

**Sandra Sefton Oral History Interview**  
Returned Peace Corps Volunteer Collection  
Administrative Information

**Creator:** Sandra Sefton  
**Interviewer:** Ernest Zaremba  
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**Biographical Note**

Sandra (Sandy) Sefton served as a Peace Corps volunteer in Brazil from 1965 to 1967 as a nurse on a community health and development project.

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Oral History Interview

with

Sandra Sefton

August 21, 2004  
Grand Rapids, Michigan

By Ernest Zaremba

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

SEFTON: [00:00:01] Good morning, I'm Sandy Sefton, and I was a Peace Corps volunteer in Fortaleza, Brazil, South America back in 1965 is when I entered. My husband and I were both in the Peace Corps and we were in a community health and development project.

ZAREMBA: [00:00:19] OK, now Sandy talk a little bit about the present, where are you living now, which kind of work you do?

SEFTON: [00:00:25] I live in Grand Rapids, Michigan, and I have two children and we live close by and three grandchildren, which are an absolute delight. I work for the Metro Health Corporation and the hospital administrator. And I've been with Metropolitan Hospital for, well, since I got back from the Peace Corps in 1967.

ZAREMBA: [00:00:52] What sort of interest do you have today?

SEFTON: [00:00:56] I enjoy traveling. Enjoy gardening and enthusiasm for still helping, folks, just like I was doing back in the '60s.

ZAREMBA: [00:01:07] Okay, let's move back in your mind to the 60s and say that about a year before, so you joined the Peace Corps. Like why did you join the Peace Corps? What kinds of things were going on that influenced you?

SEFTON: [00:01:23] Back in 1964, I had graduated from Saginaw General Hospital School of Nursing. By original education, my husband was still going to Michigan State. And the reason I joined the Peace Corps was because he said, I'm going, do you want to go along? And at the time, they really needed nurses, so it was not difficult for me to get into the program and we were married in May of '65, and then we went to Marquette University for a Peace Corps training in June.

ZAREMBA: [00:02:02] Okay, when you found out you were accepted and where you were going to go, did you have any reaction, did your family have any reaction to going abroad for a couple years?

SEFTON: [00:02:12] I'm sure my parents probably wondered what this was all about. I wasn't living at home, so there wasn't an opportunity for them to really say, what the world are you doing? And the friends that we had thought it was all in excitement to be an exciting adventure, primarily because most of the Peace Corps training during that time is being done and in places down in the islands. And so we've got that's probably where we get something, so it turned out we went to Milwaukee, Wisconsin.

ZAREMBA: [00:02:49] Now when you found out where you were going that it was all set. Did you have any hesitations or excitement?

SEFTON: [00:02:57] Um, because this had already been accepted in the same he'd been assigned to go to Africa. But when I came along as part of a package, they switched our assign of his assigned. That we would go into a community. And development program. It sounded like a nice place to go. Didn't know a whole lot about it at that particular time and we were

often finding out information about South. And so that was the fun part, exploring whether our new life was going to be like in a new country.

ZAREMBA: [00:03:39] So then you went to training in Milwaukee.

SEFTON: [00:03:41] Yes.

ZAREMBA: [00:03:42] For how long was the train training program?

SEFTON: [00:03:46] I believe was three months. And it's one of those Sunday through Saturday training program that lasted all day and all night at the time they were giving. We had six hours a day of language and there were about a dozen of us in that group, our enemies and we were in the slow class. None of us had ever had a foreign language before, so we had to start at the very basics of learning another language. That was quite the challenge for us.

ZAREMBA: [00:04:27] What language did you learn?

SEFTON: [00:04:29] Portuguese.

ZAREMBA: [00:04:30] And so how big was the group all together?

SEFTON: [00:04:33] We started out, I believe the group was just under 300 people from all over the United States and although the majority of the folks in the program at the time were in their early 20s, and we did have three or four folks that were in their 40s.

ZAREMBA: [00:05:01] You were a nurse, what did your husband do?

SEFTON: [00:05:06] He was big because in the community developers and the role was to go over and teach help promote wellness. Those kinds of activities.

ZAREMBA: [00:05:22] So it was a typical day in training like?

SEFTON: [00:05:31] We would all meet at a place called Heritage Hall. I can remember that that was breakfast, lunch and dinner. It was a very

structured program and six hours of language education every day. We learned physical training kinds of things.

ZAREMBA: [00:05:56] For example?

SEFTON: [00:05:58] Oh, we were supposed to learn judo, you know, and they were supposed to learn how to walk across a river, you know, how to, by your hands to be able to cross a river on these rope things. I never did learn to do that. I just figured the alligators would get me.

ZAREMBA: [00:06:17] Was this an outdoor setup that we worked with the ropes?

SEFTON: [00:06:20] Yes, that was outside, and we had to learn how to kill chickens so we could have something to eat.

ZAREMBA: [00:06:29] How did they teach you to kill chickens?

SEFTON: [00:06:30] I didn't do that. I just pretended I already knew how to. I figured there'd be somebody there to kill a chicken. It just very physical kinds of things that we were supposed to do.

ZAREMBA: [00:06:44] I gather that that wasn't your favorite part of the training.

