't know. I just haven't done it. I don't know why. I don't know why. This is dumb. I should have. It's hard sometimes for me to connect with that, I guess. I don't know. It's emotional part of it. I feel guilty that I don't see them, you know?

LANGLAND: [00:41:54] So do you communicate with people now? I know you said you went back, but do you communicate?

LANG: [00:42:01] Not really. That's why I feel guilty.

LANGLAND: [00:42:04] So again, I know you said it's hard to kind of think about this, but at the end of your tour, what were some of the regrets or satisfaction? I know you said you were ready to go, but.

LANG: [00:42:22] Very little regrets, now that I think about it. I mean, co-op was up and running. I thought it had a shot. They had the land reform bill. I didn't know if they could pay it off, but I hoped they could. I was sad to leave my horse, my horse a lot. Um, regrets, not many. The satisfaction, not to get into the details, but I have to fight to stay out of service. My draft board was arguably the toughest draft board in the country, the Glen Cove draft board, and they went down to the wire with me. They tried to actually, in an interview that I had to ask for it to get through the period of my 26th birthday, which is the cutoff, I had to ask for an interview. So I physically had to go up there, and they tried to make me say something that would have, they tried to trick me. But we had hired an attorney in Miami and he taught me the law and I knew what to do, what not to do.

LANG: [00:43:27] I was really, I was a draft expert. There were volunteers that would come to me, Bruce, what do I do, what do I do? And I would just say, this is my understanding of what the law is. Because when they called my number, I was in my site. I had the radio going. My parents had bought me this radio that got armed forces radio and all the other channels, great radio. And they called the draft number and my birthday was 50, so I was bloody toast. I remember getting up, shutting the radio off, and walking around the town that night. Just walking around for a

while. So we had to fight tooth and nail. That would have to be bad. But it got. So that wasn't a regret, but that was difficult. Really no regrets.

LANGLAND: [00:44:09] So at that point, what were your plans for the future?

LANG: [00:44:12] I had no plans. Go back, get my \$2000, and buy an MGT. Get a job and figure out what to do. I moved in with my parents there in Florida. Had a Costa Rican girlfriend, she came up and we moved in together there, and I worked for 11 months as a room service waiter for Disney in Orlando at the Polynesian Hotel. And put together a business plan and got a loan, opened up a fabulous wood carving shop for thing from Honduras and tracking the book. And then the Arab oil embargo occurred. You're too young to know that, but the business world came to an end when that stuff happened. And we're seeing some of the restriction now, then I think it was actually worse. And this has been a slow thing. Then it was, they just cut it off. So people went crazy and the businesses just went upside down. All kinds of things stopped. My little business didn't really have a shot, but really do some fabulous artwork. We finally found a way to do some things very cheaply and charging outrageous amount of money and really do some beautiful artwork.

LANGLAND: [00:45:23] And so what happened after that?

LANG: [00:45:26] Well, another guy I knew he lost his job in the mortgage business because our biggest mortgage company in Florida closed. He had five thousand dollars and I was forty five thousand dollars in debt to it and to a senile old lady. Probably didn't even remember she had loaned me the money. And I said, we can do something. We can do this, this repping business. We can sell stuff. We were too young and stupid to know that you couldn't do that. And so we did it and we built a very nice business and I paid her off every penny. So we bought a rather large repping firm in the Southeast and in four states out of Texas, so I was successful there. But I think the success in the Peace Corps really, really translated to this idea that I could do, I could do anything I really put my mind to. Nothing's going to stop me. Yes, it was.

LANGLAND: [00:46:16] So the next question is evaluate your service in light of the three goals of Peace Corps. So the first goal is to provide technical assistance.

LANG: [00:46:26] A-plus.

LANGLAND: [00:46:28] Would you like to care to talk more about that?

LANG: [00:46:31] Well, I think I did.

LANGLAND: [00:46:33] OK. And then the second is to help promote better understanding of Americans by others. How did you do that?

LANG: [00:46:42] Well, I'll tell you a story. It's a great story. When the man, when we walked on the moon, I happened to be in a meeting with my co-op in one of the shacks, uninhabited shacks, because the family had left or something. Dirt floor, windows, no windows, doors making windows, no glass or open. The tin roof was hot. There was somebody bought a radio, battery operated radio, which is all they had, no TVs. There was no electricity. And when he walked on the moon that the American announcer was doing it and there was a Spanish speaking announcer talking, translating, so I could hear part of the English and then the Spanish. And when he said he's on the moon, there must have been, I think, eight guys who were there. And they just turned and looked at me. What a connection. Jesus, I was on the moon, I was on the moon, I was an American and I was there. They looked at me like, wow, that was pretty cool.

LANGLAND: [00:47:48] I can imagine.

LANG: [00:47:48] And then I went to town that night. One of the young ladies with the babies who'd give me the other side of the house said that the God was going to, you know, God didn't like that. I don't know what she said. Whatever. Well, all right.

LANGLAND: [00:48:05] OK.



LANG: [00:48:06] So that's the understanding. And I have other, you know, there's a lot of connection in three years of Costa Rica. There's all kinds of Costa Ricans. Parts are the guys from the other political party that didn't like the land reform bill, they were friends of mine. Really good friends of mine, and, I mean, I could talk about all kinds of different people, levels of interaction. You know, people had restaurants, people with the coldest beer in town, people who, a painter who couldn't say my name for three years. Hola, Bush! Called me Bush, couldn't say Bruce. You know, kids I played soccer with. The guy who worked at the wood factory. So, I mean, just a million people, you know, I was out there, I didn't hide.

