

Chic Dambach Oral History Interview
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Biographical Note

Chic (Charles F.) Dambach served as a Peace Corps volunteer in Colombia from 1967 to 1969 in a community development program.

Access

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Oral History Interview

with

Chic Dambach

May 31, 2019
Washington, D.C.

By Evelyn Ganzglass

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

GANZGLASS: [00:00:02] Today is May 31, 2019. This is Evelyn Ganzglass. I was a Peace Corps volunteer in Somalia from 1966 to 1968 and I am interviewing Chic Dambach, who was a Peace Corps volunteer in Colombia from 1967 to 1969. And then he did lots of other Peace Corps related things that we will talk about. So my usual first question. Why did you join the Peace Corps?

DAMBACH: [00:00:34] It was the thing to do.

GANZGLASS: [00:00:35] It was the thing to do.

DAMBACH: [00:00:36] 1967, didn't everybody want to join the Peace Corps? It really was. I didn't even give a second thought. It just was the thing to do. But there were a couple of things behind it. One of them, I went to Oklahoma State for my undergraduate.

GANZGLASS: [00:00:53] So you're from Oklahoma?

DAMBACH: [00:00:54] I'm from Ohio. I went out there to play football. So I was on a football scholarship at Oklahoma State and a senior on the team named Kirk Breed kind of took a liking to me as a freshman. It's kind of rare for a senior on the football team to pay any attention at all to a freshman. But Kirk, for some reason seemed to like me. And he was going into the Peace Corps. And he just flat out told me my freshman year said, I'm going to the Peace Corps and you are too. And I thought, OK. And that kind of stuck with me throughout my undergraduate years, and a number of other things happened along the way. But it was just a natural thing to, of course, I go into the Peace Corps. Yeah.

GANZGLASS: [00:01:38] What did you study in college?

DAMBACH: [00:01:40] Well, I was a communications major because I was on the football team and the only course I could pass was a speech course, and so I became a speech major.

GANZGLASS: [00:01:50] I'm sure that's not exactly true, but it sounds good. And so what did, when you joined the Peace? So right after college, did you decide to join the Peace Corps?

DAMBACH: [00:02:00] Yeah, yeah. By my senior year, there were just no question I'm going to go to the Peace Corps. And so I applied. I was accepted into a program in Ethiopia, and then they changed it to Micronesia, and then they changed it to Colombia. And I learned a little bit geography in the process. Like all the rest of us, I got out a map and looked up these places to see where the heck they were and ended up in Colombia.

GANZGLASS: [00:02:29] And what kind of a program was it?

DAMBACH: [00:02:31] Well, it was a community development, which of course, as people in the Peace Corps know, that means you're going to drop you in a village and say, do good work, figure out what to do, and see what you can do. So I was on the coast of Colombia, the Caribbean coast.

GANZGLASS: [00:02:48] Before we go into all of that, just let's talk a little bit about what was the reaction of your parents and your friends to all of us? Did this make sense to them?

DAMBACH: [00:02:58] Most of my friends, I was part of the. I got hurt playing football. I couldn't play anymore, became part of the activist community, the free speech and the anti-war movement. And a bunch of us, there are at least 10 of us, of my classmates in the activist community who went into the Peace Corps. We all went in at the same time.

GANZGLASS: [00:03:15] Anti-war protest.

DAMBACH: [00:03:18] Yeah, yeah. So we just went into the Peace Corps and it just among all of us, you know, as we hung out together, we just kind of talked about where we were going to go and it just seemed to be the most normal thing in the world. Of course, we're going to the Peace Corps.

GANZGLASS: [00:03:30] And your parents were fine with us.

DAMBACH: [00:03:32] They were fine with it. They kind of knew I was a little bit crazy and adventuresome. So my dad had a little bit of a hard time understanding, particularly when he visited me in Colombia, because he had come from extreme poverty. I mean, incredible poverty. He had been abandoned by his parents and had to survive on his own at a very early age and worked extremely hard, was an extraordinarily accomplished man. There are parks named after him and there's a bust of him on the campus at Ohio State, so he had just done extraordinary. And part of his reaction was I worked really hard so that you wouldn't have to live like this. And it was hard for him to understand why I would voluntarily live in poverty in poverty. But I think he also appreciated what I was doing and why I was doing it. So there was never any antipathy among us. We just kind of understood each other and it was fine.

GANZGLASS: [00:04:30] So I don't know what training was like in 1967. So were you trained in the United States or were you trained in Colombia?

DAMBACH: [00:04:41] Both. We were part of a transition from the stateside training to overseas training, so we had the first half of our training here in the U.S. In fact, it was right here at George Washington University. But halfway through, we got on airplanes and flew down to Bogota and got the rest of our training in Colombia.

GANZGLASS: [00:05:03] And what was the training in the United States like at GW?

DAMBACH: [00:05:08] A lot. It was language training, of course, and orientation to the country and learning about the country, but also about the concept of community development. We read some Saul Alinsky, which would bother some people hear that name, but we, yes, we read Saul Alinsky. And kind of developed the whole concept of engaging with the community and listening to and understanding what the needs and that we were basically to be facilitators and then a catalyst to try to help the community figure out what they could do to make life better in their community. And we weren't to do it for them. We were to do it with them and to just help them do things they might not have otherwise thought about doing.

GANZGLASS: [00:05:48] That's right. And so then from GW, went down to Colombia and what? What happened when you got to Columbia?

DAMBACH: [00:05:55] Well, we were trained in Bogota at a place called CEUCA [Centro de Estudios Universitarios Colombo-Americano], which was a consortium of Great Lakes area colleges in the United States. Had this facility down there, where for students to do a study abroad. But something fairly remarkable happened in that training program that is known among a number of people in the Peace Corps world, largely because Sam Farr and I like to tell the story. We've told it many, many times. Sam Farr, as Peace Corps people know, was a Peace Corps volunteer in Colombia and later on became a member of Congress and the number one Peace Corps champion in the Congress and just

totally, totally devoted to the Peace Corps. But Sam was one of our trainers in Bogota.

DAMBACH: [00:06:48] And while we were going through the training, everything was going fine, but the director of the training program was a despicable person. And we all felt that way about it. We loved everybody else but this Dr. Martin was the head of the program and we just couldn't stand this guy. And in those days, they had what they called deselection, which many of us remember. We're going through training. They could say, you know, you don't really qualify and you're out.