SEFTON: [00:06:48] Well, if they, I would have flunked it if that was. You may not have noticed, but I'm not real tall. All I can remember is the instructor with the judo, how you were supposed to flip somebody over your shoulder. By the time I got him bent over, he was still standing up, I mean, there was just no hope for me. I learned how to build fires out of, you know, just sticks. It's rather interesting because our assignment was on the beach, so we didn't have to worry about stealth. And I never had to swing it off a line while I was over there.

ZAREMBA: [00:07:31] Was that part of your training, swinging on the ropes?

SEFTON: [00:07:36] On the ropes, yeah. It was a total disaster. And there were first aid classes that the nurses taught. In addition to being a student, we were also then part of the training program. There were cooking classes on

nutrition. And how? It's the same. How to make up a balanced meal with whatever you ingredients you had, where ever you landed. I think there were some cooking classes, because, you know, we're all used to the electric stove and in all likelihood in we wouldn't have one. The guys had to learn how to make showers. There was always this time where we had to do, um, they lined up and they had to give all the inoculations and then take care of all the folks that got sick afterwards. It's about half of our class dropped out.

ZAREMBA: [00:08:49] Why such a high attrition rate?

SEFTON: [00:08:53] It was a very grueling kind of schedule that we had. We had people from the FBI coming in and giving us security lectures and just all kinds of things going on. It was a day that started at like 7:00 in the morning and would end up at about 9:00, 9:30 at night.

ZAREMBA: [00:09:23] Now any particular anecdotes or other anecdotes from training?

SEFTON: [00:09:33] Well, other than the fact that we met some very good, good, good people and friends. At the time many of our instructors were Brazilian, so. We really haven't gotten any. A different way of life. I think an hour or two we had a lot of psychology classes and had to meet with psychologists, and that was right after those meetings a lot of folks dropped out, so I don't know if that had something to do with it or not.

ZAREMBA: [00:10:09] That was part of the selection thing. Was there some concern that people have these stories about the selection process as well as some people find it very stressful? But it might be selected in.

SEFTON: [00:10:23] No, I think that came as a big shock to everybody. There were a lot of participants from California, Berkeley. Of course, me being from the Midwest, it was an adventure just in itself. Some different attitudes, I think that probably helped folks get deselected.

ZAREMBA: [00:10:55] After training, did you go back home for a while before you went overseas or?

SEFTON: [00:11:02] I think we have something like a week because we were able to go home and pack our trunks and clothes, get things shipped off.

ZAREMBA: [00:11:10] What was your reaction when you got to Brazil and first saw it, any first impressions as you got off the plane and arrived in Brazil?

SEFTON: [00:11:21] Hot and muggy. We flew into Rio de Janeiro. It was a beautiful city. People were absolutely wonderful, the Brazilians, even at the airport. They had a bus that picked us up after we got through customs. Took us to a hotel where we were there close to three months. And that was because I was getting indoctrinated into Brazilian health care. There were families, Brazilian families, that would take us around during the day, the nurses, all the nurses would go to a Brazilian hospital and help deliver babies, suture wounds, and all those kinds of things.

ZAREMBA: [00:12:33] In your first three months?

SEFTON: [00:12:34] Yeah.

ZAREMBA: [00:12:34] So that, you delivered babies in the first three months.

SEFTON: [00:12:37] Yeah, well, I was an OB nurse to start out with.

ZAREMBA: [00:12:42] So you had that experience in the States.

SEFTON: [00:12:43] Well, I had the experience, but some of my colleagues didn't.

ZAREMBA: [00:12:49] Now was this all part of your in-country training?

SEFTON: [00:12:52] Yes.

ZAREMBA: [00:12:53] And now, you said we stayed three months, so others that weren't nurses often went out to their sites?

SEFTON: [00:12:59] They went out immediately. Well, that's not true. They everybody was in Rio for about two weeks and during that period of time we did things like we went to some Brazilian homes and experienced by

the hospitality of the well-to-do, the more affluent Brazilian culture. Of course, the beaches, tried the food and learned a little bit about the actual money. At the time that that we were there was there the Brazilian money was cruzeiros, and I believe it was 100 cruzeiros to one American dollar. And we went in and got our money exchanged for Brazilian money, so we could buy things. Literally you needed suitcases to be able to carry it all home, or back to the hotel. In the evening, I remember one evening when we were down on the beach and they had Brazilian. Brazil is rich in folklore, mysticism. And they had this what was black magic, this macumba.

ZAREMBA: [00:14:37] Is that something like voodoo?

SEFTON: [00:14:39] Yeah, yeah. And we happened to come upon of a gathering of folks that were practicing that out on the beach.

ZAREMBA: [00:14:53] So what were they doing?

SEFTON: [00:14:55] Oh, there was a big fire. And there were people walking on the coals. And that was about it all recently before we thought it would be best to get out of there and we did. But they also then took us out tours of some of the highlights. It took us to a place where down by the ports for the big cruise ships came in. Let us experience firsthand the Americans that came to visit Brazil and see how they behaved. I, at the time, I think there was a movie called The Ugly American and why we might be viewed that way.

