

Philip Lilienthal Oral History Interview
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Administrative Information

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Biographical Note

Philip Lilienthal served as a Peace Corps volunteer in Ethiopia from 1965 to 1967 in a legal program. He also served as Peace Corps staff in the General Counsel's office (1969-1972); as regional director for Mindanao, Philippines (1972-1973); and as deputy director for Thailand (1973-1974).

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Oral History Interview

with

Philip Lilienthal

January 7, 2019
Reston, Virginia

By Evelyn Ganzglass

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

GANZGLASS: [00:00:02] This is Evelyn Ganzglass. Today is January 7th, 2019, and I am interviewing Philip Lilienthal, who was a Peace Corps volunteer in Ethiopia from 1965 to 1967 in a legal program. He was then staff, first in the D.C. in Washington in the General Counsel's office and then regional director in Mindanao in the Philippines and deputy director in Thailand from 1973 to 1974. I forgot to say that I was a Peace Corps volunteer in Somalia from 1966 to 1968. So with that brief introduction, Phil, let me ask you, why did you join the Peace Corps?

LILIENTHAL: [00:00:57] I think, of course it's a long time ago and it's not a clear path, but I was certainly a Kennedy fan. But when I was at college, and when I was in college, which was when Kennedy was running for president and was elected, I graduated in '62, I was the chairman of the college chest drive, which was the community, uh.

GANZGLASS: [00:01:25] Volunteer? Yeah.

LILIENTHAL: [00:01:26] Well, it was charitable list of charities, so kids, the students gave money. Part of the student fee went to went to this chest drive and I was in charge of the organizations that were getting the money. Well, it was kind of like so much back in those days, there was very little freewill involved. I inherited a list of organizations and if I guess if I had hated them, I and the committee could have decided not to support them. But one that I'd never heard of, and I was hosting the speaker, was Operation Crossroads Africa. And James Robinson, who was a charismatic African American minister from New York, was the founder and the spokesperson. And he came to college and we had a chapel system where two days a week, I think, were religious and two days where we were secular. He was there, I guess, on the secular day, although I don't really know, and it's a ten minute talk, and I introduced him and I had to be there to listen.

LILIENTHAL: [00:02:29] And in those ten minutes, he got me so excited I wanted to drop everything and run to his program to work in Africa for the summer. So I don't, I don't know which came first. Anyway, I didn't go to his program. My parents, we grew up lower middle class and my first trip to, an international trip, they said, was not going to be to Africa. But I should choose something a little more in keeping with for my maybe one and only time overseas, I should do something a little more attuned with my cultural background and find out something about where I came from.

LILIENTHAL: [00:03:08] Anyway, my girlfriend at the time, now my wife, got excited about this. She was at another college. And she ended up going on the program while I, poor me, had to go to Europe. So we met at the end of the summer and she came back from Kenya with chiggers and with bruises and with dirt. And we met in Paris and I was just at the end of this great European tour on my own backpacking through. And I envied her experience much more than my own. So we showed my parents and we got married during law school and we went in the Peace Corps.

GANZGLASS: [00:03:45] Great. Good story. So let's back up a little bit.

LILIENTHAL: [00:03:50] And I'm going to stick by it.

GANZGLASS: [00:03:51] So where did you grow up?

LILIENTHAL: [00:03:52] Grew up in New York City.

GANZGLASS: [00:03:53] New York City. And where did you go to college?

LILIENTHAL: [00:03:57] Amherst College in Massachusetts.

GANZGLASS: [00:03:59] Amherst. Where did she go to college?

LILIENTHAL: [00:04:02] Wisconsin. And then she transferred to the New School in New York.

GANZGLASS: [00:04:05] So I should probably interview her as well as a Peace Corps volunteer.

LILIENTHAL: [00:04:09] If you're smart, you would have interviewed her instead of me.

GANZGLASS: [00:04:10] OK, so this all came from Operation Crossroads Africa.

LILIENTHAL: [00:04:16] I think so. You know, it's a combination of Kennedy's passion and Reverend Robinson.

GANZGLASS: [00:04:22] Alright, so you got married. You both went to law school and then?

LILIENTHAL: [00:04:27] No, she went to social work school.

GANZGLASS: [00:04:28] OK, but you went to law school. So did you go into the Peace Corps after law school then?

LILIENTHAL: [00:04:33] Missed my graduation and went to training. Yeah.

GANZGLASS: [00:04:37] And what was the legal program into which you went in the Peace Corps?

LILIENTHAL: [00:04:45] The idea that, the idea of it was wonderful and the actuality, of course, is often something else. The idea of it was the Ford Foundation was funding a law school in Ethiopia and a project to codify the laws, thousands of years of traditional law, the common law of Ethiopia. They were putting them into codes, commercial code, criminal code, civil code. While, theoretically, while the Ethiopian traditional lawyers were going to law school, Peace Corps volunteer lawyers would help out and take their jobs while they were in law school temporarily and then have them come back. I don't believe I ever met a lawyer who was at the law school, and I never heard that the job that I was doing at any of the various ministries in which I worked was vacated by someone who was attending law school.

GANZGLASS: [00:05:39] And what language were the laws written in?

LILIENTHAL: [00:05:43] The new laws were written in Amharic and English. It was a trend of simultaneous and not a simultaneous translation, but a dual codification process.

GANZGLASS: [00:05:55] So this is really interesting that you were codifying their traditional law.

LILIENTHAL: [00:06:01] Oh, I wasn't doing the codifying. I was sort of like, my first assignment was at the Ministry of Interior to review a contract coming from Reston, and this was particularly interesting, reviewing a contract by an Italian firm to do planning for 20 new towns in Ethiopia. So I figured, well, this is karma. You know, I know about new towns, I'm working on a project. Forget about it. It had nothing to do with the towns, it had to do with the contract and the Italians' firm getting money to do the work. But it was at the Ministry of Interior. It was an ad hoc job and after I was done with that, took a couple of months, I went to another ministry and worked work there.

GANZGLASS: [00:06:45] Mm hmm. Oh, interesting. So what was the training like? Where were you trained?