GANZGLASS: [00:07:14] Because of psychological reasons.

DAMBACH: [00:07:15] For psychological reasons. And so it turned out that there was a married couple in our program, Joe and Sarah Walsh. And this guy, the training director, didn't like them and he wanted to kick them out. And for reasons we never fully understood or appreciated. In fact, all of us, we loved Joe and Sarah. We just thought they were among the best. And here this guy is trying to kick them out. So when it came to the point where he was really going to kick them out, Sam Farr and other trainers went over their head, went to the country, director and others and said, we can't let this happen. These people should be brought into the Peace Corps. And because Sam did that, he was fired from the training staff. So we trainees went on strike in support of Sam and the trainers and in support of Joe and Sarah. So we refused to show up for training.

GANZGLASS: [00:08:17] And then what happened?

DAMBACH: [00:08:18] And then what happened? So we set up, and this was back in the days of student protests on campus. And because I had been a leader of the student protest movement at Oklahoma State, I was elected to be the leader of the protest movement in the Peace Corps in monitoring trainees.

GANZGLASS: [00:08:36] So you had a long career.

DAMBACH: [00:08:38] Absolutely. So it was my job to keep everybody together, and we recognized that if we didn't, if we didn't all stay together, it would fail. That if anybody broke ranks, they could kick the rest of us out and those that stayed would stay. And so we will not succeed. So this went on for a couple of weeks and we set up alternative. The trainers weren't getting paid anymore, but we found an alternative place to meet and they would meet with us and give us the language training and so on, just as though we were having training. But it wasn't at CEUCA, it was no longer an official part of the program.

DAMBACH: [00:09:13] Jack Vaughn was director of the Peace Corps at the time here in Washington, and he got wind of this strike among trainees in Bogota, and he flew down to find out what the hell is going on. Peace Corps trainees on strike, are you kidding me? And I'll never forget. He flew down and he met with Dr. Martin, the director of the program, and he met with Sam and the other trainers to find out from their perspective. And we had a small leadership team for we trainees, and I was the leader of that group. And so I got to meet Jack Vaughn and explained to him why we were doing what we're doing. And if you ever knew Jack, you would know that he's a phenomenal.

DAMBACH: [00:09:53] He passed away a few years ago, but we became lifelong friends as a result of what happened there. But at any rate, he heard our story and he got a little smile on his face and he said, get everybody together. So we got word out to everybody and we set up a place where we were going to meet. So we all came together. And he said, I'm impressed. You guys are doing a pretty good job. He said, if you can pull something off like this, you don't need more training. You know how to be community development volunteers. And we were supposed to have two more weeks of training. And he said, go off to your sites, you're Peace Corps volunteers.

GANZGLASS: [00:10:30] Including the couple?

DAMBACH: [00:10:31] Including the couple. Absolutely.

GANZGLASS: [00:10:35] Fantastic. So the trainers were all former volunteers or were they Colombian?

DAMBACH: [00:10:39] There were some Colombians and so on. And so of course, they were a little confused about what was going on. But Sam and the others, they knew and you know, they're the ones that caused the trouble in the first place, you know, by protesting this guy trying to kick Joe and Sarah out.

GANZGLASS: [00:10:54] That's quite a training story.

DAMBACH: [00:10:56] It's a wonderful training story. And Sam and I have told it in front of audiences 30 or 40 times.

GANZGLASS: [00:11:03] Good. And how was the relationship with the director after that?

DAMBACH: [00:11:07] Well, he didn't get any more contracts to train Peace Corps volunteers, let's say that. I never saw him again, never wanted to see him again.

GANZGLASS: [00:11:15] So this was Dr. Martin who was the problem.

DAMBACH: [00:11:17] Yeah, yeah. And I think everybody talked about him, recognized that that's what the problem was. And the Peace Corps country director Bill Dial knew it was a problem as well. So we got to know Bill very well, and he appreciated what we did.

GANZGLASS: [00:11:34] Ok, so you got sworn in in Bogota.

DAMBACH: [00:11:38] Got sworn in. Bogota.

GANZGLASS: [00:11:39] And then where were you? Let me ask, other than this whole episode, did you find the training to be helpful? Did it prepare you well for your job?

DAMBACH: [00:11:51] It did. Certainly, the language training was extremely valuable. I was terrible at languages. Really, really struggled with learning the Spanish. And Spanish is probably the easiest language to learn for Peace Corps volunteers. In spite of that, I had a hard time learning it. But another quick little story. Many people know the name Gretchen Handwerger, who was a giant in the Peace Corps leadership, a key figure at the World Bank later on in her life. And Gretchen was an observer at one of our training sessions when we were here at GW, and she saw that I was struggling with the Spanish and she asked to meet with me. And I thought, this is it, I'm going to get deselected.

DAMBACH: [00:12:35] But instead this great woman, and she really was a great, great woman, pulled me aside and said, you're trying too hard. You're trying too hard. She says, you'll get it, just relax and let it become a part of you. And I was so relieved that she didn't kick me out, and I took that to heart and ended up becoming quite fluent in Spanish. But I've been eternally grateful and Gretchen and I stayed in touch over the years as well and just so grateful to her for that understanding. And rather than coming down hard on me for not learning the language, she helped me develop an attitude and a positive attitude that enabled me to learn the language. So I've spent my whole life reflecting on that and remembering that when I work, when I have employees who are struggling. I think back to that and say, that's the way I need to handle it.

GANZGLASS: [00:13:27] That's really good. So training was good.

DAMBACH: [00:13:31] Training was good.

GANZGLASS: [00:13:33] You clearly bonded with your fellow volunteers.

DAMBACH: [00:13:36] We were close.

GANZGLASS: [00:13:36] And how big a group was this?

DAMBACH: [00:13:38] There were 45 of us in the training group.

GANZGLASS: [00:13:41] All were in community development?

DAMBACH: [00:13:42] All of us were community development. Yeah.

GANZGLASS: [00:13:44] Ok. So then where were you assigned?