ZAREMBA: [00:15:51] And we're just stay where you were in Rio?

SEFTON: [00:15:55] We were in a hotel that the Peace Corps had arranged for us to be in.

ZAREMBA: [00:16:03] Now than when you left Rio, where did you go and how was that process?



SEFTON: [00:16:10] We flew to work, each volunteer flew to wherever he or she was assigned. We went to Fortaleza, which was the capital of the state we were in [Ceará]. From there, we had a bus ride into our village.

ZAREMBA: [00:16:39] So how far is Fortaleza from Rio would you say?

SEFTON: [00:16:43] Oh, it was about a five hour.

ZAREMBA: [00:16:48] And what kind of area we're talking about, rainforest area?

SEFTON: [00:16:51] Ok, we're talking, we're just under the equator. We're up in the northeast and we're on the ocean, so it's sandy, water, not too much greenery.

ZAREMBA: [00:17:09] And how big of a city was this Fortaleza?

SEFTON: [00:17:11] The city was kind of a village. In a public forum in the immediate area.

ZAREMBA: [00:17:27] And then you left from there to another site?

SEFTON: [00:17:30] No, that was our. Well, Acaraú.

ZAREMBA: [00:17:33] And this was, oh so you went to Fortaleza, which is the capital and then Acaraú was about how far from Fortaleza?

SEFTON: [00:17:44] That was probably about a two-and-a-half-hour bus trip.

ZAREMBA: [00:17:46] And that's where you had and people there. And this was also on the ocean?

SEFTON: [00:17:52] That was on the ocean, yeah, just underneath the equator.

ZAREMBA: [00:17:54] I picture sort of a tropical paradise, is that right?

SEFTON: [00:18:00] No.

ZAREMBA: [00:18:04] Can you describe this village?

SEFTON: [00:18:07] It was probably a typical Brazilian village. It had a dentist. It had a mayor. Two physicians that had been assigned there by the Brazilian government to manage the health of that particular village that had a *maternidade*, which is a converted army barracks that they have turned into a hospital. They had a health post that primarily did testing for parasites. The means of transportation is horseback. The doctor and dentist and somebody else had a jeep. There was no electricity. And the water was pulled out of the river.

ZAREMBA: [00:19:10] Describe the bus trip that you took, the two hours, what was that like?

SEFTON: [00:19:16] The bus trip. It was a very probably it was it was a very typical rural bus route for the Brazilians. For me personally, that was pretty horrific. It was very crowded. People were standing wherever there was space. Which included this American's space, you know, that we like to keep around us. The people, the children, the chickens.

ZAREMBA: [00:19:59] Inside the bus?

SEFTON: [00:20:00] Oh yeah, we had chickens inside. We had chickens on top. We had, uh, it was just a real crowded bus. And it was really hot and kind of smelly. You probably remember this. And the thing that was most disturbing is that people were always spitting and they would spit out the window one and it would fly in somebody else's. So you wanted to be sure to duck and there was all this, this Portuguese being spoken all around. And it was just it was. This is a very tiring trip, because I remember I got off that bus and I just, I have a tendency to get a little car sick. Oh, my goodness, that kicked in. That's going to become our new home. But there were people standing around. There were children playing. Animals in the courtyard. Brazilian children were beautiful kids, gorgeous big brown eyes and tan complected, black hair. They would come up and I had on a sundress, which was a mistake. It was white, and you never wear white when you're traveling in a bus filled with animals. But anyway, this dress had big orange sunflowers. Yeah, sunlight coming right in and outside.

And there were probably 20, 25 little ones, I would imagine, about eight or younger, and they'd come over and they wanted to touch my dress. And that made me just a little nervous. I could handle one or two, but all 25 of them made it a little uncomfortable. The doctor and his wife were there to pick us up and they took us to their home. I was tired, they very graciously said, would you like to lay down? I said yes and took me into this room and there was a hammock. I think that was one thing the Peace Corps forgot to tell us, that they aren't such things as beds. One sleeps in a hammock. And I'm like, OK, and I learned there was later on I learned there's a technique to sleeping well in a hammock.

ZAREMBA: [00:22:54] Why don't you describe it for us, how was it? What did you learn? How did you learn to sleep in a hammock?

SEFTON: [00:22:59] Well, initially I thought you just slept the way the hammock blows and later found out you have to do it diagonally and that straightens it out. While I was trying to get recuperated, they were taking my husband on the city. He traveled much better than I did. He didn't get carsick, and so we stayed with the doctor and doctora for about two weeks before we found a place to stay. And as it turned out, it was right across from the maternity hospital that was the place that I was assigned to work. It was just a little ways down the road from a health post that Cece was going to work at. So that first month was just kind of getting acclimated to the climate, to the language, to having all the people come and just stand outside and look at you. And at the time, nurses wore white, you know, in the States, nurses wore white uniforms, white shoes, white stockings and their nurse's cap. So I go to work that way, thinking that's what how one dresses. And so people would come from days away to see the American with the white hat on. They liked my nurse's cap. I eventually got rid of the stockings and the nurses oxfords, went to flip flops. Stayed in the uniform, took the cap off.

ZAREMBA: [00:24:55] And so there's no clue to this in training.

