

Joanna Gemmell Oral History Interview
Returned Peace Corps Volunteer Collection
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Biographical Note

Joanna Gemmell served as a Peace Corps volunteer in Honduras from 1969 to 1971 as a nurse.

Access

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Oral History Interview

with

Joanna Gemmell

September 12, 2019
Lesterville, Missouri

By Gail B. Gall

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

GALL: [00:00:02] Great. So this is Gail Gall and I'm interviewing Joanna, better known to her group as Jody Gemmell, who served in Honduras in Group 15 from September 1969 through December 1971. And we are in Lesterville, Missouri, for this interview. And we'll start in a minute. So I take notes on this as I'm going through, because one of the things I have to do is write up an abstract.

GEMMELL: [00:00:41] Well, plus it keeps you in sequence on stuff. Plus, there's a certain way that all everybody answers the same questions in the same sequence or whatever.

GALL: [00:00:50] So this is the first one is, why did you come? Why did you join the Peace Corps?

GEMMELL: [00:00:58] I joined the Peace Corps because I had worked on Robert Kennedy's campaign and was actually at work that night watching the returns from California. And when I saw him shot and killed, I was devastated and felt like I just needed to get out of the country and do something constructive, that the America that was there that time was not something that I recognized.

GALL: [00:01:23] Before you joined the Peace Corps, can you give us a little background about just growing up, your education and experiences that might be relevant?

GEMMELL: [00:01:34] I had a three year scholarship to a diploma School of Nursing in Danbury, Connecticut, had graduated in 1962, had started out on a medicine floor and segued to over to Danbury Hospital's emergency room, which was a fledgling process at that time. It was one of the few emergency rooms that it opened in Connecticut. I was lucky enough while I was working in the emergency room to be part of their team that was set up and did the disaster program and part of the original team that was put together to learn how to do and respond to cardiac arrests in the hospital.

GALL: [00:02:19] Wow, I mean, so that whole cardiac arrest procedure was all developing during the '60s, right?

GEMMELL: [00:02:26] Yeah, I remember the great big huge defibrillators were like the size of small mini refrigerators and everything. Yeah.

GALL: [00:02:35] So how did you hear about the Peace Corps and the process and timing? How did that go?

GEMMELL: [00:02:42] My brother was in the Peace Corps in Thailand at the time. He told me that he was having a great time. He thought it was an answer to my frustration with where things were going in America. So I applied to the Peace Corps I put in for Afghanistan and Micronesia got notified that surprise. We have an opening in Honduras and you have to leave within two weeks. Here's your list. And signed the piece of paper and prepped

myself to leave for Honduras, which I had to look up on a map to find out where it was.

GALL: [00:03:16] So it sounds a little bit like you were more eager to go than to be picky about your country, right? Yeah. Yeah. And. So what it sounds like you reacted when you were accepted by getting ready to go, looking it up in the map. What did your friends and family have to say?

GEMMELL: [00:03:37] I think my friends and family, my family's always been people that have been very involved. My mom was someone who raised all of us to believe that silence was condonement and we were always affected. My mom raised all of us to believe that silence was condonement. So that you were expected to give back to your community and to your family and to others in greater need than you. And it just seemed like a good fit for me at the time.

GALL: [00:04:07] And she didn't mind having two children in the Peace Corps at the same time?

GEMMELL: [00:04:11] No, she was actually. It was, they. She used to say that she had six kids and she couldn't travel. So what she did was she sent her kids out to travel and report back to her.

GALL: [00:04:22] That's a great, great attitude. I think I remember reading your mother. Yeah, yeah, yeah. We'll talk a little bit about training without talking all day about. And who did the training and what was covered in the technical training?

GEMMELL: [00:04:42] Well, the training was kind of loosey goosey, if I remember well. I mean, we had the open air classrooms. They basically concentrated on a lot of the cultural issues in Honduras and the language skills that we would need to go in country. As far as any nursing preparation or any indication for what it would be like to be a nurse in the country of Honduras was not there.

