

Janet Matts Oral History Interview
Returned Peace Corps Volunteer Collection
Administrative Information

Creator: Janet Matts
Interviewer: Candice Wiggum
Date of Interview: January 21, 2019
Location of Interview: Ringoes, New Jersey
Length: 30 pages

Biographical Note

Janet Matts served as a Peace Corps volunteer in Kenya from 1977 to 1979 as a special education teacher for the mentally disabled.

Access

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Suggested Citation

Janet Matts, recorded interview by Candice Wiggum, January 21, 2019, page #, Returned Peace Corps Volunteer Collection, John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum.

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Oral History Interview

with

Janet Matts

January 21, 2019
Ringo, New Jersey

By Candice Wiggum

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

WIGGUM: [00:00:02] All right. Today is January 21st, 2019. This is Candice Wiggum, and I am interviewing Janet Matts, who was a Peace Corps volunteer in Kenya from 1977 to 1979 as a special education specialist with the mentally handicapped. Welcome.

MATTS: [00:00:24] Thank you.

WIGGUM: [00:00:25] Well, I'll ask the first question, which is why did you decide to join the Peace Corps?

MATTS: [00:00:30] Well, I came from a single parent home and we never really had the opportunity to travel much. And I was kind of fascinated with this big world out there. And I was always kind of fascinated with Africa. And while I was in college, I took a couple of African studies courses. And actually one of my professors, actually two of my professors were former Peace Corps volunteers. And so we got to talking and I realized that there

was this huge country that I knew nothing about. I didn't, you know, other than some names of countries. And I always had wanted to go in the Peace Corps. It was something that was kind of in the back of my mind. And service has always been important. And so I signed up for it. I signed up for it.

MATTS: [00:01:15] And while I was in my senior year of college, I had a couple of, of options. One was to Micronesia, one was to South America. But I really wanted Africa. I really wanted Africa. So I waited until that came up. And actually, it came up, um, just in, in terms of what I was most interested in, because it was a program in special education, and it was working with Kristina Kenyatta [Pratt], the first president Jomo Kenyatta's daughter. And she had gone to Lehigh. I went to Moravian College in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania. And she got her master's in special education and then went back to Kenya and started the Department of Special Education.

MATTS: [00:01:58] So there were five of us that went over. Three of us started a brand new school, and the two other volunteers went to a school existing that was more for the more severely, severely handicapped children.

WIGGUM: [00:02:16] Mm hmm.

MATTS: [00:02:16] So it was exactly the program that I wanted. And it also was a kind of groundbreaking because the attitude towards handicapped children was you, the first born especially, was you kind of hid them away. You kind of, you know, kept them away from things. And my goal was really to, um, change the perception of handicapped children and to show people how, how they could be integrated into the community. And actually, when I got there, I was quite disappointed because I wanted to be out in the bush, I wanted to be in Africa. And we were stationed right outside of Nairobi, which I learned later was really important because that's really where the work needs to start.

WIGGUM: [00:03:00] Mm hmm.

MATTS: [00:03:00] And the parents that, of these children was quite a mix. And it really gave us the opportunity for the, the real work around how you take

the whole issue of handicapped kids and bring that into the community. So, um. So we started a school called Treeside School in Westlands, Nairobi. It was in an old children's church and so they had these tiny little children's pews. And so every Monday morning we would come and move all the pews and have school there. Um, and there were three of us. The one woman was kind of dead set on being the headmistress and doing all this administrative. And we kind of let her do that because the other two of us really wanted to teach.

MATTS: [00:03:44] And I started out with the younger children, but I turned to the adolescent kids because that's where the real work was. And so most of these children were a variety of handicaps. And of course, they didn't have the classifications in Kenya as we do here. A lot of children spoke several languages, of which we didn't know the tribal languages. So whether they had a speech impediment or it was a real speech issue, we had no clue. You know, there were no assessments to assess all these things.

WIGGUM: [00:04:16] Mm hmm.

MATTS: [00:04:16] And so we had children that were, um, mentally, you know, didn't necessarily have full capacity. We had children, we had a couple of children from the Ugandan crisis because Idi Amin had been overthrown. And in fact, two of my students were products of the overthrow and escaping Uganda. So there was a lot of emotional disturbance there. We had children that, um, more on the intellectual mental side as opposed to the physical side. And the other school I talked about, Jacaranda School, kind of had workshops and things for more physically handicapped children.

MATTS: [00:04:54] And so what was really fun for me, especially when I took the older children, was I was doing a lot of life skills. So part of what we did was we did the academics, we did the reading and the math and, but we had a garden at my house. We had a *shamba* that we, you know, grew things. And then every Friday we came to my house and we cooked. So we learned about, uh, using the things in the garden and cooking things. Usually once a week I got them on a bus and we went to Nairobi and I kind of became known as the lady with those crazy kids.