DAMBACH: [00:13:46] I was assigned to a barrio on the outskirts of Cartagena. And I always hate to say Cartagena, because anybody that knows anything about Cartagena knows that it's paradise. It's this beautiful, beautiful tourist attraction on the Caribbean coast of Colombia. So people will hear Cartagena. They kind of roll their eyes, say, yeah, Peace Corps Cartagena, give me a break.

GANZGLASS: [00:14:09] So this was a barrio in?

DAMBACH: [00:14:12] On the outskirts of Cartagena, and it was what we called it an invasion barrio. It was squatters. So yes, Cartagena is a beautiful, lovely, lovely place. But the barrio was about as abject poverty as you can get. These were people from the countryside who had moved to the city, squatted on land that nobody had any use for. And they, it was a shanty town. There was one spigot for running water in the middle of the barrio, and that was it for water. We sort of had electricity because somebody had tapped into a power line that came by and it was spliced together going through the barrio. And of course, it would break all the time. And so, you know, maybe an hour or two a week, you would have electricity, but we didn't really have electricity. It was about as impoverished as you can get.

GANZGLASS: [00:14:59] And you lived in the barrio?

DAMBACH: [00:15:01] Lived in the barrio.

GANZGLASS: [00:15:02] How did you, um, get a place to live?

DAMBACH: [00:15:05] Just asked around and there was a place and for six dollars a month, I paid my rent and had my, I had the nicest place in town at six dollars a month.

GANZGLASS: [00:15:15] And you didn't have electricity either or water?

DAMBACH: [00:15:18] No. In fact, for water, the kids in the barrio, who were probably seven or eight years old, would pound on my door every morning when the sun came up. And one of them, in particular, his name was Miguel, and I would love to find Miguel again, but he would pound on my door, say Carlos Carlos! Because they called me Carlos, which is the Spanish, of course, for Charles. *Carlos, Carlos, agua, agua, agua!* Charles, Charles, Chic, Chic, water! And I had a 10-gallon tank. And they would take it up to the water spigot, and he'd wait for hours in line to get water. So instead of me having to wait for the water, they would get the water for me and bring it back.

GANZGLASS: [00:16:01] And you paid them?

DAMBACH: [00:16:02] And I'd pay them a few pesos, which was just a few cents, but they were thrilled to get it. And then I would put it up on the roof of where I was and let it heat up in the sun and siphon water out of it. And I'd take a nice warm shower.

GANZGLASS: [00:16:16] Yes, I know that well.

DAMBACH: [00:16:17] Life was good.

GANZGLASS: [00:16:19] And what did you do in the barrio?

DAMBACH: [00:16:21] Well, the first thing was to just kind of talk with the people in barrio and figure out what is it that they need that would make their life better. And I ended up doing several projects, but two in particular. One of them was the village was literally 100 percent illiterate. Not one person knew how to read or write. And they recognized that in the urban environment, if they were going to get jobs in the city, they needed to learn how to read and write. And while the older ones

probably never were, at least their kids needed to learn it, but they needed a school. They had no idea how to go about doing that, and, you know, would they get any support for school? So the Peace Corps volunteer could kind of walk into the Department of Education and say, you know, this module, even though it's a squatters village, these kids need an education. And said, you know, what do we do about that, to get an education? And they said, well, if the village will build a school, our policy is we'll provide teachers, but they've got to build a school.

DAMBACH: [00:17:17] So I reported back to the *junta de acción comunal*, the community action committee, and said it's my understanding that if we build a school, they'll provide teachers. And so the village built the school. And the way they built the school, it was they, it wasn't me that built it, they built the school, which of course, is fundamental to, you know, Peace Corps community development philosophy is you don't come in and build it for them. You work with them and they build it. We were right on the coast. We had access to sand and some of the people in the village worked construction. And every now and then a bag of cement would show up. And I didn't ask how. It just appeared, and we had four molds for cinder blocks. At the rate of four blocks a day, we made the cinder blocks and they built the school.

GANZGLASS: [00:18:08] Fantastic. Was it a one room school or what was it like?

DAMBACH: [00:18:11] One room, but large enough to have four essentially breakouts in it. So yes, it was a one room school, but big enough for four classes of about 20 to 25 in the corners of four corners of this rectangular building.

GANZGLASS: [00:18:25] And what was your role? Did you?

DAMBACH: [00:18:27] I just kind of supervised.

GANZGLASS: [00:18:28] You supervised the building?

DAMBACH: [00:18:29] I was kind of a cheerleader, you know, say, yeah, keep it up.

GANZGLASS: [00:18:32] But you didn't help build the school.

DAMBACH: [00:18:34] Well, yeah, yeah, I did a little bit. But you know, they didn't need my muscle power to build the school. They could do that. But my job was to kind of keep them on track and we helped design. We got somebody to kind of lay out the designs. And so we knew.

GANZGLASS: [00:18:49] And did the Department of Education then provided a teacher?

DAMBACH: [00:18:52] They did, and I was so proud the day that, with the chairman of the *junta de acción comunal* and I walked into the Secretary of Education for the Departamento de Bolívar. And when I first talked with him about it, he just said, you know, they'll never do it. He kind of dismissed it as fanciful, and I just was so proud. We walked in and said, we have a school, come out and take a look.

GANZGLASS: [00:19:15] How long did it take to build this school?

DAMBACH: [00:19:17] It took well over a year.

GANZGLASS: [00:19:20] Were there other volunteers in the same barrio, or were you the only?

DAMBACH: [00:19:24] I was the only one in that barrio.

GANZGLASS: [00:19:27] That's great. So that became your project, the school.

DAMBACH: [00:19:29] That was one of two major projects. We did some literacy stuff and other health projects and so on. The Good Ship Hope came to Cartagena while I was there, and so I arranged for the nurses from the ship Hope to come out and do lectures for the people in the barrio. But they were eking out a living as fishermen using dugout canoes, and we were literally right on the water, right on the bay.

DAMBACH: [00:19:53] And they would paddle their dugout canoes and they would go out and catch fish. But they were using dynamite to catch the fish,

which is not a good practice. And it was destroying the fish population and it would destroy the fishermen. If a fisherman had lost an arm, they were called a mojo. That was the term for somebody who lost a limb from the dynamite exploding before they got rid of it. And about half of the fishermen in the barrio were mojos. And I'll never forget paddling dugout canoes out with a guy with only one arm, paddling the canoe with one arm and holding the dynamite in his remaining arm and lighting the match with his teeth and throwing it in.