GALL: [00:05:12] So any of the strengths about the training?

GEMMELL: [00:05:15] I think the camaraderie that they build by having people, the volunteers live in the dormitories where you literally had to share everything. You had to rely on each other for a lot of things that you could share your backgrounds and talk with each other was huge. I think there was an amazing bond with this group that I hadn't seen. There were other groups and training at the time, but ours seem to be one that for some reason the chemistry was just right for this group and for everybody in the group.

GALL: [00:05:53] And how in terms of interacting with other volunteers in and host country people during training, let's talk about the other volunteers, because you already mentioned it was a very strong bond. Any particular picture you could draw of that or?

GEMMELL: [00:06:15] I think we all had an ability we stayed up at night and a lot of times in the tienda and talked about everything and what we wanted to do. And I think we all had certain reservations about going into the country. But I saw a lot of independence and a lot of commitment from all of the other members in my group. At the same time, we had a hell of a good time with each other. And I think that went a long way to, you know, a lot of discussion about what were we getting ourselves into and what the heck was going to happen when we got there.

GALL: [00:06:57] So let's go flip ahead a little bit about your entry into the country, and you can give as many as, you know, word pictures of what was the initial reaction to the people, the physical environment, the town, your coworkers?

GEMMELL: [00:07:15] I thought when I arrived and we had a couple of days in San Pedro, in Tegucigalpa, and then we're given the assignments for where you were going, there was not a lot of descriptive. There was no job description associated with where any of us were going as nurses, except I was going to Santa Rosa de Copan. I thought the area was absolutely

beautiful. I love the mountains. I love the higher things. I hate the heat. So in that way, it was a great match to me. There was no director of nursing at the hospital there for me. The director himself, Dr. Picardo, sent a message down to me the night that I arrived that he expected to see me in the morning. I had to walk up to the hospital where I was frankly quite stunned at this one level building what the statue of Jesus that was facing away from the hospital, which should have been my first clue and my introduction to go in. And he gave me a rough tour of the wards, the medicine wards where I two or three patients sleeping to a bed, one room operating room, which was kind of functioning at the time. We had kind of an erratic electrical supply system at that time. And I remember going back to my room that night thinking, I'm not sure that this is really going to work the way that I thought it was going to be. But I'll give it another day and I'll see.

GALL: [00:08:48] And then when?

GEMMELL: [00:08:49] Day by day and day by day.

GALL: [00:08:53] And how did you, so you didn't have actually another nurse co?

GEMMELL: [00:08:59] There were I had no coworker and no other nurse. I was the hardest thing to deal with was the sense of being isolated from any support system. Obviously at that time there were no cell phones. Their TVs were like every now and then somebody would have a television, electricity would go off at night. They would gradually just starting at nine o'clock, you would see the lights just started dimming everywhere. You would know that the electricity was going to be cut off. I had a decent place to live. The local agricultural director, Keoni Lewis, was my landlord. And the barrio women were very kind to me and very helpful to me, but the physical working conditions at the hospital were a real challenge.

GALL: [00:09:54] So the barrio women, people who wouldn't understand what a barrio was and.

GEMMELL: [00:09:59] The neighborhood that I lived. Yeah.

GALL: [00:10:02] And any more about the physical environment of the hospital because?

GEMMELL: [00:10:08] The hospital was the antithesis of anything that you would think of as being a hospital there. We basically had our distilled water came from we connected a piece of plastic, a heavy sheet of plastic, made it into a funnel, put it on the vent system for the autoclave. We would vent the autoclave after sterilizing stuff that would condense on the plastic, it would run down that was our distilled water. The education level of the people that I was trying to work with. The ayudantes and auxiliares was like fourth grade education, which meant that any training you gave, you had to you had to adapt that to their level of education. The most difficult thing was to go from a profession where I was considered really the top of the line into a situation where in the local area that I was in, that hospitals and nurses, especially the nurses, were considered one step above prostitution and were pretty much treated that way within the hospital. That was not. I went from being a very respected member of the medical community to someone who barely was allotted any form of intelligence or respect.