WIGGUM: [00:05:32] Mm hmm.

MATTS: [00:05:32] We'd go to a restaurant and they had to learn how to act appropriately. And I had one, one of my students who was a dear, but he was very loud and very inappropriate. And so he always was kind of embarrassing. But part of me was to show that you don't have to be scared of these children. These children are part of society. And so the program was really about life skills. How do these children become independent and also do the things that are necessary for them to be full functioning, fully functioning.

WIGGUM: [00:06:03] Yeah. What did your, what did your parents and friends think when you let them know that you were going to join the Peace Corps?

MATTS: [00:06:09] Well, I don't think people were surprised because I had talked about it. I think my mother kind of flipped out. Of course, my mom was a single mom and my mother was incredibly strong and incredibly independent and taught us all to be independent. And education was her big thing. And we all went to school, got through school. But two days before I left, I heard her crying and I had never heard my mother cry before. And I walked in and I said, Mom, are you okay? And she said, yes, Janet, I'm okay. And she said, a parent can give their child two things, roots and wings. And she said, I've given you both. And she said, I really want you to go. That's what's important to you.

MATTS: [00:06:54] So I did go. I didn't realize what a toll it took on her while I was away because she hid all of that. But it was very, very difficult for her. Very, very difficult for her. Um. And it was a, you know, during the time I was there, I had two, like two minute phone calls that were very expensive at the time. So there really wasn't any communication. She did come to visit me.

WIGGUM: [00:07:18] Oh, good.

MATTS: [00:07:19] Which was kind of neat, but we had a very unfortunate incident with a friend of mine in Mombasa where she went off on her own and she

was raped. And it was awful. It was awful. And my mother, so I'm part of all this, this friend of mine was very close to me. And so I wanted to be with her and my mother wanted me to come home right away. And I said, no, Mom, I had, I think I had four months to go. I said, no, I have to finish my service. This is what I'm committed to. So we had a little bit of a falling out and a little bit of falling out when I got home. But you could understand from a parent's perspective why that would be. And the friend of mine that this happened to was, was not very smart. I mean, she shouldn't have gone off on her own. So there was some things there that, you had to be careful, be careful as a single woman as you do in most third world countries.

WIGGUM: [00:08:07] Yeah. Yeah.

MATTS: [00:08:08] So, again, I don't think it was a surprise. I think the location was probably a surprise. And I think that, you know, where are you going? Where is that? How far is that? You know, what's that like? Um, it was a very educational opportunity not only for me, but for my community and the people I was associated with, because I wrote lots and lots of letters of which my mother saved every single one of them.

WIGGUM: [00:08:38] Very cool.

MATTS: [00:08:39] And it was really teaching them about this, you know, about Africa and vice versa. One of the things.

WIGGUM: [00:08:46] The third goal of Peace Corps.

MATTS: [00:08:47] Yes, exactly. Exactly. And one of the things I remember the kids couldn't understand was they didn't understand colored leaves. Why would leaves change colors and fall off? And I had somebody send me colored leaves.

WIGGUM: [00:09:04] Uh huh.

MATTS: [00:09:04] And we did the wax paper effects, did the wax paper thing with the leaves, and they couldn't understand why would the NA send pictures?

Why would these trees change colors? They couldn't understand that. They didn't understand snow because the, none of the kids wore shoes. And why would, you know, why, how could it be so cold that you didn't have to wear shoes? And the other odd thing that I think I said a couple of times, because during the rainy season everything was so messy and muddy. And I kept saying, I just wish I had a good vacuum cleaner. And I was explaining to them what a vacuum cleaner was, and they did not get that either. The other thing they thought was really weird was we always wanted to go on a picnic and they thought, why would you pack up all your food, put it in these little boxes, and then go out in the woods? Because that's how they ate all the time.

WIGGUM: [00:09:48] Yeah. Yeah.

MATTS: [00:09:50] So those were some of the things that they thought were a little bit odd and a little bit foreign. And the other thing was we used to give each other haircuts, and that was like a big day at lunchtime. So at lunchtime the kids. And of course the kids, when I first got there, they all looked the same. You know, they all kind of, they were wearing, they had uniforms. The man who started the school wanted the kids to have uniforms like the other schools. And so they all kind of had, you know, real, real short hair. And it was hard to tell, even the boys and the girls, except for the dresses and the.

WIGGUM: [00:10:22] Mm hmm.

MATTS: [00:10:22] And they couldn't understand how our hair would grow. And so they would take samples of it and hold it. And that was like a big deal. Every time somebody was getting a haircut, they'd all get in the circle and watch. I want to collect this hair. And one of my colleagues had blond hair and they thought that was really, really odd. You know, this, this, this different color hair. So, um, but it was a very, very positive. It was a very positive experience.

WIGGUM: [00:10:47] Oh, good.

MATTS: [00:10:47] It's very positive.