LILIENTHAL: [00:06:51] At UCLA. We were in a program for teachers, mostly teachers. Half the group was at UCLA and half was at Utah, and that was done for language purposes. They were experimenting with learning the language grammatically and the written language, which we did, versus learning the spoken language and the conversational language, which they did at Utah. And of course, all of us at UCLA envied the people who were learning to actually speak it. We could read signs and read the news. We could read the letters. We just didn't know what they meant. So three months later, they were in much better shape than we were. Twenty years down the road, we would have been much better prepared to be scholars in Amharic, which not many of us are.

GANZGLASS: [00:07:40] And did you have legal training for the Peace Corps too?

LILIENTHAL: [00:07:43] We did. The, um, I forget his title. I think he was the former attorney general. Bereket Habte Selassie.

GANZGLASS: [00:07:55] Who was a very good friend of my husband's.

LILIENTHAL: [00:07:57] Oh, come on. Oh, he was just great. And he was at the Peace Corps training. He was our mentor. Brought us, I remember, up to, um, might have been Santa Barbara, where a wonderful institute is. Anyway, it's not important, but I knew the institute, I read a lot of their publications and we met with their scholars. But there were three of us in the program. The other two ended up dropping out. One before, no, I think we all got, we all went to Ethiopia, and they both terminated early. So I was the survivor. But yeah, Bereket was our mentor, spoke to us about the laws, and I don't remember anything specific other than being in his presence was just marvelous.

GANZGLASS: [00:08:51] He was a wonderful person.

LILIENTHAL: [00:08:51] Yeah. Great guy.

GANZGLASS: [00:08:51] Offline we'll talk more about Bereket. And did you. So you were at UCLA, and then you flew. How long was that training?

LILIENTHAL: [00:09:03] That was three months.

GANZGLASS: [00:09:05] Three months.

LILIENTHAL: [00:09:05] June, July, August. Came back to New York and had a week in New York or so, I'm not sure.

GANZGLASS: [00:09:09] And then flew off to Addis directly?

LILIENTHAL: [00:09:13] Yeah.

GANZGLASS: [00:09:14] OK. Was there any training in country after that?

LILIENTHAL: [00:09:17] No.

GANZGLASS: [00:09:18] And were you stationed in Addis?

LILIENTHAL: [00:09:20] Yes.

GANZGLASS: [00:09:22] Because you were in the legal program?

LILIENTHAL: [00:09:23] Yeah.

GANZGLASS: [00:09:23] And your wife then got a job there as well?

LILIENTHAL: [00:09:26] Yeah, she was the sole social worker. So it was kind of an individual placement idea, but they had very good jobs lined up. I think they had them lined up for her. I don't think she had to look for them. She was at an orphanage, a mental hospital, and a juvenile home.

GANZGLASS: [00:09:46] So what, how was your living situation in Addis?

LILIENTHAL: [00:09:52] Well, we were given an allowance and we were just told to go look for a house. We had a lot of bargaining. There was one house we really wanted and it was \$10 more a month than we were given and we were not going to pay it, and we ended up compromising and ended up getting a much, in the same neighborhood. But as it turned out, that was a lovely house and it was, oh, two or three bedrooms, and not formal bedrooms, but spaces that could be used for bedrooms. There was one formal bedroom, one bathroom, hot water heater. Of course, the sewage system was that it, I think everything went out to the stream that was next to the house and it just flowed downstream. Although maybe the toilets didn't. All the kitchen water did. And it was.

LILIENTHAL: [00:10:45] We had a big yard and all the kids in the neighborhood would come and play soccer in our yard. We had a little band that they just created and just made it a mecca for the kids. But it was not far from work. It was a bus ride or a long walk from my main, my initial place of employment. And for Lynn, she had to take busses to where she was going. But it was in the city proper, near what's called the piazza, which used to be the center of town and now is not. A lot of eucalyptus trees. That was a big main tree there, so it was quite shaded but very pleasant. Climate is delightful, sort of like Southern California. It's at about eight thousand, eighty five hundred feet where we were, so constantly out of breath. We never got fully acclimated. My tennis suffered tremendously as I was winded by the middle of the first set. And soccer, forget about it. It just didn't happen. But it was delightful.

GANZGLASS: [00:11:47] Did you interact with other Peace Corps volunteers?

LILIENTHAL: [00:11:53] Yes. Yeah. The lawyers in our program, we saw a bit. But then when the next group of lawyers came, we were friendlier with them. We knew one of them from home. My wife's good friend married a lawyer at Harvard, and she and he came over. She ended up teaching social studies and he was part of this, I think there were six or seven in the next group of lawyers. So we were pretty friendly with them and I was mentoring them a bit too. And other volunteers from

our training group would come into Addis and they'd always stay with us.

GANZGLASS: [00:12:29] And then did you meet Ethiopians? Were you? Did you become friends with them? Did you work with them?

LILIENTHAL: [00:12:35] Yeah. All of the above. Our neighbors. We went to the wedding of people who are our age. I guess we met them, the woman lived a couple of doors down from us on our dirt road and I think we just met her from the neighborhood. We ended up having kids at the same time. We had our first child, a son, born over there. And she had a child born also, a boy, and her brother-in-law and etcetera, we were friendly with. And then the people I worked with, I mean, we were, we had friends, but these were kind of the neighbor, the kind of coffee klatch people you would have as neighbors now. And even, let's see, 1992, when our son who was born there was going to go in the Peace Corps, we had a trip to Ethiopia. They were still living in the same house and we just dropped in on them. We didn't have any contact information, but they were still there and it was just like, you know, camp friends, school friends, renewing contacts. We just started chattering away and it was just delightful.

GANZGLASS: [00:13:47] So did you communicate with them in Amharic?

LILIENTHAL: [00:13:50] English.

GANZGLASS: [00:13:51] In English. So they all spoke English?

LILIENTHAL: [00:13:53] Yeah, yeah. Our Amharic never got good enough, and the people we were working with all spoke English, the professionals that and the legal professionals and the. But we would, you know, chit chat in Amharic. They'd tolerate us for a while and then they switched to English to make it easier for all of us.

GANZGLASS: [00:14:11] And let me ask some more about the job itself. So you were working on contracts for these new towns. What other kinds of work were you doing?

LILIENTHAL: [00:14:20] Well, in the morning, as I recall, in the morning, I would go to my job and in the afternoon I'd come back to the Institute of Public Administration, where we would be based. Oh, and there were lawyers there before me, so we would all get together and we would proofread the laws that were being proclaimed. Because the new laws when. I might have this a little bit off, I think it was the new laws were being, like in the Federal Register. They were being advertised and they were being, not promulgated, but just being proposed, and then if there were people who objected. I mean, nobody objected to Haile Selassie, but, you know, they ran through the process.