GALL: [00:11:32] Thank you. So let's the in terms of your typical workday, you've given us some, but maybe just run through so people could actually listen to like start and stop and being on duty.

GEMMELL: [00:12:00] Ok, the typical. I average 60 to 80 hours a week. Sometimes you would be off in the evening. It wasn't always a consistent there was no consistent work schedule, but I did start around seven o'clock every morning would make rounds and make sure you don't come in. Any new patients had been in. I would go over and work and check the emergency room. The physicians came in at eight o'clock. They left at noon to go into private practice from noon until the following morning. If there were any issues or anything, I was the person that was basically called in to especially to the emergency room. The hospital was locked. The porter had the key both to the hospital and to the medicines and everything. Um,

we had a TB hospital connected to the back of our hospital, which had about three hundred more patients in it. We had a pediatric ward where the children with kwashiorkor and the severe malnutrition and pica were in. Many of the children were brought in for treatment and then the parents would leave them there trying to find their parents or have their parents come back was often futile.

GALL: [00:13:17] And how many beds were or how many people were maybe in the hospital in Santa Rosa?

GEMMELL: [00:13:25] At times, I have to say, I honestly don't know. We had like the wards were basically no matter whether you are a medical patient, surgical patient or had just delivered, you were in the same wards or two. We had very limited supplies of the needles, had to be sharpened every time, take all the birds off the needles. So that was one of the jobs that we had to do every single day. After you went around and gave everybody their AM medications. They were not doing live caesareans. When I first got there, we routinely did surgery on women, emergency surgeries or c sections of our women, frequently at hemoglobin of four and six. They had suffered multiple, multiple births. It was a difficult we were losing two to three children a day due to malnutrition and dehydration. And it was a, shall we say, a challenging environment to work.

GALL: [00:14:31] And yes, you can. Um, any particular comments about relationships with other countries, nationals, PCVs or Peace Corps staff?

GEMMELL: [00:14:46] Um, I rarely if ever saw Peace Corps staff out at my site. I don't know if it's because I didn't communicate that I had any issues and they forgot where I was or if they figured since I hadn't heard from me that everything was OK. My life saving grace was that there were some of my male Peace Corps volunteers from my group that were stationed around me. And since I had the only hot water shower, they would frequently come in just to take a shower and to touch base with each other. I wished I had had an ability to communicate with the other nurses, especially my friend Barbara, who was up in Santa Barbara at that time, because she

and I, I think we're going through a lot of the same issues. And I would have really been nice to be able to talk to somebody else about what we were dealing with. At the end of my first year in the hospital did send out a physician and his wife who had been on the out political party and had not been allowed to practice medicine. Their power, their political party had come back into power. So Dr. Hillsakka and his wife Herma came in. She was made the director of nursing. She was a very, very hard working, very aggressive, energetic, tiny lady who, because of their just coming back in, was bound to make you determined to make a difference in the hospital. Unfortunately, they had applied for an American visa before coming back to work, had been denied for some reason that was my fault. And she had no respect whatsoever for Americans and the American government and how they did everything. And she made my job, which was already challenging because I had set up another training program at that time. She made that a little more difficult. Mm. She expected me to do that, the training for the artex all day. And then I was frequently put on and assigned as the night supervisor from eleven to seven.

GALL: [00:17:07] Any of that, so that was a little bit of a change in you near did you take any vacation time at all?

GEMMELL: [00:17:18] I had a friend of mine that came down from the states to visit me, and I did take a week with her. When Karen came down, we went up to the north coast. We went up with Jack Talarico and some other people. We went up to La Ceiba and went to the beach. But basically that was the vacation time that I had for my time there. We would go into Teguc. At the end of my first year, I was ordered to do, I spent a couple of days in Teguc. I kind of wandered around because all that all the volunteers were working. I didn't know what to do. So after a couple of days, I just kind of went back to my site.