WIGGUM: [00:10:48] What was training like for you? What did you go through for training?

MATTS: [00:10:51] Training was quite good. It was quite extensive. We spent, I think it was. I think it was, I don't, can't remember if it was four or six weeks at George Peabody College in Nashville, Tennessee, which now is part of Vanderbilt. But at the time it's where all the assessments came out for special education, the George Peabody assessments.

WIGGUM: [00:11:13] So this was the five of you who ended up?

MATTS: [00:11:14] No, actually it was the whole group. It was the five of us, plus most of them were education or ag volunteers. Mostly education, mostly math. Most, mostly math and science teachers. But they had it at George Peabody. And I mean, I was thrilled because it was just such a cool school. And we got some really neat experiences, you know, in terms of practicals and things.

WIGGUM: [00:11:35] How big was your group?

MATTS: [00:11:37] I think we were about, I want to say about 24, 25. So it was a nice size. Like we were always sort of out in the corner because the bigger group was, you know, the math and science teachers.

WIGGUM: [00:11:50] Mm hmm.

MATTS: [00:11:50] So we were always kind of doing a little bit of special program off to the side a little bit. But I think the training was good. I think we, um, I felt that the special education aspect was new. I think it was a new program for the Peace Corps. So I think they invested some time into that. I do remember the vaccinations we had to get, and my roommate had a huge reaction because they were using duck embryo for the first time and she passed out and I didn't know what to do. And it was, you know, so I was a little concerned with what was that vaccination and why didn't they check on that a little bit more before we, before we got that.

WIGGUM: [00:12:29] Mm hmm.

MATTS: [00:12:29] But so we had the training there and then we got over to Kenya and we had another, I think it was another three weeks at Kenya Science Teachers College. And that was mostly language. That was really the culture and the language. And when I got there to Kenya, I got horrible dysentery. And I don't even remember the first three days because all I did was throw up and poop for.

WIGGUM: [00:12:52] Yeah, ugh.

MATTS: [00:12:53] It was terrible. It was. And I thought I was dying. I just wanted to go home. So the very first, like it was probably like the first week there I don't remember.

WIGGUM: [00:13:00] Welcome to Kenya.

MATTS: [00:13:01] Yeah, yeah, I couldn't, I, I don't even remember. And I remember being dropped off, um, at this little flat. We didn't live with families, those of us that were part of the school. We lived in this little complex. And I remember I had this trunk that I brought when I was at the, um, at the airport. I had a backpack and it was an old Boy Scout backpack and it was packed. And I had a trunk that I brought. And I remember going to take the backpack off to weigh it. And I fell. And I was, I couldn't get up it was so heavy. And the thing was moving underneath and it was tickling me. I was laughing and I could not get up, I remember. And I didn't know anybody at the time, but people remember that at the airport there was this woman laying there laughing.

MATTS: [00:13:49] And then I remember they dropped me off at this little flat and they put my, you know, my backpack and my trunk down. And there I was by myself. And outside there was this big Maasai warrior guard, you know, that walked around the complex. And I thought, what the heck am I doing? You know, it was a little bit, a little bit unnerving because you were by yourself, you know, it wasn't like you were with a family and all of a sudden, you know.

WIGGUM: [00:14:12] So all the 20 some odd that were in your group were all had their own little flat?

MATTS: [00:14:17] No, no. That, the group, the teachers all went up country.

WIGGUM: [00:14:23] Okay.

MATTS: [00:14:23] They all went up country and they either had housing at the school or they stayed with a family. So they had the typical Peace Corps experience, because this was outside of Nairobi.

WIGGUM: [00:14:33] So this was your five that were the special?

MATTS: [00:14:35] Yeah, well, we all weren't there. Three. There were, there were the three of us that were at, we had to choose the school. And once we chose that school, we lived in this flat. There were probably about 12 units near the school.

WIGGUM: [00:14:49] So this was after the language training?

MATTS: [00:14:51] Yes, yes, yes.

WIGGUM: [00:14:52] Okay. That's, that's where I was a little confused.

MATTS: [00:14:54] Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah. So that was after, after the, after the language training and after the, that was the first days, you know, when you're kind of on your own. But the training I thought was, um, was worthwhile. And I think they, I think they did a good job of, of kind of keeping us together as a group and also kind of giving us, you know, we did a lot of Swahili training and we did a lot of cultural training.

WIGGUM: [00:15:20] So Swahili was the.

MATTS: [00:15:22] Well, they spoke English because it was a British colony. So it wasn't like you had to speak, you know. But the kids all knew Swahili. And there are about 42, I think, tribal languages. So most of these kids could speak other languages, but most people could speak Swahili. So you

really had to know Swahili and English, because a lot of people spoke English as well. So it was kind of a combination. But the interesting thing was that the, um, the assessments and all when we got to the school, there wasn't anything. So all of us said, you know, you know.