SEFTON: [00:25:00] No, there really wasn't. And in the maternity hospital in Rio, we wore scrubs and when you're working in OB you generally didn't wear a hat anyway. That was just a get to know. The village we were in, we worked,

worked out very well. Brazilians have a tendency to be short and dark. And consequently, I fit in very well in that area until I opened my mouth and tried to speak the language. My husband was tall, but he was real dark also. And so they didn't know for sure. They thought maybe we were from Sao Paulo because we spoke differently. Um, my husband was very fluent in Portuguese. It just kind of rolled out of him like it was natural. But he couldn't understand a word when anybody was talking to him. I could understand it, I just couldn't speak it, so we made a good couple and as long as we were together, we got through most things. And after the maternity hospital, it was kind of some basic nursing care, which because of different customs and culture, you know, I did some horrible things to people.

ZAREMBA: [00:26:30] For example?

SEFTON: [00:26:31] For example, right after a woman delivered in the States, you gave them a bath and got them all cleaned up and put them to bed. I did that same thing over there, and it was, to them that meant the lady was dying. That was the only reason that I cleaned her up.

ZAREMBA: [00:26:57] Now, how long did you do that for somebody said, hey, and you found out that you didn't mean to give that message? Several people?

SEFTON: [00:27:04] Yeah.

ZAREMBA: [00:27:06] And then how do they let you know about that?

SEFTON: [00:27:08] The doctor told me. There was a midwife there, and she pretty much ruled the roost, including the doctor. She had no formal training, she was just part of the community and she delivered all these. She wasn't quite sure what she was going to do with me, and I had no idea she was such a powerful lady just going about. I didn't care who I took instructions, at that point in time. And we eventually came to an agreement. She did her thing. But they didn't have anything to sterilize the equipment. They didn't have the type of throwaways disposables that we were even starting to use back in the 60s. So as a nurse, you know, when you start an IV and it's a sterile procedure. They'd bring the IV tubing they'd used the week

before and the needle, they'd pull out of their pocket and get things started. They also had a life expectancy of about 45 down there.

SEFTON: [00:28:36] Friday nights turned out to be the kind of a scariest night of the week. Because the men would go out and drink the sugar cane whiskey and just get horribly intoxicated and would take the big machetes to each other and then they would show up on the doorstep and then folks were going across the street and get me. Most of the time we had suture material. A lot of times it was just the thread out of my sewing box. And I don't know, you know, to this day, I'm not sure why it worked, but it did get people going again.

ZAREMBA: [00:29:27] So it was a regular thing?

SEFTON: [00:29:29] Yeah, pretty much.

ZAREMBA: [00:29:33] So what were your living quarters?

SEFTON: [00:29:38] We had we actually had a house. It was constructed of clay, I don't know, whatever they do down there, and it had the typical tile roof and there were windows.

ZAREMBA: [00:30:00] Nice windows?

SEFTON: [00:30:00] Well, not when we got there, we had to, they were just open. They were just a square cut in the wall and we went in and cleaned out the place and were able to rent it. And it had some banana trees on it. We ended up getting two horses and some chickens. To ride, yeah. We did a fair amount of that. The culture was such that on Sunday afternoons, horse riding or racing was a big thing.

ZAREMBA: [00:30:41] Now did they have a track?

SEFTON: [00:30:44] It's a field. No. It wasn't necessarily a circle, most of the time it was just straight. And they did a lot of cockfights with roosters. We'd go down to the square in town and walk around the square, and that was the evening entertainment.

ZAREMBA: [00:31:15] Walk around and converse with various people?

SEFTON: [00:31:17] Yeah, yeah. From six to eight p.m. in the center of town. And the rest of the time we used kerosene. Our house had what we turned into a kitchen, a bedroom and. It would be like a living room here and we did get furniture for it as a period of time.

ZAREMBA: [00:31:47] Where'd you get the furniture from?

SEFTON: [00:31:51] We somebody knows somebody that knows somebody. I don't know where it came from. It was wood, wooden furniture and they got it in for us.

ZAREMBA: [00:32:03] How do you cook the meals?

SEFTON: [00:32:08] Right. So those lights would go off and everybody would take off and go back wherever their homes were. You were asking about cooking, how did we cook? We had a pressure cooker that was one of the things they advised us to take with us and we had. Like a camp stove that we had gotten once we got to Brazil and had little tanks of gas that you would put on this side and pump it up and then light it with a match. We've cooked with that. And the pressure cooker was, it was a curiosity for the Brazilians, and they like to come over and they would just stand and look in the windows. They'd stand on the outside because they like to hear that jiggling noise that a pressure cooker makes, you know. The pressure cooker also is about the only way you could get meat quasi tender enough tender enough to be able to.

SEFTON: [00:33:14] The diet was primarily bread, rice, beans, bananas. Beans and rice and rice and beans, which I actually acquired quite a taste for it. Still kind of something that I enjoy today. They did eat sometimes horsemeat was kind of a delicacy over there. And because we were on the ocean, we get the seafood and cook fish and enjoy it.

ZAREMBA: [00:33:52] I assume you never tried the first meat?

SEFTON: [00:33:54] Oh no, we tried it.