GALL: [00:18:00] Did you did you extend for a third year?

GEMMELL: [00:18:04] No. At the end of my two years, I contracted malaria. I got some treatment for some malaria, finished my two years. I was felt a little bit at

odds. Richard Nixon was in elected our president. The Vietnam War was going on. I still didn't feel like I needed or wanted to go home yet and basically spent the following year traveling and backpacking down through Central and South America.

GALL: [00:18:38] So if you look back at your service, what do you think your main accomplishments may have been?

GEMMELL: [00:18:46] I would like to think that the operating theater training program that I set up for our techs is actually was the foundation that they've actually built on after I left. I have heard that of a really, really good Peace Corps nurse volunteer, followed me at that site after I had left. And she accomplished many, many things. She got along well with Donna Yarema and they were able to accomplish a lot more than I had ever been able to do. I was happy to say that we actually opened the second recovery room in the whole country. Whether or not that stayed open or not, I don't know. Up until then, the patients did their surgery and then they were just stuck over in the ward post OP. But I think probably the foundation was laid there for someone who had better personal skills than I did with Donna in order to bring to create a much better work environment than the one that I had left on.

GALL: [00:19:57] So how did your Peace Corps experience influence your plans for the future?

GEMMELL: [00:20:04] Well, I looked at the Peace Corps. The problem was that during this time, I had been a political activist and with Richard Nixon in power, I had refused to come home until he was out of office. Mm hmm. So on my way back from my one year of traveling through Central and South America, I ran into two Peace Corps, all retired Peace Corps volunteers who were opening up a Peace Corps training center in Costa Rica. And they offered me the job as the Peace Corps trainer for the women in their program and as the nurse for the program, the training center. And I took that job. And then and that was in Costa Rica, which was a perfect way to

segue from Honduras to Costa Rica, made my reentry back into the states a lot easier.

GALL: [00:20:53] And how long were you in that job?

GEMMELL: Two years.

GALL: Two years. And overall, how do you see so this is a little three part question. So how would you assess your service in light of three goals of Peace Corps? A is to provide technical assistance where requested. B is to promote better understanding of Americans, and C, is to promote better understanding of other people by Americans. So flip to A and think of that a little bit.

GEMMELL: Read that to me again.

GALL: To provide technical assistance where requested.

GEMMELL: [00:21:37] I think I was able to do the technical end of it. I know that I did the work. I know that I set up the OR training program. I know we opened up the recovery room. We also had visitors that came through and would show up suddenly in Santa Rosa, including a dentist from Caremedico. And we went out and did a whole different the surrounding towns where we did dental work, which consisted of pulling buckets of teeth. We had an eye surgeon who came down from New Orleans who came down and for a week we did nothing but straight cataract surgery at the hospital. So we were able to generate some other technical issues besides just the daily work. We were severely limited in equipment. We were severely limited in supplies. We were severely limited in the political climate, the isolation and basically not a lot of government support at that time for health. I'm not sure for part two, I'm not sure I was the best representative of an American in Latin America. I was older, I was 29 when I went in. There are a lot of things that in retrospect, I could have handled a little less aggressively or a little less assertively, shall I say, especially with dealing with my male medical counterparts and stuff.

GEMMELL: [00:23:14] I don't know, though, even today if I went back there, if I would be able to modify myself much more than if I was 50 years ago type of stuff. I think in some ways I was a role model to some of the young women there who saw my ability to not be browbeaten or subservient or whatever to the male medical counterparts. You try to make their lives a little better to give them an example. I enjoyed the Honduran women a lot. When you got them away from the men and you got them alone, they had a great sense of humor, my awe and respect for what they dealt with on a daily basis and kept a sense of humor and their ability to lead their lives was a constant, humbling reminder to me that how actually lucky I had it. I was there for two years and they were going to be there for the rest of their life. Mm hmm.

GALL: [00:24:20] Mm hmm. And then promote better understanding of other people by Americans. So I think it might be clear to say influenced Americans to improve their understanding of other people.