WIGGUM: [00:15:56] Here's the kids.

MATTS: [00:15:57] Yeah, right. And you know, you know of other assessments and personality. But, but none of that had any significance. And we took, we all brought all that not thinking. So we're saying, okay, if the kid had to identify, is this a television? Well, they wouldn't know, you know. So we, actually one of the side things that we'd do, one the fun things was we developed our own assessments based on Swahili, which was kind of fun, you know, where we tried to.

WIGGUM: [00:16:21] More culturally sensitive.

MATTS: [00:16:22] Yeah, yeah, yeah. So we kind of tried to, um, and it was, uh, it was a real mix. It wasn't like one, one identification or category. You know, we had one child that was, you know, quite, quite visually impaired. Um. And we had, like I said, we had Ugandan crisis kids. We had kids that, that, um, mentally, you know, weren't, weren't up to, you know, developmentally delayed. Didn't have a lot of physically handicapped kids because, again, the site that we were at wasn't, you know, it wasn't set up for that. It was.

WIGGUM: [00:16:59] Now, did you have a specific counterpart that you worked with or was there a group of locals that were?

MATTS: [00:17:07] We did, what the plan was, was to train. We had teachers aides, so we had two teachers aides. And the plan was to teach them and then also teach at the college to try to teach training teachers, because the whole idea was from there to grow the program, which it did grow. It did grow. And the other school was really more of a workshop and we didn't really have that purpose. There were really people there that sort of custodially took care of the kids and did, you know, jewelry making and things like that. So this had a little bit different focus.

MATTS: [00:17:38] Mr. Menya, who was the Kenyan who had a handicapped daughter, Ava, he wanted a school for her and he knew that the other school wasn't the right school for her. So he invested in this school and actually contributed a lot of his own money. It wasn't a government school. It was, was one of these what they call Harambee schools, which is let's all pull together. That's what that means in Swahili. And there's a lot of, in Kenya education is very important and there are government schools. But if there's not enough government schools, then parents form together and they form these Harambee schools. And what happens is they, you know, the teaching is not top notch. I mean, it could be a kid that just finished eighth grade is now teaching kids.

WIGGUM: [00:18:26] Yeah.

MATTS: [00:18:27] But there's a lot of them around. And so this school was kind of like that. But he also had funding, he had some money, and he also wanted to engage the group of parents in this whole effort. So he was more. And of course, Kristina Kenyatta was involved.

WIGGUM: [00:18:42] Yeah, that's what I was going to ask you next to us, was whether you worked directly with Kristina Kenyatta.

MATTS: [00:18:48] We did some with her. I mean, she was, you know, she wanted us to create, part of our goal was to create a curriculum and to create a process and assessments around all of this. We also worked with Eunice Kennedy Shriver. We started, I started a Special Olympics chapter, which was really cool. I mean, I never would've been able to do that. I mean, she actually came over to Kenya.

WIGGUM: [00:19:10] Yeah.

MATTS: [00:19:11] When we started the chapter, so that was really cool. That was really cool.

WIGGUM: [00:19:14] Had Sargent passed away by then?

MATTS: [00:19:16] Uh, I don't think so. I don't think so. He was still around.

WIGGUM: [00:19:19] Yeah.

MATTS: [00:19:19] But she was kind of taking on the reins of all of that.

WIGGUM: [00:19:22] Nice.

MATTS: [00:19:23] So it was really, you know, for, for a project, you know, you couldn't, I couldn't touch anything like that. And to be at that kind of beginning ground level. And the school had since, you know, evolved and turned into probably 100 schools across, across the, across the country, you know, just in terms of a similar pattern and, you know, training teachers, etcetera. It was interesting to train the teachers because their educational system, the British system, it was not the Socratic, you know, teaching here. So they wanted, they wanted us to write a book about if the kid did this, like a recipe.

WIGGUM: [00:20:00] Yeah.

MATTS: [00:20:00] And of course, special education isn't like that.

WIGGUM: [00:20:03] Yeah.

MATTS: [00:20:03] And it was very, it was difficult to. First of all, you had to kind of go back and help them understand that, you know, everything doesn't have an answer and everything isn't like a recipe. Um, and so you have to kind of, um, use some of what you know. But then also what, what, what are you faced with at that time?

WIGGUM: [00:20:23] Yeah, because every kid is different and every disability that they're experiencing.

MATTS: [00:20:27] And this was a combination. So it wasn't like here where everything's all mapped out and you could kind of figure out, it was sort of a mishmash. And some of the kids, I had a young woman who went back who actually went on to public school and actually ended up going to their

secondary school. One of the, um, a couple of my students did get jobs, you know, kind of low skill jobs. The Ugandan children were the biggest challenge. And in fact, the two children there that I kind of harbored, and I look at it now, which was not a really wise thing to do, but what did I know at the time? Their father was involved with the Idi Amin overthrow, so they were out to find him. So they often came to the school and did kind of a shakedown looking for the kids.