ZAREMBA: [00:33:56] How was it?

SEFTON: [00:33:56] Tasted like beef. We did have one period of time because we had the horses, our chickens happened to be kind of on the plump side. And we had a chicken, a rooster named said that we put in a cock fight one time because we really didn't know what they were. But if he was so big and fat that these the other little chickens stands a chance. And so he got quite a reputation, although he never did fight him after that. And food was getting really scarce and we ended up having to eat Syd, that was our rooster. So he was a mighty tough bird. That's all I can say about that.

ZAREMBA: [00:34:51] So you mentioned getting furniture early on. You mentioned sleeping in the hammock. Did you ever get a bed?

SEFTON: [00:34:57] No, we slept in the hammock.

ZAREMBA: [00:34:58] Got kind of used to it?

SEFTON: [00:35:00] Yeah, well, they make they make hammocks in a single or a double.

ZAREMBA: [00:35:09] I'm curious to go back to the story of the midwife. And you said you worked up an arrangement with her. How did that? What was your relationship like?

SEFTON: [00:35:19] At first it was, her name was Dona Laura. She was very suspicious, she didn't want me there. She thought I was going to, I guess, usurp some of her authority and her role in the community.

ZAREMBA: [00:35:38] Did she avoid you or overtly hassle you?

SEFTON: [00:35:42] The latter. She was aggressive. Let's put it that way. She wouldn't, the biggest thing, she wouldn't relay information. And if there was material that was needed, it might come up missing all of a sudden. There were stories that were started.

ZAREMBA: [00:36:08] For example?

SEFTON: [00:36:09] There was one about I had some kind of magic, which I, you know, obviously didn't have, and that was kind of and then that just got people's curiosity up and they'd come and it was nothing to, you know, get up in the morning and there'd be people standing outside the House looking in the windows. So our first trip back to the city, we bought some screen in. It was plastic screen that we could use to make to put into the windows, to keep the flies out. And the custom over there was not to knock on the door when you wanted to come in, but to stand outside and clap. We have the windows covered then, and the biggest thing, that was another Dona Laura story. You know, we had to be crazy, because why would we put screens on the windows? How would the bugs get out? And it was just a different way of thinking. And they had a lot of you didn't eat this. You didn't eat that. You didn't drink milk. And why don't you drink milk? Well, all the Americans wear glasses and that's what happens if you drink milk. We didn't wear glasses, so we didn't fit that stereotype.

SEFTON: [00:37:43] But what we found out was that there was such a poor country. Mothers would often tell children you can't eat after dinner, and this are simply was no food. You can't have this or you can't have that and you can't have a slice of bread because it'll make you sick. They had a belief that the first five years of a child's life, the child doesn't really belong to you as the parent, it belongs to God. They're predominantly Catholic country. And so the baby died, it was okay because it wasn't yours yet. High pregnancy rate for women starting at about age 13. The belief was the more children the man had, the richer he was. Or the more work he could get done and not have to do himself. I'm not sure which it was, but it was not uncommon to have young girls at age 13 or 14 that had been pregnant four or five times already, and miscarried, and now were pregnant again. The babies would get dehydrated. Parasites were the biggest problem because folks didn't just go down to the river and get your water and they didn't boil it or didn't treat it. They didn't filter it. They just drank it right out of the same water that the cows were walking through and people were swimming in and the boats were passing by and you did your laundry on a rock.



ZAREMBA: [00:39:42] Back to your relationship with the midwife, did she turn in effect a number of the people in the village against you initially would you say? Were there like two camps or?

SEFTON: [00:39:50] No, I think that it just made them more curious.

ZAREMBA: [00:39:54] And where the rest of people quite friendly or a little shy?

SEFTON: [00:39:57] A little shy.

ZAREMBA: [00:40:02] Then how did that change? How do they start? Did you have some close relationships where they got through their shyness to connect? Did you connect the stories of them?

SEFTON: [00:40:10] I think. Well, my husband was quite tall. He was 6'1". And that was really big for Brazilian men. And so they were a little scared by him. But with me that that wasn't a problem because I was short, just like they were. And we worked, we started out, we both had assignments. Like I said, I was in the hospital. He was in the health department, but it became evident that for Cece to get into the community, he had to do some things a little bit differently. And the men in that community played guitar. They raced their horses. They told stories they sat out around porch.

ZAREMBA: [00:41:07] Seems like the men had an easier life there.

SEFTON: [00:41:09] I'd say so. Yeah, I'd say so. But he kept this role in the health post. Because you can meet people. But he also picked up these other things, other talents and skills, which then really allowed him to get into another level of the community. And where I was, as I was working primarily, and it was pretty much the men were with the men and the women were. There is quite a divide in social status there.

ZAREMBA: [00:41:49] Now was this like a local Indian tribe or people basically?

SEFTON: [00:41:54] Yes. Yes, they were they were all Portuguese, they were. There may have been some Indian heritage in with the folks. Portuguese and Brazilian.

ZAREMBA: [00:42:06] Now because you were possibly close to the ocean there, were there more Portuguese then? Was it was a fishing village?