GANZGLASS: [00:20:39] What possessed them to use dynamite?

DAMBACH: [00:20:41] Well, it works. It works.

GANZGLASS: [00:20:42] But I mean, who came up with this idea?

DAMBACH: [00:20:44] No idea, but you know, it's done in developing countries all over the world. So, you know, somehow word got out that it's a way to do it and it works. You know, you find a school of fish, throw a stick of dynamite in, it goes off and the concussion.

GANZGLASS: [00:20:56] There are all these dead fish.

DAMBACH: [00:20:57] Got a whole bunch of fish, scoop them up and so you got them. So but you know, I was watching that and saying, you know, this isn't good. We've got a whole bunch of mojos and the fish population is declining rapidly. And they were saying, where are all the fish? Well, they're dead because you killed them. So let's find another way to do this without killing off and particularly kill off the small fish. And they don't even scoop up the small ones. They scoop up the big ones and small ones are all gone. So this is not sustainable.

GANZGLASS: [00:21:26] So what did you come up with?

DAMBACH: [00:21:27] So we organized them into a fishing co-op to give them legal status and so they could get loans from the Agrario, the agricultural bank, gave them loans so that they could motors for the boats and get

nets, to give them a viable alternative so they could catch virtually as many fish using more appropriate techniques than using the dynamite.

GANZGLASS: [00:21:49] And that worked?

DAMBACH: [00:21:50] It worked. I can't say we ended dynamite fishing altogether, but dramatically reduced it. And ended up taking that to five fishing villages right along the coast. So I remained based in Alborodos, but went to these other villages to help organize a larger co-op and expand the concept of using the boats with motors and nets to reduce anyway, the amount of dynamite fishing.

GANZGLASS: [00:22:21] Well, it sounds like you really did good work in this.

DAMBACH: [00:22:24] We did some good stuff. Yeah, I'm pretty proud of it.

GANZGLASS: [00:22:26] That's excellent. What did you do in your spare time?

DAMBACH: [00:22:31] Well, I had a girlfriend.

GANZGLASS: [00:22:34] Peace Corps?

DAMBACH: [00:22:36] No, Colombian, who happened to be a national beauty queen. There was a hit song in Colombia called Se Ama Martinez Larena Nelargorone. And that's the cotton queen for Colombia, named Martinez, that was my girlfriend and we got married.

GANZGLASS: [00:22:53] You got married.

DAMBACH: [00:22:54] Yeah, near the end of my service, we got married. And it didn't last, lasted seven years.

GANZGLASS: [00:23:01] Did she come back to the U.S.?

DAMBACH: [00:23:04] She came back to the U.S. and I won't go into a number of reasons it didn't work out. But she's still in the U.S. and we have a son from that marriage, who is a great guy.

GANZGLASS: [00:23:22] That's excellent. So you had a girlfriend. Did you do anything with other Peace Corps volunteers?

DAMBACH: [00:23:30] I did. We would get together. We'd hang out and just party together and have a good time and we'd would travel around the country too.

GANZGLASS: [00:23:39] Yeah, I was going to ask. So you traveled around the country.

DAMBACH: [00:23:40] I never got out of the country. I would love to have, but I traveled around Colombia. Didn't get as far south as I would like to. I really wanted to get down to Leticia, where the Amazon River just barely touches Colombia. Really wanted to get down there, but just never was able to make it down there. But did get up to Riohacha, where there's this desert or fascinating culture in Riohacha. Got to Bogota, Medellin and you would stay with volunteers wherever you go. You certainly wouldn't want to pay for a place to stay.

GANZGLASS: [00:24:16] No, not at all.

DAMBACH: [00:24:16] You know, you'd stay with volunteers wherever you went.

GANZGLASS: [00:24:19] And so this was a really exciting opportunity for you to organize things. What did you do after Peace Corps?

DAMBACH: [00:24:30] I organized things.

GANZGLASS: [00:24:32] Organized things. Did you have any thought of staying longer? Some people extended.

DAMBACH: [00:24:38] Yeah, I did. It occurred to me, but I had a very strong relationship with a faculty member at Oklahoma State, and he and I corresponded the whole time I was there and he really wanted me to come back and study with him, and we were kind of planning a partnership for our careers. He had political interest. He was going to

run for Congress. So we were going to set up a consulting firm together, and he would run for Congress and I would manage his campaign. And if he won, I would come to Washington as his chief of staff and we were going to change the world. And so I came back and was working on that with Dale [Stockton]. And he was murdered.

GANZGLASS: [00:25:26] That's shocking.

DAMBACH: [00:25:26] It's shocking, to say the least. A random killing.

GANZGLASS: [00:25:31] Just a random killing.

DAMBACH: [00:25:32] We were on a trip together. We'd set up our consulting firm. I was still going to school working on a master's degree. He was the debate team coach, the oratory coach, taught speech communications. And the debate team had a tournament in Dallas, Texas, and they all went down with the team. But we had a consulting contract with the Americans for Indian Opportunity. And I don't know if any of you remember Senator Fred Harris.

GANZGLASS: [00:26:01] Sure.

DAMBACH: [00:26:03] Fred Harris and his wife, LaDonna, set up this program called Americans for Indian Opportunity, and we were good friends with Fred and LaDonna, and we had a contract with them to do some training for Native Americans in Arizona near Phoenix. So I went to Phoenix to get everything set up for this project we were going to do. Going to meet with Fred and LaDonna there. Dale went to Dallas to give a lecture and to be with his debate team and in the hotel where he was staying in Dallas, he was murdered. And I was at the airport to pick him up. And I was paged and told he will not be arriving and you need to get back to Oklahoma.

GANZGLASS: [00:26:47] That's just shocking.

DAMBACH: [00:26:48] Shocking. And in many ways, Dale was just a tremendous inspiration in my life, and I've kind of lived out my life wanting to fulfill

his values and his dream of what could be done to make the world a better place.

GANZGLASS: [00:27:01] It's sad. So then what happened?