WIGGUM: [00:21:13] Hmm.

MATTS: [00:21:14] And we kind of got wind of when that was happening. And since I lived close to the school, I would take them over to my house and hide them, which again, I could have been in huge trouble. You know, that was not, that was kind of a stupid thing to do. But I was not going to let those kids get hurt. And the mother knew that, she was very frightened. And so they spent a lot of time staying at my house. And they were, especially the young boy, he had seen so much violence. And he would have, you know, visions and he'd just like flip out periodically. So that was a, you know, how do you calm him down? How do you, you know, help him understand that that's not necessarily reality? That's not necessarily, um.

MATTS: [00:21:52] So it was a combination, a combination of, of children. And we had a couple of Indian children, there was quite a bit of Indians in Kenya. But it was a nice, it was a nice amount of children. It was a nice mixture of children. And it was challenging. It was challenging.

WIGGUM: [00:22:12] Yeah, I can imagine it was really challenging.

MATTS: [00:22:14] And we really broke the kids into two classes, you know, the older kids and the younger kids. It wasn't so much the disabilities. And some things overlap, but we had, you know, we had kids that were five and six years old and we had, you know, you know, the oldest was 16. So it was a real, you know, mix, a really wide, wide spread of kids. So, um, so we did our best.

WIGGUM: [00:22:39] As we do. What was your day-to-day life like? Like, like for cooking or for shopping or for just washing?

MATTS: [00:22:47] Actually, it wasn't, I mean, it was not a hardship post. I mean, you lived in a flat. You had a rain tank, so you had running water, you know. You had electricity periodically. It would come on for a couple of hours at night. And the rest of the time you used a gas lantern, which was okay. Um. There was a grocery store within walking distance and, um, ate a lot of rice, pineapple, bananas. I became a vegetarian there just because of the way that things were killed and later in the marketplace. So I was not into goat meat. And I did have a cat that I rescued who, you know, got goat meat. She was very happy with that, I imagine. And she became pregnant.

MATTS: [00:23:39] She was actually was given to me by a student because they rescued her from a dog or something outside. Anyway, long story short, she was not supposed to get pregnant. And she did. And so and she was a midget and she had a very strong Siamese, Siamese meow, which is what all the cats in Africa have. And she started to give birth. I took her to the vet and he said, you know, she wasn't supposed to get pregnant, but she went out one night and did. And I just never forget taking. She had, I had a neighbor who was a pediatrician at the hospital, and she went into labor and she was screeching and screeching. So I went over and got him and he said, Janet, I know how to deliver babies, but I don't know about kittens.

MATTS: [00:24:21] Well, she had a breech birth of the first one and the head was stuck. So we were trying to get the head out. So we finally did. The next one started and that was like 8 hours later.

WIGGUM: [00:24:30] Oh my gosh.

MATTS: [00:24:31] So I got, I put her in a basket and I walked, it was probably four miles.

WIGGUM: [00:24:35] Wow.

MATTS: [00:24:35] With the screaming cat in the basket. And then we got to the vet and she gave birth to the second one and she had two more in her that

were all stillborn and I was a wreck. And the next day the cat was fine. But we had a lot of rescues. We also rescued a rabbit. So the rabbit and the cat became really good friends. And then people would give me chickens when my mother was coming, and they wanted me to kill the chickens to eat them. And I couldn't. So I built a pen in the back. So 6:00 every night I'd open the gate and they'd fly up on the tree to stay safe. And we had eggs every day.

WIGGUM: [00:25:10] Mm hmm.

MATTS: [00:25:11] We had eggs every day. So it was a little farm over there. Um, so my day-to-day was, was not bad at all. It was kind of an A-frame house. So it was a, a small kitchen with a small gas cooker and water, you know, that came from the rain tank. Toilet flushed periodically. It was kind of off and on, if you poured a little bucket of water in there you could help with that. So we didn't have an outhouse like a lot of people did. Um. We were fairly close to the school. It was probably about a 15 minute walk. So that was fairly close by. And you were right outside Nairobi, so you could go into Nairobi fairly, fairly easily.

MATTS: [00:25:57] I tried to stay pretty low keyed and also focused on the program and not so much the Peace Corps, because everybody and his brother wanted to stay with you on the weekends because everybody wanted to come into Nairobi. And in the beginning, that was okay. But then it got old real quick. People would just come and stay and, you know, you know, eat your food and everything else. And I realized I didn't want a Peace Corps experience. I wanted a Kenyan experience. So I kind of backed off on some of that and made friends with the local, you know, local people. And, you know, my colleagues at work and, you know, other people in the, in the neighborhood.

WIGGUM: [00:26:37] Mm hmm.