GEMMELL: [00:24:36] I think the ability of any Peace Corps volunteer who's served in a country, I think their ability to go back I work now in situations and you run into people, especially in today's climate, an environment with the person that we have sitting in the White House, the ability to correct or bring people's attention to the fact that what you're hearing coming out of the present administration is not what we saw and we worked with and what we know the people to truly be. You know, I used to say and raise and say to my kids all the time, it's not better. It's, it's not worse. It's different. Mm hmm. And, you know, just because it's American doesn't mean it's the best.

GALL: [00:25:22] Excellent. OK, so have you continued any kind of employment or involvement with your country of service or contact with people from that country?

GEMMELL: [00:25:33] Yes, I have gone back to do medsearch missions in San Pedro Sula with a group called Casa Corazón, which was out of Pennsylvania.

We worked out of Maria Carranza's hospital in San Pedro Sula. We went down to put in shunts for the babies and children with hydrocephalus. We were down there in two oh nine. Unfortunately, with the political climate, the couple of times we've tried to go back again, we have not been able to go back because of the political climate. However, I remain friends with Dr. Ian Miller, who is the head of the neuro surgical unit at the hospital, and we continue to cooperate with her. We try to help her financially. If there's any specific piece of equipment or something that they need, we're happy to stay in contact and help out however we can.

GALL: [00:26:35] Ok, here's the big bucket one boy, what no. You're very eloquent. It's what has been the effect of Peace Corps service on your life.

GEMMELL: [00:26:49] I think it's fair to say, like most of us, that it was a seminal point in our life. I think it was a, it's a focal point that we refer back to frequently. I think the friendships that I made in the Peace Corps, for instance, coming back to my fiftieth reunion here, not having seen people in 50 years, it was like I just saw them. The camaraderie and they shared experiences that you have in that process also gave me a sense of that. Nobody can threaten me with anything anymore. You want to take away my money, you want to take away my house, you want to, you know, been there, done that, survived. And it makes you want to continue the fight.

GALL: [00:27:37] Am I hearing Donna Summer in the background here, We Will Survive?

GEMMELL: Yes, yes.

GALL: Very good. Is there anything else you'd like to add?

GEMMELL: [00:27:50] For all of the ups and downs and everything, I'd really like to thank the Peace Corps for the ability for hiring me and taking me on in the first place. Maybe in retrospect, there nonsupport was actually the best thing they could have done for me, because you have to learn to improvise. You have to learn how to make do you have to learn how to

survive conditions that you didn't think that you could. The friendships that you make and that shared experience is something that is absolutely unique. There's no way that anybody who did not go through that experience can possibly understand your references and what you say. But I think it has a. I'm, I'm stunned at the number of volunteers who come back, who continue to do good for their country and to do good for other people. I mean, I'll bet 80 to 90 percent of them have stayed on and contribute positively and one way or another to making the world a better place.

GALL: [00:28:51] Perfecto.

GEMMELL: It's true, Gall.

GALL: Yeah, no, we have a great group of compatriots here.

GEMMELL: [00:29:02] Yeah, I mean, my brother's tie group, you know, they still get together and they still have their. They just had their 50th year reunion earlier this year. Yeah, he went in like a couple of months before I did. Yeah, and they talk almost the same way that you and I do with their experiences and what it was like. And of course, they're the cultural was very different. That was an Asian culture.

GALL: [00:29:26] Yeah, I know you couldn't read any signs on the road or anything like that.

GEMMELL: [00:29:33] But I found I found the generosity the people in Honduras could have nothing and they would share what little they had with you. Their kindness to you under the most adverse conditions was absolutely amazing to me. It's very humbling.

GALL: [00:29:53] Excellent, excellent. So we're finishing up that interview with Joanna Gemmell, who served in Honduras from 1969 to 1971, and this was conducted by myself, Gail Gall, in Lesterville, Missouri, the 50th anniversary of Group 15.

[END OF INTERVIEW]