LILIENTHAL: [00:15:12] But we would proofread it to make sure that it was being translated into English the right way. So we spent a lot of time proofreading, which is deadly. But the fun work was in the mornings at the ministries. Yeah, but the. So the typical day was I would leave the house, get the bus down to the Ministry of Interior, come home for lunch. After lunch, go to the Institute of Public Administration, which was a ten minute walk or so, and work there in the afternoon.

GANZGLASS: [00:15:43] So this is a very unusual kind of Peace Corps assignment, isn't it?

LILIENTHAL: [00:15:47] Yeah, yeah.

GANZGLASS: [00:15:49] Do you think it was a good thing for Peace Corps, to have lawyers in the Peace Corps?

LILIENTHAL: [00:15:55] Whoever knows if what you do is important. My project was dramatic and great and changed my life, but my job was like so many of the jobs, you know, they could have hired somebody else to do it, or was I needed, or could an Ethiopian have done the same thing? Yes, probably, to all of the above. And like so many Peace Corps jobs, it was much more of a eye-opener and radical change experience for me than it was for them. For them, it was maybe meeting an American was good. You know, we handled all the questions about CIA and what could you possibly be doing here if you weren't spying and all of that?

So it was a little bit of goodwill and a little bit of, yeah, this is what Americans are like. But for me to find out about Ethiopia and to travel and to learn was mind blowing.

GANZGLASS: [00:16:51] How is it mind blowing? What did you do with all of that experience?

LILIENTHAL: [00:16:56] Well, at the time, it was probably the most pronounced thing. I mean, the image of dreaming in Amharic was there tangentially, but my Amharic was never good. But the Amharic I knew, I knew very well. So I would be in the market and I would be dreaming in Amharic. And I thought, oh wow, that's a great sign. But much more important was I was looking at world events through an Ethiopian screen instead of through an American screen. That is, I would read their papers and be sympathetic and buy in to their view, not to adopt it, but to understand how they were looking at the Vietnam War through a different set of eyes from the Americans. Although the Vietnam War wasn't big then, it wasn't major in my mind, it was perking.

LILIENTHAL: [00:17:55] And things that I knew about American foreign policy were not just, were not necessarily the facts. It was just what I knew about American foreign policy. Other people, I could have respect other people's views. And that was marvelous just to have, to know that my base of knowledge was relative and that other people had very different views that were completely worthwhile. And maybe I didn't know, I just thought.

GANZGLASS: [00:18:25] What a revolutionary idea.

LILIENTHAL: [00:18:27] Yeah, yeah.

GANZGLASS: [00:18:30] Talk a little bit about what Addis or Ethiopia was like under the emperor.

LILIENTHAL: [00:18:37] Well, it, um, well, my, the classic remark, which is not entirely the point, but it's too good an anecdote to ignore. We had a

congressional delegation come over, and being in Addis and being from New York, one of the members of the delegation was a New York Congressman, a new Congress, I think he was in his first term. His name was Benjamin Rosenthal, who ended up being getting pretty senior in foreign affairs and a bright guy. But you wouldn't know it, this sort of this shleppy Jewish guy from New York, from Queens. And we hosted him and we're Jewish and we have lots of chatty neighborhood deli kind of discussion to talk with him. And then, he was lovely to be with and very unassuming, and he went home. He went back. And he said, give me your parents' phone numbers, I'll call them. I said, wow, that would be great. You know, phone calls were not part of the milieu at that point. So, yeah, they'd love to hear somebody who saw us.

LILIENTHAL: [00:19:39] So when he got back, as my parents told it, he called them. He said, this is Ben Rosenthal. I'm a congressman from Queens and I was just in Ethiopia. And they said, oh. And your son is doing wonderful and your daughter-in-law's marvelous. And they said, well how is it, what's Addis like? He said, you know, Miami Beach it ain't. So that's how we summed up our lives when somebody asked us, how was that place? Well, Miami Beach it ain't. But to us, it was an opportunity. It was, it was great. It was sui generis in the sense that it was just unique in our world. We'd never seen anything like it. It was the only country in Africa that had never been colonized. So it was a very strong, nationalistic flavor and a very proud culture.

LILIENTHAL: [00:20:34] And they tolerated foreigners. They knew they were superior, that they had their own country and they ran it. They were not bowing and scraping to these transitional transient Westerners. So it was very much peer development, peer relationships. The city itself was, um, apparently the water system is very good and the pipes are what are so bad. So you couldn't drink the water, even though it's coming from great pure sources. But there was never the infrastructure spending for it. The roads were, a lot of paved roads in the city, but our road was very rocky and the road that our house was on. So the taxis would never come down. We'd have to get off at the paved, where the paved road ended. But it was a lot of small shacks, a lot of individual homes.

LILIENTHAL: [00:21:30] I don't think there were apartment houses then. And if they were, there were three or four stories tall. Everybody had their individual shack, which was made with mud and with paper over it that they then painted, newspaper or other paper, and was mud with sticks supporting it. And the tin roof if you had some money, grass roof if you didn't. And we had a tin roof on our little house. And everybody had guards. It was just a cynic cure, but, you know, to give somebody some work, but you paid a few bucks a month and a little guard house where he lived and he would always be there to open the gate, the door, or the little tin door, which could have been entered with a can opener. And we had a cook who was a maid and a cook. It was a kind of expected that if you were both working, somebody would need to clean up the house. So it was getting.

GANZGLASS: [00:22:32] Was it a male or female?

LILIENTHAL: [00:22:34] We had both. I mean, we all, we started off with a male and he left for a better job and then we got a female.

GANZGLASS: [00:22:44] I guess my question was directed more at the politics of it, since you were in the legal field.

LILIENTHAL: [00:22:51] Oh sorry.

GANZGLASS: [00:22:52] No, no. Both are good. But coming from the United States and the thought of rule of law in the United States, did it differ under an emperor?