MATTS: [00:26:37] So it was, I remember a Thanksgiving I had. And it was just so, so precious because I invited all these people and we got a turkey from the embassy. And this friend of mine made this homemade eggnog. And it was just this, it was this wonderful, wonderful night with all these people,

all these Kenyans, and all this, you know, and teaching them. And I made pawpaw pie because they couldn't get apples. And so all the recipes, you know, you adapted them. But it was just such a beautiful, you know, opportunity.

WIGGUM: [00:27:04] Yeah.

MATTS: [00:27:05] The other holidays we usually spent at the orphanage, there were two orphanages, so we usually spent time there. And we, I remember giving gifts to the kids and they didn't know what to do with them, whether they should, you know, they were bought. And what do you do with this? And you have the show and they took the paper off.

MATTS: [00:27:19] And I also did a lot of child, maternal and child health care. So there were a lot of underweight babies. And so I was involved with some of the programs at the hospital with underweight kids and nutrition and that sort of thing. And so I had a wonderful woman who made a food, food chart for me. She stitched the whole thing, which I still have, with the food groups. And they also had a group that was bugs, you know, that was protein, that was a protein groups. So that was one of the, um.

MATTS: [00:27:47] So I worked a lot. I probably worked a lot more than my, my other Peace Corps friends. They had a system which was three months on and then a month off. So it was really kind of a nice system. So people were always going on vacations. And some of those vacations I worked or did volunteer work. And sometimes we traveled, sometimes, you know, I'd travel with them.

WIGGUM: [00:28:09] Where did you travel?

MATTS: [00:28:10] Mostly in Kenya. Mostly in Kenya. We went into Tanzania. Uh, we, you know, did the whole Mount Kenya hike. We did the game parks and. And then visiting volunteers within, within Kenya, you know, mostly, mostly in Kenya, I pretty much stayed. And of course, the Seychelles was right nearby and Mombasa on the coast. And, you know, so there was plenty of places, plenty of nice places to go and visit and explore. But most of the time was spent, most of that time was spent in Kenya.

WIGGUM: [00:28:42] Now, you said that there was a Maasai that, that guarded the complex that you stayed in and that one of your Peace Corps friends got raped while she was there. Did anything frightening happen to you? Was there any time that you were concerned about your safety?

MATTS: [00:28:59] Um, yeah, a couple of times. I remember, um, this Maasai. There were two. They would come and they also went in my backyard because I was like the end unit. And they'd make a fire and they'd do that crazy jumping.

WIGGUM: [00:29:13] Mm hmm.

MATTS: [00:29:13] And I was, I was scared of them. And they were these big tall. But they'd come to collect money. And I didn't know if they were really guarding us or they just wanted the money. So I was a little nervous about that, you know. And then and they were always in my backyard, you know, and I kept the curtains closed. And so that made me a little bit uneasy.

MATTS: [00:29:29] I also had an experience with one of my colleagues' parents came to visit and we all went into Nairobi for dinner. And that night we took a cab home and the guy dropped us off and I was the last one because I lived the furthest. And we drove through the middle of town where all the government buildings are, and we got stopped and were told to get out of the car and this guy put a gun in the back of my back. And I thought, oh my gosh. And the guy was talking to him not in Swahili, in another language. And I kept saying to the driver, what does he want? What does he want? If he wants money, I have money. But how much does he want? And it ended up, we ended up giving him 40 bucks and he let us go. But that was very scary because you talk about a Kenyan prison, you just don't want to be there. And when the guy, you know, I was kind of casual about the whole thing. When the guy put the gun in my back, I was like, whoa.

MATTS: [00:30:26] So that was scary. That was scary. And that made me, you know, concerned. And then when this friend of mine went off on her own and she was exploring some caves in Mombasa, it was a stupid thing for

her to do. But also I realized that it's not so safe to, you know, to be on your own, and you really do. I was a pretty good volunteer. I mean, I took my malaria pills. A lot of people didn't. And I paid attention to my health. You know, I paid attention to my safety. You know, I wasn't, you know, I mean, we did a couple of things that looking back on now, I don't think were the smartest things, you know. But on the whole, you know, I wasn't so carefree that, you know, and invincible.

WIGGUM: [00:31:06] Did you report the incident to Peace Corps? How did they respond to it? If you did.

MATTS: [00:31:11] Well, again, the woman that this happened to. What, the incident in the?

WIGGUM: [00:31:16] No, with the cab.

MATTS: [00:31:17] No, I never did. I never did. I don't know why I never did. And I don't know what it was. I just kind of thought, you know, I was just happy to be alive and, you know.

WIGGUM: [00:31:26] Yeah. Yeah.

MATTS: [00:31:27] So, no, I never did because, you know, I'm just thinking of it now. I should have.

WIGGUM: [00:31:32] Did you have any other health scares while you're over there other than the horrible dysentery when you first arrived?