DAMBACH: [00:27:05] So they had me teach his courses for the rest of the term, and I did the best I could, which was pathetic. You know, obviously very emotional and just, you know, fulfilled the obligations, and I just couldn't finish my master's degree, you know, without Dale. There was just seemed to be no point to it. So I got a job in El Dorado, Kansas, running a community action agency, or a poverty program, doing community organizing. So I did that for a few years and then kind of moved on with the career.

GANZGLASS: [00:27:41] So your career was in community organizing based on your Peace Corps experience, do you think?

DAMBACH: [00:27:51] Absolutely. And everything I've done since then, I've done it in a whole range of different arenas in the last 20 years or so has been, you know, here in Washington and doing work with the National Peace Corps Association, we'll get into that, and some other organizing types of things. But everything I've done has really been in a way, an organizing sort of thing. I got involved in the arts, a great fan of good music and museums and so on. So I ran two local arts councils, which was organizing the arts community, became the founding director of the National Assembly of Local Arts Agencies, now known as Americans for the Arts, which is well known on National Public Radio. You hear Americans for the Arts every day. I was the founding director of that organization, still involved with them there. The director, Bob Lynch, is a dear friend and I still connect with that community. But I'm the guy that kind of helped get them organized and that's all based on Peace Corps training and Peace Corps experience.

GANZGLASS: [00:28:51] So this is all Saul Alinsky.

DAMBACH: [00:28:55] Well, we got to be careful where you use that name. Subversive.

GANZGLASS: [00:29:00] But that's where it started.

DAMBACH: [00:29:02] That's where it started. Yeah. And with Sam Farr.

GANZGLASS: [00:29:05] And did you work with Sam Farr afterwards or you were just friends?

DAMBACH: [00:29:10] Yes. Well, friends. But you know, I ended up on the Hill for a couple of years. And so with John Garamendi, and still very close to John. But even while I was working on the Hill, I was as close, if not closer to Sam. You know, I spent the day working with John and then I'd swing by Sam's office. We'd go to dinner together.

GANZGLASS: [00:29:30] So I know you were director of the National Peace Corps Association. How did you, were you the founding?

DAMBACH: [00:29:38] One more thing and then we'll go to that. But this was a pretty significant part of my life. You know, I'd been an athlete in college and ended up becoming a kayak racer. And did that vigorously and very seriously for many years. I've got a drawer full of national championship medals.

GANZGLASS: [00:29:57] Wow.

DAMBACH: [00:29:58] Almost made the Olympic team, didn't quite, but came awfully close to making it. In fact, the godfather of our youngest son is an Olympic champion, two Olympic gold medals, two bronze medals. So when I raced all over the country and some internationally, I became chairman of the board. And this is another community organization thing. It's the reason I want to fill it in. Became chairman of the board in 1984, my last year of competing. I was 40 years old and kind of aging out of being competitive, but I did. I won five gold medals in the national championships in 1984 and said, this is it. You know, I just cannot put in the time and effort for the training twice a day every day. A lot of work and of course, not only do you not make any money,

you spend a lot of money buying your boats and get into races and so on. So this is it. I'm finished.

DAMBACH: [00:30:52] But the team was upset with the way the whole thing was organized. It was just dreadful organization and they knew that I had a background in the Peace Corps, in community organizing, and they said, we're going to change this organization, but you've got to lead it. And I'll never forget that David Halpern, particularly, he was a member of the Olympic team, gave me a call. He said we pulled off the coup. The old guys are out. We've got a new leadership on the board, but you've got to lead it. You're the only one that knows how to do it. And I reluctantly said OK and ended up spending about a decade leading the U.S. canoe and kayak program.

DAMBACH: [00:31:27] And we went from miserable international performance to winning gold medals and getting substantial financial support and really developing a strong program. Became president of the Pan American Canoe Racing Council, helped get canoeing into the Pan American Games and participated in the Pan American Games, including in Havana, where I got to have dinner with Fidel Castro. How many people can say that?

GANZGLASS: [00:31:50] Not many people can say that.

DAMBACH: [00:31:52] Yeah. So and was on the Racing Committee for the International Canoe Federation, writing the rules for Olympic and World Championship competition. Built this network of friends from all over the world in the canoeing world. But all of it goes back to that Saul Alinsky Peace Corps training, knowing how to bring people together and organize people and get things done.

GANZGLASS: [00:32:15] It's a great story.

DAMBACH: [00:32:16] And that's how I met my current wife. She is also a kayak racer and we met at a competition and been married ever since. And this one's worked out wonderfully.

GANZGLASS: [00:32:26] That's great. So, from kayaking, how did you end up heading up the National Peace Corps Association? Were you the founding director?

DAMBACH: [00:32:38] I was not the founding director. There were two people before me, but back when I was a volunteer, I kept thinking, you know, somebody needs to go back and organize. You've got all these incredible people all over the world having this phenomenal experience and we need to be connected with one another and continue to be organized and be a movement that has an influence. And I came back and there wasn't an organization. Actually, there was in the late '60s, as you may remember. There was the Committee of Returned Volunteers that was an anti-war movement of returned Peace Corps volunteers. And they even challenged the Peace Corps itself, tried to shut down the Peace Corps, called it imperialist committee of returned volunteers. And I really didn't want to be a part of that. I was anti-war, but I felt the Peace Corps is a pretty good thing. So and since they had kind of turned on the Peace Corps itself, they occupied. They went in and occupied the Peace Corps offices. And I just didn't want to be a part of that. And partly because of that, it became difficult then to organize returned Peace Corps volunteers because that was kind of the image that people had, that that's what they're going to do. And most of us just said, you know, I don't want to be a part of that. Anti-war, yes, but anti-Peace Corps, no. Come on, give me a break.

DAMBACH: [00:33:53] So it took a while. But finally, and I can't remember the dates, but local groups were forming and friends of groups were forming. And they started communicating with each other and decided it was time to build a national network of the groups. So it was called the National Council of Returned Peace Corps Volunteers. And they met and it was totally volunteer for a while. And then they got started getting enough membership and membership dues to begin to hire a staff and set up an office here in Washington. And there were two people preceded me, but it never really caught on in a significant way, and they were really, really struggling financially. So when I was hired, they were out of money and membership was declining and really weren't sure they were going to be able to make a go of it. Doug

Sigman was chairman of the board at that time. And in fact, they hired me and then said, but you can't start yet because we don't have enough money to pay your salary or anybody else's salary. And let us see if we can raise enough money to pay the rent and pay a salary. It was a pittance of a salary, but at least something.