SEFTON: [00:42:12] Yeah. Very poor. So we decided that maybe one of the best avenues, the quickest avenues might be working through the children and the children were much less reserved. And the adults who seem to be that understand us a little bit better, too. And so we did we did some stories that we took to throughout this the schools, the various schools in the area and churches.

ZAREMBA: [00:42:12] What were some stories?

SEFTON: [00:42:52] We had one called, it translated into Sandra with the Dirty Hands. And so it was just a little cartoon kind of thing on a flip chart that shows what happens when the poor girl didn't wash. How she got parasites and all the kids can relate to that because they had the tummies up to here.

ZAREMBA: [00:43:24] So did you create these stories yourself?

SEFTON: [00:43:26] Yeah. Mm hmm. And both of us enjoyed that kind of activity and the kids would come over and we would have games and we would feed them, and that quickly grew quite a following, and they would come over and they would see the pressure cooker and why we would treat our water differently. How we had a garden, it didn't do very well, but we did have a garden. They see the screens on the windows and then they talk about it. I started off Future Nurses Club with some of the young younger girls, so they were probably about 10, 11, 12 years old and the kids would start coming over to the house and if they had a cut on their hand, they knew they had wash it and see what they had done. You'll see how I cleaned my hand up. So that's how we started getting into the community itself.

SEFTON: [00:44:44] We were not Catholic, so that was that kept us a little bit on the outside for a while and we went through all the, I did more, so I think, than my husband went through this great culture shock. Wondering what the heck I'm doing here? There's no running water, no electricity, no bathtub.

ZAREMBA: [00:45:06] How did you get your water?

SEFTON: [00:45:06] I carried it.

ZAREMBA: [00:45:10] From the community well?

SEFTON: [00:45:10] Well, no, well, we hired a man to do that for us. Every morning he would bring us water and two slices of bread, the French roll kind of bread. I also had somebody do the laundry for me. And part of what we were doing was giving back to the community. People could get some money. They could buy food. They could, that type of thing. Eventually wasn't too long before I realized I needed the Brazilian wardrobe because. At the time we wore shorts and t-shirts and things like that in the States, and that really wasn't appropriate in the little village hat I was in.

SEFTON: [00:46:05] We had other volunteers that were not nearby, but within a day's travel would be able to get be able to get back and forth to each other. And we had one couple. She was a nurse who was a health worker, my husband. But they had red hair and they were very fair complected. And they actually got chased out of the village and came over to our place with straight hair. The story was they just didn't trust this, these people that looks so different. They were not accepted out in the. There are plans like they were it wasn't a city, it was a village like ours and the people were afraid of them. And so they got were reassigned to a place in Fortaleza, an orphanage, and they did fine. But the villagers were just again, that's mysticism and folklore. And that was quite the event.

ZAREMBA: [00:47:26] And did you get close with any particular families more than any others? Or a person, maybe someone you worked with?

SEFTON: [00:47:38] Probably. They were all just really great folks. I don't know that there was any one better than the other.

ZAREMBA: [00:47:49] Go back to the midwife. And how does that kind of resolve? What kind of relationship did it end up with?

SEFTON: [00:47:59] It ended up with one that was collegial. When she discovered that I didn't want to take her business away, I didn't want to take the spot in the community away from her. And when I would consult with her on similar cases that came, this you have to remember, this was an army barracks. We did have some beds.

ZAREMBA: [00:48:30] The hospital was an army barracks?

SEFTON: [00:48:31] It was an army barracks, it was not a hospital. I wrote to some of my friends here in the states, and they gave me instructions on how to put together a personal sterilizer. I think we got it together right, but we would do surgery. I would give drop ether. And somebody would be assigned to keep the flies out of the wound, out of the incision. But we did blood transfusions by taking the blood out of you and putting it into me, no type and cross matching. As I said, folks usually carry the IV tubing with them. And it was, you wash it out with the river water and that was kind of the way things were done there.

ZAREMBA: [00:49:44] And you had assuming outside training then?

SEFTON: [00:49:46] Oh, yeah. Well. I think we cooked something up, so that it was like the bucket of water in the tow rope and it dumps on you and and that was the shower and of course, that was inside.

ZAREMBA: [00:50:07] Now what was your typical workday, were there regular hours or more on call?

SEFTON: [00:50:13] It was more on call, because I was right across from the hospital, I was more or less on call. And if we had patients, we had patients and then one of my first cases was, uh, the abacaxi is the word for pineapple, and it also was a slang term for a bad case and high risk something to that effect. And being told that the abacaxi were going to be coming in. So I was getting really hungry for a good slice of pineapple and

all we got was a truckload of folks that had been injured. So a little hospital humor exists everywhere, I guess.

ZAREMBA: [00:50:59] Were there a regular number of patients like any other?

SEFTON: [00:51:02] No, no.

ZAREMBA: [00:51:04] Did people stay the length of time in that real way?

SEFTON: [00:51:06] Not necessarily. They might come. Get whatever it was taken care. The doctor, he was there occasionally, but not with any kind of regularity.

ZAREMBA: [00:51:25] Would he be out in the bush so to speak or in the big city?

SEFTON: [00:51:31] I don't know. Or on a call, or doing the things guys do, facing the crisis.