LILIENTHAL: [00:23:07] Yes, you knew where all power came from and occasionally it looked like there were great changes because the cabinet would change and they would just shuffle around and change positions. We figured it was probably because he felt somebody might be getting too entrenched and might challenge him. I don't think, aside from whispered comments about Haile Selassie, you know, you wouldn't criticize him openly. I don't think anybody, I don't remember feeling a police power or a police state. There wasn't, there weren't people

around all over. But I think there was a suspicion, a fear of intelligence people being around and people who might report. I don't think we felt it because we weren't doing anything sensitive, and we were young and naive. You know, we didn't think in those terms, that anybody would care about what we said. But in fact, they could very well have.

GANZGLASS: [00:24:01] You might have been watched.

LILIENTHAL: [00:24:03] We might have been watched. Yeah, yeah. But it wasn't apparent. And my wife in her work met the emperor's granddaughters and had some work to do with them. And that was, they were educated in England and were very open and educated and liberal thinking, at least in terms of social policies. I guess we didn't get into politics much because there wasn't any opposition party. There was nothing to talk about. I remember one TV commentator, Musay somebody, was rather on the edge. He had been educated abroad, had very good English, might have been gay, was just a little bit on the edge of society and was more politically open. I don't remember anybody else being that way.

GANZGLASS: [00:24:57] Did you travel throughout Ethiopia to neighboring countries during vacations?

LILIENTHAL: [00:25:03] Yeah, yeah. Both.

GANZGLASS: [00:25:03] Where did you go?

LILIENTHAL: [00:25:05] Well, we went to a conference in Asmara in Eritrea, and we were entrusted with a Peace Corps jeep that they needed to get up there, and four of our friends went with us. So we had a three day trip up there on crisscrossy dirt roads, and that was exciting. We went to visit friends in other parts of the country, Dire Dawa, Harar, Debre Tsege. And then my wife's parents came to visit in the spring of '66 and we met them in Spain, which we shouldn't have done, which was off limits. We shouldn't have gone to Europe, but we just met them for a night or two and then went to Morocco and spent a couple of weeks or a week there, two weeks there, traveling around. And then I took

leave, unauthorized leave. Lynn came right back. But my job was more flexible and I didn't have to come back.

LILIENTHAL: [00:26:03] And Pan Am had a cross Africa flight that went, and I might have these stops in the wrong order. But it went from Dakar to Lagos, Accra, Monrovia, Nairobi, and I don't know if it then went up to Addis or if I had to get another flight. But if you just went for one leg of the trip, they would put you up with room and board and taxi to and from this nice hotel until their next flight came in. So you could spend two days and it was every other day of the week and I could spend two days in Dakar.

GANZGLASS: [00:26:44] Good deal.

LILIENTHAL: [00:26:45] Great deal. So unfortunately, it was discovered that I was absent without leave, and while I was good friends with the director, he said, well, look, I've got to do something. What do you suggest? I said, I had heard of one month of unsatisfactory conduct, thinking that was one month of the readjustment allowance, 75 bucks. I figured that was probably appropriate. And he seemed to think that was a little harsh, but he did it. I thought it was a pretty good trade. So anyway, I saw a lot of Africa then. And then on our holiday, the first summer we went down to, again unauthorized, we went to South Africa because we just wanted to see how bad the situation was there. Peace Corps wasn't allowed to go. And we went to Malawi and the Rhodesias, what was then Rhodesia.

GANZGLASS: [00:27:37] Were you not allowed to? So Peace Corps was not allowed to go to Somalia, um, to South Africa?

LILIENTHAL: [00:27:44] No.

GANZGLASS: [00:27:45] Under apartheid.

LILIENTHAL: [00:27:46] Yeah, yeah. And I remember, I remember most vividly that entering the country, they took away my Playboy. They didn't give it back. But that was the biggest thing I found. Plus, drive, I mean, it was

lots of horrible stuff and we visited a friend. We traveled with another Peace Corps couple from Ethiopia, and they had a friend from college who was working for Citibank down there. Gorgeous big house and nice, I mean, servants and everything. But the servants, I remember they had to leave the house before dark so they could get back to their township. And that there were signs along the road. Please don't go into the native areas, we don't want the privacy of our natives to be disturbed. Meaning don't cause any trouble by asking questions. So there, I mean, it was powerful to see this, and I was so sorry that Peace Corps didn't allow it. I'm sure it wasn't for any reason other than it didn't, they didn't want us to get into trouble in a country where we were.

GANZGLASS: [00:28:55] Or support the regime.

LILIENTHAL: [00:28:57] Well, maybe could be seen as.

GANZGLASS: [00:28:58] Oh, that was before, it was before sanctions, I'm sure.

LILIENTHAL: [00:28:58] Yeah. Yeah, that's true.

GANZGLASS: [00:29:03] I think sanctions came quite a bit later than that.

LILIENTHAL: [00:29:06] Yeah. Anyway, the other countries were interesting, but this was pretty powerful.

GANZGLASS: [00:29:13] So you did your job for two years? I did. And then what did you do? How did you decide, were you going straight home or what? I think you stayed an extra, no, you stayed two years and an extra month.

LILIENTHAL: [00:29:30] Well, I stayed the extra month because I, my project was what was really big. That's what dominated my presence there. In the spring of '66, we'd been there about seven to eight months, one of the emperor's granddaughters came to Peace Corps. Had come back from England and said, you know, we really should have a summer camp in Ethiopia. We should have a camp for our kids. And it would be a great

way for tribes to come together and to break down some of the barriers that the tribes have against each other and make them more collegial, if you will. So Peace Corps, one of the staff members, came to me knowing my father owned a summer camp in Maine. And I must have said how much I love it or whatever. And he came and said, you want to start a camp? And I said, sure, thinking, no big deal.

GANZGLASS: [00:30:27] I know how to run a camp.

LILIENTHAL: [00:30:29] Well, I'd been a counselor for two years. But when once I got into it, a lot of the organizational stuff really did just come to me just from my father's experience and what I'd learned. So that was immense. We had a boys' program because our camp was a boys' camp in Maine. And the first summer we just had one session of 60 kids. We got support from USAID, from the military, from the Ethiopian military. One of the emperor's family gave us the land to use. We got tents and dug latrines and got sports equipment and had 60, probably about 55 Ethiopian kids and then a few from the American and British community to give it further integration. And had counselors from, you know, university students and a few Peace Corps volunteers.

LILIENTHAL: [00:31:28] And that set my life in motion for the rest of my life, because I juggle law and camp, which is what I've done ever since. And the second year, we had expanded it to three sessions of 75 kids, and I was working with the YMCA to hand it over to them when I left. And they assigned one of their youth leaders to work with me for the year to get the camp organized and then to take it over when I left.