LANGLAND: [00:48:53] So on the opposite end, how did you promote understanding of Costa Ricans to your American friends and family?

LANG: [00:49:02] Just by kind of talking about Ticos. I mean, they're a very special breed of people, they are.

LANGLAND: [00:49:09] So what did you tell them?

LANG: [00:49:10] Well, they're very, very *pacífico*. They're very peaceful people, very pro-American. They're very proud of their democracy. They're very proud that they don't have an army. They're very proud that they produce more teachers and export teachers to all over Latin America. They're proud of the friendship that America has with them. The beauty of the land, I mean, it's a tiny, tiny country. I don't know, in a jet plane it may take you minutes to go from one coast to another once you're rocking and rolling up in the air. And there are four or five different types of zones there, deserts and jungles and mountains and volcanoes and Pacific Ocean, Atlantic Ocean coasts. Crazy deep rivers. The world's second rivers. I mean, it's, for a tiny country it's got a lot of power.

LANGLAND: [00:50:00] So just a couple more questions.

LANG: [00:50:02] It's OK. I'm enjoying talking about myself, I didn't know that.

LANGLAND: [00:50:08] So I think you've answered some of these, so let me go through this. I know you're here for a reunion of your group. So do you have any other continuing Peace Corps involvement?

LANG: [00:50:21] Well, over the years, I've done Peace Corps Day at school, for my daughter's school. You know, I go in with some pottery from Costa Rica and a picture and some different artifacts I have, Costa Rican things, and talk about. Peace Corps as a packet they'll send you. You can talk about that. I've done stuff like that. I volunteer a lot of stuff, you know, so we're just going off from my volunteer all the time. We were in the classroom all the time. For my daughter now, and she likes, she goes to an acting, she does a lot of acting actually, and so does my wife now, in Portland. And we do a lot of volunteering there at the acting school. My daughter doesn't go to the school academically for that, but for extracurricular activities. So the volunteerism, you know, is there.

LANGLAND: [00:51:18] So last but not least, what effect has your Peace Corps service had on you?

LANG: [00:51:26] Actually, yeah, it taught me I could be successful. It taught me Spanish. It taught me about a whole culture of people, geography. A lot about myself. So a huge impact.

LANGLAND: [00:51:44] Did it change your career goals at all? I know you said you're a liberal arts major in college. I'm sure that had a direction specifically.

LANG: [00:51:54] Not actually, not at all. I always wanted, before in high school, I wanted to have my own business. Always, always, always wanted to be in my own business. That was something ingrained in me for a long time. A lot of it had to do with how my father was treated in the business. He was very successful. But there are some things that he couldn't control, weren't very fair. And I didn't like that. I wanted to control my own fate. So I wanted to be a businessman. You know, just one thing led to another, forced me into this thing, economic necessities. And I thought I was very good at it. And so that's where I stayed. It gives me the ability to be a dad and a husband, make a nice living, be at home. Not have to travel too much. Not be a slave to somebody else's whim. Just really

worked out well for me. That's so, no. I didn't go work for a non-profit. I think that would have been cool, but you know, in the '70s there weren't non-profits, I mean, you didn't have 501(c)s, I don't think it existed. So that whole concept of doing that didn't really, I wasn't aware of that that existed. If I had, it might have been an interesting career path. But it didn't end up.

LANGLAND: [00:53:05] So what last comments would you like to say?

LANG: [00:53:10] I just think, um, I think the Peace Corps is so short. I think they can do a lot more. You know, we were kind of told in camp, you know, if you can't do anything there, we understand that, but be friendly with the people and learn something about them and have them learn something about you. And I thought, you know what? That's fine. That's going to happen anyway. But you know what? We have skill and these people have needs and there's no excuse for just going for two years and being a friend. Do something, you know? And that was a criticism I had, maybe the group that I was with. Not to jump in and try to change the world because that could get you in a lot of trouble, if you try to do too much. That was something that concerned me too with this co-op. Was I doing too much? Or was I pushing these people's work, you know, and was this going to blow up in your face? Because they're, you know, the peasant in any country does not have any kind of extra money or goods to risk. That's why they're poor. They don't have a collateral, they don't have anything to the risk. You know, they put in a new crop and it fails, they can starve to death. So you had to be really careful with that stuff. So I'm not saying that Peace Corps should be super people get out there and change the world. No. But you know, you're there to do something, even if it's a small something, leave something. So I think there could be more emphasis on that. Maybe it's changed now. I don't know. It hasn't?

LANGLAND: [00:54:34] We'll talk about that when the tape's over. This is your interview.

LANG: [00:54:37] Oh, alright.

LANGLAND: [00:54:37] Is there anything else you'd like to add, Bruce?

LANG: [00:54:40] I don't think so. I, you know, I mean, yeah, I could talk for hours, days. There's more stories. Days and days and days. Just funny stuff, sad stuff. Throw a subject and I could probably tell you stories, but no, I think this is fine.

LANGLAND: [00:54:56] Ok, well, thank you for your time. I'm going to end the interview now and stop the tape.

[END OF INTERVIEW]