ZAREMBA: [00:51:46] Well, speaking of that, what about leisure time? You mentioned visiting the other volunteer, but how would you do that, by horse or bus?

SEFTON: [00:51:53] Both. One time we went on a truck, sort of found out somebody was going to go to nearby town four hours away, so we hopped on the truck with him. Sometimes we flew.

ZAREMBA: [00:52:12] On an airstrip nearby?

SEFTON: [00:52:14] No, I mean, you've got to go into Portaleza. We'd fly someplace. Sometimes we took the train. We did a lot of, we were able to see a lot of South America while we were there. My favorite spot was Bahia. It's on the ocean. It's just a beautiful country, it's mountainous.

ZAREMBA: [00:52:48] What's Bahia, is it like its own country?

SEFTON: [00:52:54] It's like a state inside of Brazil. The state I was in was Ceará and then Bahia was like two states south of us, so it'd be like Michigan

versus Ohio. Just a beautiful city. We got there by truck and got on a train and went into the interlands.

ZAREMBA: [00:53:29] Any anecdotes from the travels?

SEFTON: [00:53:37] Well, it was just folks were just really friendly, and I happened to be all along the outgoing side. I was generally bringing somebody home or back to the hotel room. Met, I didn't know it at the time, but he was a somebody that traded in gems. As a result that we got to see some of the beautiful amethysts and when we got back into Rio, he had a store so we go to go there and see all the uncut emeralds and amethysts and I can't remember the rest of the stones that were there. So I met a lot of interesting people that way. Got caught in [inaudible], that that was a beach in Rio de Janeiro. Got caught in the undertow. Another volunteer and I had gone out to the beach that day. He had like a broken collar bone and fortunately, I didn't get injured to that degree.

ZAREMBA: [00:54:47] So what kind of accident?

SEFTON: [00:54:49] I just tumbled. Yeah, but we got out of there and got him to the hospital. Of course, they don't have cell phones in those days, and you can't call and say, I'm going to be late getting home or getting back to the hotel? I can remember holding up an airline one time. I didn't understand the language. It was one thing to hear people talk when you're in the same room as them. But the overhead speakers, I have a trouble with at airports here. Certainly didn't hear a thing and a security guard. It sounds like my husband was never with me. He was, but we weren't always, you know, together. Security guard comes and gets me because they're waiting. They decided to send the plane out earlier. You know, it was supposed to leave at 12 noon. They decided oh, it's eleven let's just go. That was a little frightening because they had, the guards had guns. And I wasn't quite sure what was going to be happening. Got in the airport one time and the president of Brazil was going to be flying in the day and they changed the times. So they were sending us out early. They didn't necessarily adhere to any kind of a schedule so you just needed to be ready. And they were concerned that the airport was going to get bombed, so I don't know, some group, so they got us all out of there quite rapidly.

ZAREMBA: [00:56:38] Was there civil unrest later there?

SEFTON: [00:56:44] Um, you always heard stories.

ZAREMBA: [00:56:47] Never experienced it directly?

SEFTON: [00:56:48] I never experienced it myself.

ZAREMBA: [00:56:51] Now, the village where you were stationed, did travelers ever pass through there?

SEFTON: [00:56:57] Oh my, no. That was that was why we were such a curiosity too. We're different, and yet we weren't really because we didn't look that different, but so that really that really helped us fit in, become part of the community that much faster.

ZAREMBA: [00:57:20] Was there much difference from your first year to your second year? Because sometimes the first year's a demarcation.

SEFTON: [00:57:27] Yeah, absolutely. That first year was trying to get adjusted to all of this. And I, you know, we were just newly married also. So there was the getting acclimated to being married. To live in this new environment. The language all of a sudden kind of snapped in and that wasn't a problem, I mean. I had established a routine. I was part of the community by now.

ZAREMBA: [00:58:01] So what were some of the highlights of the second year?

SEFTON: [00:58:10] I don't know if I would describe them as highlights, just as part of being more credible within the village and people actually trying to implement some of the things that we were. That's probably the highlight. It wasn't so much that we were going to be able to change the world as that we could change the attitude, to encourage education differently. Because there were some people that were wealthy. Is there any way that we could get them to help sponsor some of the children to go to school for example.

ZAREMBA: [00:58:51] Wealthy from the area?

SEFTON: [00:58:53] Yeah. Well, wealthy by their definition.

ZAREMBA: [00:58:59] Now would these be fishermen or farms, were there farmers or just fishermen?

SEFTON: [00:59:02] They were landowners.

ZAREMBA: [00:59:06] And on this land, did they raise cattle?

SEFTON: [00:59:07] Right.

ZAREMBA: [00:59:15] Any other unexpected events? Some of things about your sense of achievement.

SEFTON: [00:59:27] Well, I think one of the things that we both realized quickly was how fortunate we are as Americans to live in the country that we live in. Folks literally lived in mud huts. And were happy. They didn't have the health care that they needed. They didn't have the educational background that would help them to be able to survive past the age of 45. The women, it was not at all uncommon for the women to have been pregnant 25, 30 times. The first time I heard that I went to my dictionary and I'm looking because I'm thinking, I'm not hearing this right. And so, um, teaching birth control methods in an all Catholic area.