GANZGLASS: [00:31:56] And you brought together people from different ethnic groups, is that what it was?

LILIENTHAL: [00:32:00] Yeah, we lost that. We didn't have any sessions that really focused on it. It was much more, let's just get this off the ground and let somebody else worry about the tribal stuff. We didn't, and they didn't push us on it. So we just got the camp organized and then it continued.

GANZGLASS: [00:32:19] Where was the camp?

LILIENTHAL: [00:32:20] It was at a, the one lake that Peace Corps said is safe to swim in, Lake Langano, and we called it Camp Langano, L-A-N-G-A-N-O. It's about, I think it was 190, 200 kilometers from Addis south, and it was, it had a hotel down there that was a relatively nice hotel. Now it's much more developed, I understand. And it ran for seven years until the emperor was overthrown and the communist regime came in and stopped that kind of independent youth development and thinking.

GANZGLASS: [00:32:55] So you continued to do law and camp for the rest of your life, you say?

LILIENTHAL: [00:33:00] Rest of my life. My father died in '74 when we finished in Thailand, well we cut it a little bit short.

GANZGLASS: [00:33:08] We'll go back to all of that, yeah.

LILIENTHAL: [00:33:10] But yes, I've been doing that ever since. And then I started a camp in South Africa when I, about fifteen years ago, when I was phasing out of my camp in Maine. I figured through the success of Camp Langano, there haven't been camps in Africa. I figured in the 35 years since this would pick up, but it never did. So I figured, let's go back and do something else back there.

GANZGLASS: [00:33:40] Hmm.

LILIENTHAL: [00:33:41] And make it a different kind of a focus, a life skills focus, more of a, what are the biggest problems that kids have? Well, in Ethiopia, the emperor's family thought it was tribal. There were many more problems, but let's deal with tribalism. We could have dealt with tribalism in South Africa, but we're dealing with AIDS, abusive behaviors, sexuality, gender bias, self-image, empowerment, all these things.

GANZGLASS: [00:34:08] And that continues in South Africa?

LILIENTHAL: [00:34:10] That's going on now. Yeah, I go over three times a year. We have three camps a year.

GANZGLASS: [00:34:14] Fantastic.

LILIENTHAL: [00:34:15] That's a whole other.

GANZGLASS: [00:34:16] That's another whole thing. Yes, we should probably move on because you have so many Peace Corps related experiences. So you stayed to launch the camp and then what happened? How did you end up as general counsel?

LILIENTHAL: [00:34:32] Oh, I just applied. I came back and was looking for a job. I worked for a law firm. And actually, I interviewed at Peace Corps and they said, we don't take anybody right back from Peace Corps. You've got to have another job first. And it was lovely. I mean, I was really in sync with the people at the General Counsel's office, whom I didn't know. I just went and called for an interview, and it just was a great feeling. I said, this is a place I want to be. So I went to work for a corporate law firm. It was not a very great experience. I'm not wonderful at being in a, I don't know whether it's a corporate setting or a formal setting. I like having access to the top and having a free exchange of ideas.

GANZGLASS: [00:35:17] You don't like hierarchy.

LILIENTHAL: [00:35:18] I don't. I don't. Unless I'm at the top. I think I do better that way. So we, I was there for about a year, maybe a little bit more, and then interviewed for Peace Corps again. They said we have an opening and yes, you can be there. So in '70, wait, that was '72. No, it was '69. That's right. That's right. I was interviewing for a job in late '67, got it in late '67 or early '68, was there till early '69, and then went to General Counsel's office '69 to '72. And the only real dilemma in my life. I wanted to work up on the Hill also. And I interviewed up there and shortly after I got the Peace Corps job, I got two offers from the Hill, one with antitrust and one with Ben Rosenthal. And I hated not to take a job on the foreign affairs, whatever his subcommittee was, it might

have been Africa. But I hated to turn it down, but I had just accepted the other job. And, you know, one of those life decisions. So I just stayed at the Peace Corps.

GANZGLASS: [00:36:33] So what does the General Counsel's office at Peace Corps, or what did it focus on in '69 to '72?

LILIENTHAL: [00:36:41] It was quite a very, well, one thing I liked about it was it was so varied. I dealt, my first issue was whether somebody from Swains Island near American Samoa can be a Peace Corps volunteer. Whether you are considered a U.S. citizen by virtue of being a Swains Island resident or citizen, I mean, I still don't remember. It was a fun project. I remember letting a lot of humor get in, and the other lawyers were saying. They were laughing, no, sorry, this has got to come out. This has got to come out. It was very function, well, part of it was regional. I would handle the problems from the region and I would also get all the problems from either administration, special service. I think it's called special services, the people who do the early terminations.

GANZGLASS: [00:37:42] Did you deal with liability issues in Peace Corps? Were you responsible for outlawing motorcycles?

LILIENTHAL: [00:37:49] I don't, well, all the regulations came through our office and yes, I did a lot of those. I don't remember about motorcycles. Probably not.

GANZGLASS: [00:37:59] In all of the interviews I've done, it's pre-motorcycle and post-motorcycle regulations.

LILIENTHAL: [00:38:05] Ah, interesting.

GANZGLASS: [00:38:06] It's a very big issue in Peace Corps history. You were not involved.

LILIENTHAL: [00:38:11] I wasn't involved. A lot of, I don't, I don't assuredly say, no, I wasn't involved. I might have forgotten about it, but I don't remember that. But we had the Bruce Murray case, which was in Chile, where

marching in protest against the Vietnam War. That was a, those were big issues. Whether U.S. Peace Corps volunteers, whether the Constitution follows them to their sites, or whether they're properly restricted by the local laws of the country. So free speech issues were very big at that point. Our friend, my wife grew up with a guy named Paul Cowan, who was a volunteer in Peru or Ecuador and was very radicalized by the experience. And while we were, while I was at General Counsel, he and his group took over Peace Corps and hung out banners and, you know, took over a portion of the building and wouldn't negotiate or I don't know what. I don't remember the stuff, but it was it was fun being in the middle of this incendiary event.