GANZGLASS: [00:35:05] And when was this?

DAMBACH: [00:35:07] This was 1992. So they went out and raised as much money as they possibly could, and they had enough to guarantee me three months salary and three months rent and salary for our very small staff. And fool that I am, I said, OK, let's give it a try. So I moved to Washington from North Carolina and we went to work, and there were days when I was not sure we were going to make it because it was a really, really, really close call.

DAMBACH: [00:35:40] But made contact with, started finding out about RPCVs, who were financially well-off, who could help make it happen. There had been kind of a culture of saying, well, we don't want to do that. We don't want fat cats, you know, running the organization. Well, do you want an organization? Let's grow up a little bit here. The only way you have enough money to run the organization is you get the people and these are still good people. I don't care if they're rich or not, they're still Peace Corps volunteers. They're good people and they care and they want to be hopeful. Nobody had ever asked them. So I went out and found them and went out and asked them, and they said, sure. And so I ended up with what we call the director circle, a thousand dollar and above donors, and brought in enough money to pay the rent and pay salaries and then to build an organization.

DAMBACH: [00:36:26] But the other thing we did was really have a reason for having the organization. Because the main thing up until then was just to keep the network connected. And I said, well, we need to be doing more than that. For one thing, we need to be advocates for the Peace Corps, for the values. We need to be lobbying the Congress and we need to be mobilizing the RPCV community to take on issues and causes and things that we believe in. And among other things, the third

goal of the Peace Corps, bring the world back home. Thirty percent of RPCVs are teachers. Well, so people come back and maybe for a little while, they do some things in the classroom, but they need support to bring the whole world back home to their classroom.

DAMBACH: [00:37:07] So we developed a program and got foundation support for it to provide RPCV teachers with resources and a network to support them in the classroom, give them more so that they could actually be much more active and effective in third goal activities in schools where they teach. So we developed that program and I hired Anne Baker to run it. And Anne still there, and she did a phenomenal job and I'm really proud of what we did. But the other.

GANZGLASS: [00:37:38] So the program still goes on?

DAMBACH: [00:37:40] It's still going on. Yeah, yeah. So the other was that, you know, having been an old anti-war activist and so on, and I always, I was always a little bit bothered that we call it the Peace Corps, but we really don't talk that much or do that much about peace. And I felt that there's some many things we could do, and I understand why the Peace Corps itself doesn't, because of the concern about it. Yeah, yeah. The agency, you know, just can't get involved and things like that, you know, the potential of being perceived as being political and so on. But RPCVs can. And we have the language skills, the cultural spheres, we have the motivation to get involved.

DAMBACH: [00:38:25] And the group that really started doing this. I can't take credit for really getting it started. The Friends of Liberia. There was violence going on in Liberia, and the Friends of Liberia group got involved in conflict resolution in Liberia and did some remarkable work. In fact, I'll never forget a meeting with Jimmy Carter, who of course, did an awful lot of work in Liberia. But he said, you know, Chic, the group that has done more than anybody else to help build bring peace to Liberia is the Peace Corps group. They've done phenomenal work and I was just kind of inspired by what they were doing.

GANZGLASS: [00:39:01] So this was a friends?

DAMBACH: [00:39:04] Friends of Liberia.

GANZGLASS: [00:39:04] What did they do?

DAMBACH: [00:39:05] Well, they went and they met with the people on all sides of the dispute and try to help get them to talk with one another and find nonviolent ways to resolve their differences, which is classic peace building. So then in 1994, the genocide broke out in Rwanda. And of course, like others in the Peace Corps community, was terribly concerned about it, but wasn't sure what, if anything, we could do about it. And a guy named Steve Smith, who had served in Congo but near the Rwandan border, lived out in California. He was an engineer. And he called me up and he said, you know, I know the United States isn't doing anything about this, but we're Peace Corps.

DAMBACH: [00:39:53] We need to do something about it. And I said, well, let's talk. And so we brought together a group of people who had served in Rwanda and basically said, let's see what we can do. And a new program had developed at USAID called the Office of Transition Initiatives. A guy named Rick Barton was the founding head of that program. And so I got in touch with Rick and we talked about it and he said, you know, the rest of the U.S. government is doing nothing in Rwanda, but my office is, we're going to do something. And he said the people who can do the best are the people who served in the Peace Corps. You know the language, you know the culture. You know how to get around and you're motivated. He says, but let's put together a team of RPCVs to see what we can do in Rwanda.

DAMBACH: [00:40:42] And Rick and I literally had a handshake agreement, which is unheard. USAID, as you may know, plans and contracts and all kinds of detail and incredible stuff. Rick said, we're just going to do it. We don't even know yet what we're going to do. What do you do in the aftermath of a genocide? Who knows what you do? What you do in the Peace Corps is you go and you listen.

GANZGLASS: [00:41:08] Yeah.

DAMBACH: [00:41:08] You go and you listen and you find out what the people there say needs to be done. So we mobilized a team of former Peace Corps volunteers, RPCVs, to go to Rwanda and to listen, listen, listen, listen and come back with a set of ideas and concepts of things that could be done.

DAMBACH: [00:41:28] And I'll never forget the day they got off the plane and we went to the State Department and said, here's what we learned, and they were just kind of astonished. Nobody had ever listened to anybody from Rwanda before. Said, well, that makes sense. So we mobilized a team to help build safety, security and stability. Among other things, they needed monitors just in the villages with communication capability. So if things were to flare up again, there was a way of communicating and bringing in support to help make it happen. They also needed to work with the women. There were just a whole lot of women who had been left without their spouses and absolutely destituted, and so we needed to provide training for them and to help them find a way to become self-sufficient.

GANZGLASS: [00:42:15] So were you a U.S. AID contractor then?

DAMBACH: [00:42:18] We ended up, we had a USAID contractor through OTI, through this unique new agency that Rick had set up. So that's what we did. And they basically, we would do things and I would send an invoice to Rick and he would send me a check.

GANZGLASS: [00:42:36] Wow.