MATTS: [00:31:37] Not a whole lot. No, no. I had pretty good health while I was there. Um, you know, I was careful with what I ate and I was careful with, with, um, you know, making sure things were washed and stuff. So, no, I mean, occasionally, I'm trying to think. Nothing like, you know, other than maybe an upset stomach once in a while or, you know, like stuff people get, you know, here as well. But nothing very serious. You know, there were people. We had a woman, an older woman, who was diagnosed with cancer, and she had to go home early. And we had a couple of people that got severe cases of malaria. But again, that was stupid. They didn't

take the malaria pills. And then when they got home also they had continuing bouts with it.

MATTS: [00:32:23] So I was pretty good. And then even with the health care, you know, you could go down to the Peace Corps office and you kind of did your own blood work. You know, you prick yourself, you put your thing in, and put it in the. And so you were really the captain of your own health. And they gave us that book, which I think is a wonderful book. I don't know if they still do, Where There Is No Doctor. It's a great book. It's a great book.

WIGGUM: [00:32:43] No, I've heard about it but.

MATTS: [00:32:44] It's that book and it's also, um, the cookbook they gave us that I still use to this day. Um, it's a fantastic cookbook. It's a Mennonite cookbook. More With Less. And it's in its third publication now. In fact, I just bought a new copy because my other one was so war torn, you know. But that's such a great cookbook.

WIGGUM: [00:33:05] Yeah.

MATTS: [00:33:06] But those two books were, you know. So no, you were pretty much in charge of your own health if you, you know, if you chose to do that and if you paid attention to that. So I don't remember any, any significant health issues.

WIGGUM: [00:33:17] What was probably the most surprising thing that happened to you or the most awe inspiring? What was the, what was something that you hadn't expected that might have happened?

MATTS: [00:33:30] Something that I didn't expect. Um. I think I, I didn't. I didn't realize the impacts of what we were doing. And I didn't realize until after I got home and kept, you know, and kept in touch with people that the impact of the work and the parents and the fact, and really thought about the Eunice Kennedy Shriver. And, you know, at that time, it was not like a big deal. It was just part of what we do.

WIGGUM: [00:34:06] Mm hmm.

MATTS: [00:34:06] And when I look at the scope of the program and the ability, that was my field and I thought, who could ever touch this kind of experience? And who could ever make that difference in a third world, in a small school, that could really have an impact? And the program did spread out across the country. And, you know, it trained teachers and they were taught at the teachers, the teachers college. So I guess the impact of the work itself didn't really hit me till after I had been home for a while.

WIGGUM: [00:34:40] Mm hmm.

MATTS: [00:34:40] I mean, I think that was probably the biggest, the biggest surprise. The other surprise was, um, Africa. I think Africa. What people say is it becomes a part of you. And it does. It's, you know, they talk about Mother Earth and the, um, the land and the people and the fact that you, um, it becomes part of your soul. It's, it's hard to explain. It's, it's, um, it's a very beautiful place and it's a very, um, very much tied to the earth and, uh. And even the animals in all the children's fairytales, not fairy tales, they're animal tales, are tied to why the giraffe has a long neck or why the elephant has a trunk. You know, there's all these wonderful stories. You know, why one of the bridges has a ridge is because the giraffe leaned his head on it and stayed there one night.

MATTS: [00:35:41] And so the richness around nature and the richness around the environment. And I think what surprised me also was how a country the size of Texas could have so much diversity. You know, 40 some languages and so many different tribes and, um, so many different. And the tribalism, the tribalism has affected me. You know, as you take a look at what's happened over the years with the country. And I realized that one of the things that makes the United States the United States is that we all speak the same language, because that's such a huge barrier, and that we all kind of, well, today's probably a little different, but we're all Americans and we're all kind of one big tribe where we were, that was how we were founded.

MATTS: [00:36:35] And there really is a lot of tribalism in Africa, and it's a big, big cause for a lot of the angst and a lot of the who's in power. The other thing that was significant was Jomo Kenyatta died while I was there, which was huge. And we had an evacuation plan because they thought there would be all of this unrest and we were all prepared to go home about a year, probably a year and two months into my. And what happens, it was very peaceful. It was a very peaceful, um.

WIGGUM: [00:37:03] Power transition?

MATTS: [00:37:05] Yeah, very peaceful. Um, Idi Amin was overthrown while I was there, so there was a lot of turmoil. So when I look back at history in terms of the, the events that happened, they were pretty significant events.

WIGGUM: [00:37:18] Yeah, huge ones.

MATTS: [00:37:19] And the other thing about the training, which also inspired me, and I don't know if they still do it, we had a lot of history we had to learn. We had to learn a lot of African history. We had to read a lot of books, you know, now classic, you know, not yet a ruin. And then I took African studies before I left.

WIGGUM: [00:37:37] Yeah. Yeah.