LILIENTHAL: [00:39:19] Another thing that happened when Joe Blatchford came in and Nixon was president. They wanted to have Peace Corps subsumed by ACTION, and Peace Corps was in the process of losing its identity at that point and would just be as an appendage of the greater volunteer organization. We got, in General Counsel's office, we provided a little bit of a spur to prevent that. And I remember calling John Oakes, who I had known, my wife's family knew very well and I had met him. He was the editorial page editor of The New York Times. And I called him and I said, look, I don't know if this is a big enough issue for you to get involved with, but this is what's happening. And the next day, he had an editorial about it. So I think that pretty much squashed the lack, the Peace Corps losing its independence. So I'd like to claim partial responsibility for that anyway.

GANZGLASS: [00:40:29] Thank you.

LILIENTHAL: [00:40:29] You're very welcome. It's my pleasure. You never know. You never know where, you know, where you might have an impact. And this was not, you know, a volunteer or your typical thing. But this is where lobbying and who you know becomes important. So it was fascinating. I mean, the General Counsel's office was great. I was there before my time though, because what I wanted to do was go part time after my father's death. I wanted to get involved with our camp, but I couldn't work full time with the government and do that, and they didn't have any part time work or flex hours or anything like that.

GANZGLASS: [00:41:10] So you then left General Counsel's office?

LILIENTHAL: [00:41:12] Well, I left General Counsel's office to go overseas. When I came back, I wanted to do the part time, but I wanted to get. The General Counsel's office was meant to be two and a half years. It ended up being three, because I did want to get a full assignment overseas.

GANZGLASS: [00:41:27] So then you went to the Philippines.

LILIENTHAL: [00:41:32] Yeah.

GANZGLASS: [00:41:32] Talk a little bit about that experience as well.

LILIENTHAL: [00:41:35] Well, that was a riot because it gave me such a great understanding about home office and field. As soon as I got there, they were bitching about Peace Corps regulations, and I said, you know, I wrote that regulation. What's the problem with that? And then they'd say, oh. So I would fight from their side against General Counsel. I'd say, you guys, this couldn't apply to us. This is a different situation. Said no, this is what it means. Anyway, it was really interesting. But I was, uh, Mindanao is the southernmost island of the Philippines. It's quite large and now it's been in the process of a Muslim revolution or Muslim led revolution. A lot of Muslims down there and the Christians of the, the Catholics of Luzon really imposed control over there. And there's been a lot of fighting. Even when I was there, there were gunshots as we were traveling and there were some scary situations.

LILIENTHAL: [00:42:39] But it was a marvelous independence where I had responsibility for all the programs in Mindanao. And I think we must have had a hundred volunteers and seven or eight programs. Fisheries, agriculture, teaching, community development, all of which I had to get to be something of a, expert is much too severe, but I had to acquire a working knowledge. And it was fun going around and seeing the volunteers and talking to learning, about fish farms and tilapia and fingerlings and fry and the banks of the fishpond. We just took my

grand, two grandsons, my wife and I took two grandsons down to Ecuador and down to the Amazon River basin, and one of the communities had fish ponds, and I said, ah!

GANZGLASS: [00:43:28] You knew all about it.

LILIENTHAL: [00:43:29] I was right in there talking about fry and fingerling, and it was a riot. So you never, you never completely lose it. But after a while, it got a little bit boring and I wanted to do something more challenging. And I just said to Peace Corps, I'd like to do something more. And if there's something that comes up for my remaining time, I'd love to do it. And there was a problem in Thailand. We had an astronaut who was the head of the program, and he was more of an astronaut than a program expert or management expert. And he was a lovely guy, but his deputy, who was a younger guy and he had some clashes, and the younger guy was a threat to him. And they thought bringing me in at the end of my five years wouldn't be much of a threat and I could get things done while he socialized.

GANZGLASS: [00:44:32] As he did his thing.

LILIENTHAL: [00:44:35] So I was there for, you know, intentionally for a short term just to get things organized. He ended up leaving right about the same time we were leaving. I think it was. I think it was very soon after he and his wife left, and everybody was just nicely relieved. I think I had to stay in the background and yet do a lot of the stuff in Bangkok. So for me, it wasn't as much fun being there. I didn't get to go out all that much, but my wife loved it. She got involved in museums and stuff in Bangkok and just had a great time where she couldn't do as much of that in Mindanao. Plus, our kids were younger. We had a.

GANZGLASS: [00:45:17] You had kids overseas during this whole time?

LILIENTHAL: [00:45:19] We had, the one in Thailand, the one in Ethiopia was now six or seven. We had one born in Washington, and then we had another one born in the Philippines. So he was quite young. We moved

when he was about two weeks old, so that was a big deal. But he was so easy. He was great. So she just got out and did more.

GANZGLASS: [00:45:43] So as you think back about your very, very varied experience as a volunteer, as general counsel, various staff positions. What's been the impact of Peace Corps on your life? You said some of that but think about it a little more.

LILIENTHAL: [00:46:04] Well, I guess Peace Corps gave me a maturity that I, or a feeling of maturity that I don't think I had. It gave me a perspective on the world and on life that I didn't think I had before. But then again, I was straight out of high school, leading to college, leading to law school. I knew nothing about the world, so Peace Corps gave me the window on the world in a way that most people don't get. You know, if you're not a Peace Corps volunteer, you then go to a graduate school or, well, I went to graduate school. You then go to a job and you're still in your fairly narrow prism of life. So I didn't have any thinking that this might be a benefit, but getting out into the world and just seeing things for the first time from a. Without somebody telling me what I needed to do the next day and this is my homework and this is my term paper and all this kind of stuff.

LILIENTHAL: [00:47:02] It made me a great believer in gap year, in experiential education, in so much in our education system that just needs, not needs, but could be revised to the benefit of the students and probably to the teachers. And you know, I hope that I've taken some of that into the work that I've done, at least now the work I'm doing back in Africa. I don't think I did it as much with my work as a lawyer and a camp owner in the States. Perhaps I did, but I'm much more aware of doing that now that I'm back overseas. You just want to expose people. You don't, I don't. I care less about the product than about the process. You know, the destination and the journey idea. The journey is what's more important and get to know people and open up your mind.