DAMBACH: [00:42:38] So based on that, then we thought, well, this this concept has merit. And then we started building other programs, and so we created what we call the, uh, what did we call it? The emergency response network. Yeah. Emergency Response Network through the NPCA. And when Mark Gearan became director of the Peace Corps, he found out about this program and he was impressed. And he said, you know, I'm really impressed with what you guys are doing, he said, but you know, the Peace Corps itself should do this kind of thing. And

of course, we struggled to have enough money to be able to do very much of anything with it. But so.

GANZGLASS: [00:43:22] So Mark took it into Peace Corps?

DAMBACH: [00:43:23] He took it into Peace Corps and it is now called Peace Corps Response. So he asked my permission. He said, would it be OK with you if we were to adopt this program? And I knew if they did.

GANZGLASS: [00:43:35] They had funds for sure.

DAMBACH: [00:43:37] Yeah, and it would overwhelm what we were doing and there would be no reason or way for us to sustain it. But the idea is to get the job done. If they can do more than we can do, by all means have at it. And so they took it over and it's now Peace Corps Response, which is.

GANZGLASS: [00:43:53] Lots of people have joined that.

DAMBACH: [00:43:54] Lots of people in it. It's doing really, really good work all over the world. So but that's the origin of Peace Corps Response.

GANZGLASS: [00:44:03] So when did the, I forgot what it was called at the beginning. National Council of Returned Volunteers? When did that become National Peace Corps Association?

DAMBACH: [00:44:12] Well, that was 1993. I was bothered by the name National Council of Returned Peace Corps Volunteers. One thing, it was too long. And it said to people who hadn't been volunteers, Peace Corps staff or family, that they really weren't part of that. And we thought, you know, we ought to be welcoming of anybody who wants to be supportive, part of and supportive of what we're doing and particularly Peace Corps staff, who could be tremendously valuable. So we kind of went through a process of thinking what would be a better name and came up with National Peace Corps Association.

DAMBACH: [00:44:51] But it took a while to get the Peace Corps to approve it, and something that is not well known in the Peace Corps community is the Peace Corps owns the name Peace Corps, and controls the use of the name Peace Corps. Now they don't do very much to control it, but rightfully so, they own the name. And so Elaine Chao was director of the Peace Corps at the time. Well, she was at the start of this then. She wasn't the one that. When she was director, we weren't able to get very far. And her attorneys were saying, you know, we really aren't ready to do this. But then Carol Bellamy became the director, and it took a while with her attorneys to get them to agree to sign off on it. But they finally signed off on it and said that does make a lot more sense. They said, make sure you make it very, very clear in your literature that you are not the Peace Corps. And so we would always say we have a subheading, you know, that this.

GANZGLASS: [00:45:47] And so that's the same reason that there's now legislation to allow veterans, I mean not veterans, Peace Corps volunteers who've died to use the Peace Corps emblem on their graves.

DAMBACH: [00:45:59] Exactly. Exactly, because Peace Corps owns the name and the emblem. Yeah. So you can't just go out on your own and do it. Now people do. And a Peace Corps is not going to be a bad ass and go out and put people in jail for using it. But if somebody were to misuse it, and I'm glad they do. There are some people who served in the Peace Corps who don't like the Peace Corps and would be perfectly happy. I know some of these people would be perfectly happy to go out there and tarnish the name of the Peace Corps and create an organization that would tarnish and use the Peace Corps name and tarnish the reputation of the Peace Corps. And I want the Peace Corps to be able to keep that from happening.

GANZGLASS: [00:46:41] No, that makes sense. That makes sense. So given the state of the world now?

DAMBACH: [00:46:47] Yeah.

GANZGLASS: [00:46:47] With conflicts all over and conflict starting and people not listening to each other. What do you see as the role of NPCA or Peace Corps volunteers in all of this?

DAMBACH: [00:47:03] I see a fundamental and central role for the NPCA and the Peace Corps community in all of this. As you probably know, after I left the NPCA, we formed a team of RPCVs to get involved in the Ethiopia Eritrea border war, and we ended up playing a central role in bringing end to that war. In fact, Meles Zenawi, the prime minister of Ethiopia, sent us a letter after it was over saying we created the spirit of the momentum that made the peace agreement possible. That was a group of RPCVs that did that. We met regularly with the heads of state of the two countries and help get them to the point where they were willing to agree to sign an agreement and bring an end to the war. We were invited to Algiers for the Peace Corps, or for the peace treaty signing ceremony. We met at great length with both heads of state right after that signing ceremony. Kofi Annan was there, Madeleine Albright was there, and they wanted to meet with us.

GANZGLASS: [00:48:05] That's great. And how did you do that? This was after you left NPCA.

DAMBACH: [00:48:09] I had just left, and John Garamendi had been Deputy Secretary of Interior, but a Peace Corps volunteer in Ethiopia. And I'll never forget. My phone rang. He said, Chic, it's John. He said, my friends are killing each other and we've got to do something about it. He's talking about the border war between Ethiopia and Eritrea. I said, John, I haven't a clue what we can do, but let's give it a try. We got together, talked it through, met with the embassies from the two countries and they said, please help. We trust you, Peace Corps. The heads of state of both countries, been taught by Peace Corps volunteers, their foreign ministers, the ambassadors, all had been taught by Peace Corps volunteers, so we trust you more than anybody. So we were able to build a trust relationship. We built a team of five people. John and I did most of it, but we brought together a team of five people and we met regularly with the ambassadors from the two countries.

DAMBACH: [00:49:04] We were invited to Asmara and Addis Ababa when we met. When we made the trip, we thought maybe we'll get five minutes with the heads of state and then they'll send us off to other functionaries. We ended up spending almost three hours with Isaias Afwerki, the president of Eritrea, three hours with the head of state of the country and went through strategy to find a way to break through the barriers and bring an end to the war. From there, we went down to Addis Ababa, met with Meles Zenawi, the prime minister for two and a half hours. We're able to report to him on what we had heard from his adversary, and he was shocked to find out that he was actually willing to do things. Nobody had ever told him that Isaias was, or that uh, yeah, that Isaias was willing to do these things to bring an end to it. Took two years to get to the final resolution and the end of it came.