ZAREMBA: [01:00:28] When you say 25 or 30 times, were there are a lot of miscarriages or children dying young, or both?

SEFTON: [01:00:31] Oh yes, both. I know. But again, remember men were viewed as being powerful because of the number of children they had. So and they did not practice any kind of birth control. And so the women just. Age 13, we're starting to get pregnant, and so by the time they're 30.

ZAREMBA: [01:00:56] Did you ever try bringing that up?



SEFTON: [01:00:58] Oh, yeah.

ZAREMBA: [01:00:59] What kind of response would you?

SEFTON: [01:01:02] The women were very curious about that. You know, why didn't I get pregnant? That was always a question. So we would talk about the various things that could be done to prevent a pregnancy. You know, did I make any inroads there? I don't think so. But still then they had some knowledge that there were things available.

ZAREMBA: [01:01:31] Did you get any resentment from the man?

SEFTON: [01:01:34] Not that I was aware of. But there might have been, but they were very respectful to me.

ZAREMBA: [01:01:49] Now overall, this question is evaluating the service in light of the three goals of the Peace Corps. The first one is providing technical assistance where requested.

SEFTON: [01:02:01] What we did was a couple of things, and it was all around the arena of the bladder. We were able to put, I don't know what to call them in English, but they were big pots where you filtered your water. And we were able to introduce that into the village and actually many homes started putting those in.

ZAREMBA: [01:02:37] So sort of a filtering system in these pots?

SEFTON: [01:02:44] Yeah. Learning how to use water, the importance of washing your hands. The importance of, with a baby, of boiling your water not just giving them creek water. So I don't know if we call that technical or not but we had a lot of emphasis on that. Because people did respect us. They were willing to give it a try. The encouraging of moms to get their babies in for vaccinations. They could go to this health post and get all the baby shots. Having them follow through on that. So that was the technical piece of what we did.

ZAREMBA: [01:03:31] And the second goal is to help them know better understanding of Americans.

SEFTON: [01:03:38] That probably was the best one for us. Because we were for whatever reason, we were readily accepted. We were a curiosity. We didn't have two heads. We didn't go blind when we drank milk. So we were able to demonstrate all of those things. Folks, kind of liked us. And we certainly liked them. And so we had a great opportunity to be able to strengthen with the idea of what is an American and what do they do? These folks were very simple and they didn't have TVs and radios and newspapers. So they didn't know if Americans were good, bad or indifferent other than what they had heard.

ZAREMBA: [01:04:34] So you're their first introduction to American history.

SEFTON: [01:04:38] There had been a minister, I believe, that have gone through the area some years before that they all talked about. That was the only other American.

ZAREMBA: [01:04:56] For the milk, they didn't drink it. Where did you get your milk?

SEFTON: [01:05:02] We used powdered milk. And when you get into town, into the city, you could get milk. That was the thing you missed, a cold glass of milk and a peanut butter sandwich. We didn't have any supermarkets there.

ZAREMBA: [01:05:22] Did you ever get any of them to try milk?

SEFTON: [01:05:26] Yeah. The children. Too chalky, too thick. If you've never tasted it before, it's, I guess it's almost understandable.

ZAREMBA: [01:05:41] A third goal is to help promote better understanding of other peoples by Americans.

SEFTON: [01:05:50] Well, maybe it's showing up more in later life for me. I've helped start a diversity program at the hospital where I work. It's a lot of, a lot of the things that I learned back there are things that are just basic, very

relevant kinds of activities that we need to practice here. Basic respect. Appreciating differences. Enjoying different cultures and ethnic backgrounds. I'll never forget the ones you know that I learned, and you don't necessarily give every everybody a bath the first hour after they've delivered unless you find out that's OK with them. Some of those kinds of things.

ZAREMBA: [01:06:48] Say a little about the diversity program in this area.

SEFTON: [01:06:52] Well, Metro Health has had a diversity program for seven years. And we employ just under 2,000 employees and in the Grand Rapids area, this has been a highly Dutch reformed area. And over the course of the last three years, we're starting to see the influx of various cultures and ethnic groups. So not only is it just a good sense to treat everybody with respect and dignity, it's good business sense too. So as our workforce has become more diversified, we have needed to have a better understanding of the work practices, the work ethics, the English as a second language, those kinds of things.

ZAREMBA: [01:07:49] And then one of the items they have here is the effect on you of your Peace Corps service in the long term. So this fits in very much.

SEFTON: [01:07:56] Right. One of my roles is my title is Chief People Officer. And so one of my roles is in the H.R. arena and public relations and community development. And so it works very well with all those practices we had back in the '60s in the Peace Corps. I just kind of think that we bring forward.

SEFTON: [01:08:31] Oh, good morning. Today is August 21st, 2004. My name is Sandy Sefton, and I was a Peace Corps volunteer in Fortaleza or in, excuse me, Ceará, which is the state of Brazil. We entered, we being my husband and I, entered the Peace Corps in June of '65. That was our assignment. And we were in a community health and development project. Sorry, I didn't get those all the right order, but I think I got.

[END OF INTERVIEW]