LILIENTHAL: [00:47:59] It doesn't matter what you think. Think something? Take a stand and see what it is and does it work? It's like the great line from Sondheim, Into the Woods. How do you know what you want 'til you

get what you want, and you see if you like it. You know, try something out. See if it works and then develop it more. Don't worry about needs assessment, feasibility study, studying, studying, studying, analyzing. Just do it. And if it doesn't kill you, it's not going to be a disaster. You can always change. It's our fear of failure I think that keeps us stuck. We don't want to go out and do something. If you do it and you're wrong, OK, I did it. I was wrong. I'll try something else and I'd love to instill that.

GANZGLASS: [00:48:44] That's clearly the Peace Corps experience, because everybody's job didn't turn out to be the job that they thought they were going to do. Right?

LILIENTHAL: [00:48:53] Right. Yeah. And Peace Corps probably tells people that more now than they did with us. With us, your job was important and this is what you're going to do, and you know, we're relying on you to do it well. But everybody found that out. And you know, I'm sure, Peace Corps is resilient enough and we're there. You know, Peace Corps is us. So it's, you know, the former volunteers who get there who then say, yeah, your job may not work out, but then it's not. That's when you show how good you are, when something doesn't work out. How do you bounce back? And I think that's true in life. It's not how well you do the job that you're given. But when that job doesn't work, how well do you do the next? How well do you do the rest of life? That's what we need to learn.

GANZGLASS: [00:49:38] Have you stayed in touch with people in Ethiopia, Philippines, Thailand, on an ongoing basis now?

LILIENTHAL: [00:49:46] No, not many. Peace Corps volunteers. But yeah, a lot of unanswered emails from Ethiopia. And Thailand and the Philippines, we really didn't have the same kind of strong contact.

GANZGLASS: [00:50:04] Because you were staff.

LILIENTHAL: [00:50:05] Too busy with staff. Yeah. And the staff, my staff friends, Thais and Filipinos, didn't really extend those contacts for us.

GANZGLASS: [00:50:14] So I asked about impact on your life. What about the countries in which you've worked? I know you worked directly in Ethiopia and you talked a little about that, but think about Thailand. There was, I don't know, thousands and thousands of volunteers who went to Thailand and Philippines. You think there's been an impact? I mean, those are three of the biggest programs probably in the world, I mean, in Peace Corps experience. There were so many volunteers. You think that Peace Corps had an impact on those countries? Does it matter?

LILIENTHAL: [00:50:50] Well, I think it does matter, but I don't know how you measure it because it's like camp. The camp experience is such. I've had people come back to me literally 20, 30 years later and tell me about the impact that the experience meant and that I said something to them that mattered. I didn't, not mattered, made a difference in their lives. They still remember this. And I think you can't, you'd go crazy worrying about it or thinking you shouldn't do it if you don't notice the impact it's making. I think the way to get through life is to do the best you can do in what you're doing and be a little Zen about it and figure it's going to, it's going to be good. You're doing what you know is the best you can do.

LILIENTHAL: [00:51:48] It's going to have some, some good impact on people. Then if you hear about it, so much the better. If you can measure it, so much the better. If you can do a study, you're a doctor and you've got a cure for something, it's rather easy, or a treatment that's new. When you're in the social sciences, it's a little bit tougher to measure that, and I don't know how reliable the measurements would be. If we reduce AIDS in South Africa, you know, fewer HIV infected people. Well, that might be a result of camp. But I'd like to have people be empowered to live stronger lives so they can let people know in a public health way what works and what doesn't work. It's too sketchy to rely on, did you have a good time? Did it mean a lot to you? I'm all for evaluations, but I don't know. I don't know how you measure that kind of impact.

GANZGLASS: [00:52:49] That's the trouble with evidence-based policy making. Some of it is really easy to measure, and a lot of it isn't.

LILIENTHAL: [00:52:56] Yeah, but I've gotten very, what? Non. I'm not too harsh on myself about it. I'm clear in my own spirit and mind that I'm doing what I can do best. So, you know, I can't be a surgeon. I've got a hammer and everything looks like, and I've got a camping hammer and everything looks like a nail. We'll solve it by camps. We'll solve it by experiential education. We'll solve it by getting people together and discussing it. These are the tools that I have. And then if we can get people in with the subject matter expertise that we're looking for, HIV AIDS or whatever it might be, we'll bring those into the party. It's, uh, it might be a cop out a little bit, but we're still and we're still evaluating the programs as we go along. We've got a group at University of Pretoria that's doing a five-year study with us, and maybe they will find the silver bullet as to whether we're doing it well or not. Of course, I would like to know if what I'm devoting my life to is working.

GANZGLASS: [00:54:06] Yes.

LILIENTHAL: [00:54:06] That would be nice, but I am confident that I'm doing the best I can do and we might need to go off in slightly different directions. So it's, uh.

GANZGLASS: [00:54:15] I mean, you want to continually adjust what you're doing.

LILIENTHAL: [00:54:18] Yeah. Yeah.

GANZGLASS: [00:54:19] To move in that direction.

LILIENTHAL: [00:54:20] Yeah.

GANZGLASS: [00:54:21] So then the third goal of Peace Corps is bringing the world back to the United States.

LILIENTHAL: [00:54:26] Right.

GANZGLASS: [00:54:28] Think about, do you have any thoughts about achievement of the third goal of Peace Corps?

LILIENTHAL: [00:54:33] Well, bring it back. I'm getting a lot of people involved and we've got a big local following for my program in South Africa. And we bring, what we're doing very specifically in that, is we bring our. We don't have our camp program operating during the South African winter, which is our summer. And what I had been doing ever since we started is getting our best South African counselors jobs at U.S. summer programs.

GANZGLASS: [00:55:07] Ah.

LILIENTHAL: [00:55:07] So last summer, we had 18 of our counselors coming over to the U.S., going to camps. Many of them repeat at the same camps because the camps love them. Two of them for the first time were assigned full time in Reston to a local childcare center summer program where we've got a lot of input. We know those people very well and they're major stars, they're superstars. Because a lot of camps want internationals, but they never. I would, well never is awfully hard, especially for a lawyer. Rarely, rarely do the internationals have camp experience, so we provide great people with camp experience. They can just walk into a camp and they could take it over. I mean, they could run it, but they don't. I mean, they're just good counselors.

LILIENTHAL: [00:56:02] Somebody was looking. Oh, we had a friend. A local minister has a peace camp and she was having trouble. They just started it and they were having trouble getting counselors. They just run it for one week and administrators said, get some of our guys over. They can come at the end of the summer. They would love to do this and they will run that camp for you just the way you want it with it, with the love, the attention, with the discussion. And it's a marvelous pure exchange.