DAMBACH: [00:49:58] We had gotten down to where there was one last issue at stake, and it was the sequence, the modalities to implement a cease fire. And there was a dispute over that and one side or the other was going to have to make a concession. And we had talked to both sides about it trying to get them to make a concession. And John and I were in the office of Gay Maritade, who was a close friend of the president of Eritrea. And was saying, you know, if the president will just make this one last concession, the war can be over. He said, are you sure? I'm sure. And he called his friend, the president, with John and I sitting in his office and put us on speakerphone, and we talked to the president and said, you know, please consider doing this. This can bring an end to the war. He said, are you sure? And reluctantly, he said, I'm ready to do it. Let's do it.

DAMBACH: [00:50:45] I jumped into a cab and. I get emotional about this. It's 20 years ago and I still get emotional about it. Jumped in the cab, went over the Ethiopian embassy and said, let's go over this one more time. I said, if Isaias is willing to make a concession on the sequence of modalities, the war is over. Is that right? He said, yes, it's right, but he'll never do it. He's a warmonger. All he wants to do is fight. I know how you feel, but I'm here to tell you that he just did. I don't believe you, he said, this was the facade, you know, the deputy chief of mission. The

ambassador was out with the deputy. The DCM was there, he said, pulled out my cell phone, said I've got him on speed dial. We'll call. He said, you can't do that. There was an absolute prohibition of communication between the two sides. He wouldn't let me use my own cell phone to call and confirm. I said, OK, I know the rules, but please tell the prime minister what I just told you. He said, I will. Two weeks later, the prime minister was in Washington and he invited us to have lunch, had breakfast with him. Over breakfast, he leaned forward and he said, I want you to know the war is over. I want to thank you for making it happen.

GANZGLASS: [00:51:48] That's great.

DAMBACH: [00:51:50] Peace Corps. So we did that.

GANZGLASS: [00:51:54] So conflict resolution on the ground throughout the world.

DAMBACH: [00:51:58] Yeah. And then we did something very similar with the Congo. We brought together and because word kind of spread as to what we were able to do with Ethiopia and Eritrea. And so we were invited to do something similar with the Congo, which of course, had this massive civil war that killed.

GANZGLASS: [00:52:17] But this was no longer through NPCA?

DAMBACH: [00:52:19] It was not. And what we did in Ethiopia and Eritrea, we got a very small grant from the Hewlett Foundation and we did this as volunteers. We didn't get paid a penny to do what we did. But the Hewlett Foundation provided a small grant that covered our travel. So when we went to Asmara and Addis Ababa, it was covered by this small grant from the Hewlett Foundation and we did receptions and so on. Every time they would come to the U.S., we would bring people together to meet with them and so on.

GANZGLASS: [00:52:49] So but it wasn't through the Association.

DAMBACH: [00:52:52] Well, actually, the Association served as the fiscal agent. So it was done through the NPCA that we operated very independently. But the NPCA served as the fiscal agent for the project. And then we did the same thing in the Congo, and the Moore Foundation provided financial support for what we did with the Congo. And there we brought together the leaders of the major rebel groups with the chief advisers to President Kabila and got them to agree to hold something called the Inter-Congolese Dialogue that brought together the rebel groups and the political parties and the business community civil society from throughout Congo to agree to form a coalition government that brought about an end to the large scale civil war. Still dreadful stuff going on in various militias and so on. But the large scale rebellion and civil war is over. And the level of fatalities is down dramatically from what it was. And again, the leaders of those groups credited our group.

GANZGLASS: [00:53:55] So you would argue that a direct response to conflict with Peace Corps volunteers makes sense.

DAMBACH: [00:54:03] It makes sense. It's possible. We've done it. We know it can be done. It can't be done everywhere. But we know it can be done. And then I went from there, a couple of other things, but ended up running something called the Alliance for Peacebuilding, which is the network of people and organizations throughout the world that do conflict resolution, violence prevention, conflict resolution. And a lot of the people in that network are RPCVs.

GANZGLASS: [00:54:39] And they work throughout the world as well?

DAMBACH: [00:54:41] Yeah. And working at all levels, we were fortunate enough to be able to work with the heads of state. A lot of the work of peace building is done at the community level where there are hostilities of ethnic or whatever the nature of the hostilities are. And a lot of the people doing peacebuilding work do it at the community and neighborhood level, which of course is ground zero for Peace Corps people. We feel right at home there.

GANZGLASS: [00:55:07] So it sounds like you never stopped being a Peace Corps volunteer.

DAMBACH: [00:55:10] Never stop being a Peace Corps volunteer.

GANZGLASS: [00:55:12] Just in a different mode.

DAMBACH: [00:55:15] Changed the title.

GANZGLASS: [00:55:16] Change the title but keep doing the same thing.

DAMBACH: [00:55:18] Get paid, sometimes get paid a little bit more. Although a lot of it, I got paid even less than I got paid in the Peace Corps, you know, what we did in Congo and Ethiopia, Eritrea. You didn't paid a penny. You didn't even get a stipend.

GANZGLASS: [00:55:30] Right, right. So do you have any other thoughts about the role of Peace Corps? Well, I mean, this is all third goal. I mean, it's third goal.

DAMBACH: [00:55:40] It's absolutely third goal. And I just am so honored to have had the opportunity to be a Peace Corps volunteer and proud of the community and what we're able to do. Always frustrated that we don't do more. I think we could do more, but certainly proud of what we do and want to make sure we keep it up. Stay together. Maintaining the NPCA and the country groups and the geographic groups, and just recognize that we had the opportunity of a lifetime to be a Peace Corps volunteer. Yes, there is some sacrifice involved in it, but for God's sakes, to get to go off and live in a remote village and learn the language and meet the people and become part of that. What a privilege! And if you have any value set at all as to what that all means, then I would like to think we would all in our own way, in our own communities, in one way or another, to just have that be a part of who we are and what we are, our identity for the rest of our lives.

GANZGLASS: [00:56:47] That sounds like a really good place to end this interview.

DAMBACH: [00:56:50] All right.

GANZGLASS: [00:56:50] Unless there's something else you want to say. But I think that it seemed like a benediction.

DAMBACH: [00:56:56] That will do. I've got hundreds more stories, but that's plenty.

GANZGLASS: [00:56:59] OK, thank you.

[END OF INTERVIEW]