GANZGLASS: [00:56:35] That's great.

LILIENTHAL: [00:56:35] And so we, you know, we have black South Africans over here who are accepted in the community. People fight for them to stay with them because housing at a day camp program is really tough. And we have people in Reston who said, I want them. Next year they stay with me.

GANZGLASS: [00:56:53] Mm hmm.

LILIENTHAL: [00:56:54] And this is, you know, what more could you want? It's great.

GANZGLASS: [00:57:00] Have you stayed involved with Peace Corps activities? There's a Northern Virginia Peace Corps association, I know that. Are you involved with that?

LILIENTHAL: [00:57:09] We, well, my wife is an officer. She helped start it. Yes, so we evolved with that, as is done. I was involved in rewriting regulations for Camp GLOW, which is, anyway, it's a camp, a camp organization, if you will, through Peace Corps. Girls Leading Our World is how it started off in Romania in 1989, and it's all over the world now. Volunteers do Camp GLOW as a project. And it's really funny that it's a central kind of thing through Peace Corps, and yet they're individual projects in every country. But we wanted some standards for them, and they asked me to help rewrite them. And I did that a few years ago.

LILIENTHAL: [00:58:04] And I've been trying to work more with Peace Corps about Peace Corps volunteers being assigned to our camps. We want a great experience for them, but Peace Corps has a thing about volunteers not coming to Johannesburg or Soweto, which is where we're based. Even though the camp is outside, our follow up projects are in their neighborhoods, so they won't, they won't assign people there. So that's just one of these administrative things that we can't overcome. But yeah, I'd love to work with Peace Corps and I wish we could do more. But there are certain things. I've offered to go in and train volunteers who are doing Camp GLOW. I was in Ethiopia. The staff turns over too quickly for all of this to happen well. If we were a

bigger organization with people on the ground in different countries, we could do more.

GANZGLASS: [00:59:03] So you are saying your camp activities or Peace Corps staff turns over too quickly?

LILIENTHAL: [00:59:08] The Peace Corps staff. Yeah, because it takes them a while to get their arms wrapped around this. And Ethiopia, the Ethiopian staff was very interested in having some of our people come up and give their volunteers training, and then staff changed and they didn't do it. So we're small and we can't go back and forth to these countries to solicit. But we want to plant the idea because what we'd like to do is have any youth serving organization, any Peace Corps group that's involved with youth, any local group that's involved with youth. If it's not working brilliantly, try some camp ideas. Don't make a camp. But if you have an after-school program, have one day where you do camp like activities, because it takes a certain amount of energy. But it's so, the kids get so much more out of it and they're willing to listen to you more the rest of the time. So by having an interactive program, they want to learn more about sexuality.

LILIENTHAL: [01:00:06] And yes, you've got to be out there and you've got to be promoting. You can't just say, OK kids, go and play soccer for an hour and then come in and study. You know, that's the typical format of a lot of youth organizations when they have people sitting around doing their nails or do on their phone or reading while the kids are off playing. You need people with a little bit more energy to get involved. And that's a drawback. You know, you can't impose that on a group that's already in place. So we try to work with young groups, new groups, that want to make a difference in kids' lives, that don't want to just warehouse them, and take care of them, get them off the streets. So it's fun. It's fun looking around, but it's never ending. It's not going to, you know, I'm not going to worry about this job ending and another one, having to look for another job anytime soon.

GANZGLASS: [01:00:59] So everybody is talking about how we need better bridges in this country to understand other people, rebuild community. All of the

things you know are going on in this country at this point. How do you think Peace Corps volunteers could impact, former Peace Corps volunteers? What could former Peace Corps volunteers do to bring some of these ideas to this country?

LILIENTHAL: [01:01:30] I guess get involved. I think the toughest thing is thinking that we can't make a difference, that whatever we do is too small to overcome all the hate, all the negativity, and all the terrible policies that have come about in the last couple of years. I think the biggest thing is just to, again, take that first step and see if an organization that you think might do something good does, if it can have an effect. Think of a climate. I forget what it's called, climate lobby or citizens groups or results. Get involved with the group that has a track record and see if that fits. And I'm just going to a meeting tonight exploring that, trying to get involved, because I'm not. I don't want to sit on the sidelines complaining. I don't want to just call up my congressman who's already involved, but to make him more of a cheerleader or more of an instigator, more of a promoter.

LILIENTHAL: [01:02:33] I'd like to work with a group that has done the homework for this already and knows how to direct me and then see if I can participate. But it's not something you can just dial it up and make it happen. It's getting involved with a group that's doing a good job already and putting your two cents in. And then I think you can make a difference. And making a difference is what it's about. How, first, how do we make a difference? What is needed to make a difference? It's not changing the minds of people who are already entrenched, but going to the edges and getting the people who are marginal in their doctrinairedness, if you will, and just say, yeah, I'm open to new ideas. Maybe I'm not going to toe the line completely, but yeah, we shouldn't be closing the government. We shouldn't be doing without this. There are people on the fringe, and how to approach them in a way that's not threatening, in a way where it's educational.

LILIENTHAL: [01:03:33] Search for Common Ground is one of my favorite groups and they concentrate on all the things we have in common when we have opposing views. And we're all concerned about children's

education, about enough food, about, you know, we'll complain about the traffic, we complain about high prices. We have a lot in common. And yet we might disagree on abortion or we might disagree on disarmament or the Iraqi war or pullout of troops. But let's see what we have in common and then see what we can achieve.

GANZGLASS: [01:04:06] So I would love to, but I shouldn't say. It seems like a really good place to end the interview with those thoughts, but I want to give you a chance to say anything else that you wanted to say. Or a story. And you are a person with many, many stories, a story that you really want to get into this interview.

LILIENTHAL: [01:04:32] Let's see. Yeah, no, no, I actually. It's all been summed up well. The stories are endless, as you know, and they just would be, you know, they wouldn't be boring per se, but I don't think.

GANZGLASS: [01:04:47] Good. I just didn't want to cut you off.

LILIENTHAL: [01:04:50] But thanks for asking. No, you did a great job in bringing out everything. Thank you.

GANZGLASS: [01:04:53] Great. Thank you.

LILIENTHAL: [01:04:55] My pleasure.

[END OF INTERVIEW]