MATTS: [00:37:38] So what was really cool was having an understanding of the history and understanding so that by the time this election came, you could understand the, the differences. You know, and as I'm talking, the other thing that really, really hit home to me and to this day, every time the American flag goes up, I cry. Because you couldn't talk about politics. You couldn't talk about and you couldn't talk about, you know, you're in a room and you were taught don't say anything because somebody could come in and take you out.

WIGGUM: [00:38:05] Yeah.

MATTS: [00:38:05] So you really didn't have freedom of speech. You didn't talk politics, you didn't talk about what was, you know, who you were for or

what you were, you know. So I was very aware of that while I was there. And I came back thinking, wow, we have so many freedoms that just are just so taken for granted. And I get so mad at people when they don't vote. I get so mad and I just realize what that took to get that and the, the freedom of speech. And then the abuse of all of that now, you know, is just, it's, it's. You know, it's one of those things that you just, you don't realize until you don't have it.

WIGGUM: [00:38:41] Yeah.

MATTS: [00:38:42] You know, you don't realize. And I think that's the Peace Corps experience. I think the Peace Corps experience is we're all touched by how fortunate we are in this country.

WIGGUM: [00:38:51] Oh, yeah. I think it makes everybody reflect.

MATTS: [00:38:53] I think it's a big part of, and I think that's the big, the big opportunity with the Peace Corps. I mean, I gained more than I gave. I always say that. It made me the person I am today. And it also has given me and, you know, an incredible perspective around the world and people and I think that's the true. I mean, I was fortunate. There are a lot of people that did not have good experiences, you know, that were volunteers that waited a long time to get posted or were injured. I had a really good friend of mine, she was up in Boston. She had a very strong Boston accent, and they placed her in Mombasa. And she's red haired and freckled. And kwashiorkor is a disease of, you know?

WIGGUM: [00:39:37] Yeah, a nutritional.

MATTS: [00:39:37] A nutritional disease. And they thought she had that because she had the red hair and freckles. And they couldn't understand her. They couldn't understand her English because she had the accent. So they, they stoned her. They kept throwing stones at her. And at one point she wore a boubou just to cover herself up. She had a hard time. It was eventually they, they warmed up to her, but it was, you know, um.

MATTS: [00:39:57] And then there were people that, you know, came into the Peace Corps because they wanted to travel and they wanted to, you know, kind of take advantage of the system. And, you know, they weren't there for the real work. They were there for a free ride and they were there for the bird watching, you know, see the safaris. And, you know, so I think it's all different, um, different experiences. I feel very, very fortunate to have had a really good experience and to have one that I think was very meaningful. But I also dove into it with two feet and two hands.

WIGGUM: [00:40:27] Yeah.

MATTS: [00:40:27] And, you know, I was very committed, very committed. And I had planned on staying a third year, but after this whole thing happened in Mombasa, I had to come home. I couldn't.

WIGGUM: [00:40:37] Yeah. Yeah. When, when you were in training, did you live with a family then?

MATTS: [00:40:43] No, we never did. We, in Nashville, we stayed in the dorms and at Kenya Science Teachers College we stayed in the dorms, so we never had that opportunity.

WIGGUM: [00:40:53] So you never had the chance?

MATTS: [00:40:54] No. That was the one thing I wish we would have had. You know, I had, I did, was very close to my parents in the school. And I was, you know, went to dinner a lot and was at their homes and stuff. So I had the experience there.

WIGGUM: [00:41:07] In the homes.

MATTS: [00:41:07] In the homes, but not necessarily living in a home and being part of a family. We didn't have that experience, which was a little bit different.

WIGGUM: [00:41:14] What was it like for you as it approached time to leave?

MATTS: [00:41:19] What was really important to me was that I left things in a place where the, the Kenyans could take over. It was very, very important to me. And I didn't want, I wanted to stay another year to ensure all of that. And I had been involved with a number of things. My counterparts were leaving and the friend of mine that had had the unfortunate experience left early. And she was also incredibly committed. Um. And I wanted to stay a little bit longer because everybody was leaving and everybody was leaving. But I also did know that we had done the training and we had left things in a good space. We actually built a building while we were there.

WIGGUM: [00:42:02] Wow.

MATTS: [00:42:03] You know, like a little admin building next to the church. So we had a little office and a bathroom.

WIGGUM: [00:42:08] Where did you get the funding?

MATTS: [00:42:10] This guy. This guy.

WIGGUM: [00:42:12] This same guy?

MATTS: [00:42:12] Yeah, same guy. You know, he, you know, he actually, you know, had the. And actually the volunteers that came after us, they helped with that as well. You know, when we saw that building go up, it was. But it was a. And the, um. It was in, you know, the woman that that kind of took over had been with us the whole time.

WIGGUM: [00:42:37] Yeah.

MATTS: [00:42:38] And she had started out as kind of a quiet teacher's aide.

WIGGUM: [00:42:41] Yeah.

MATTS: [00:42:41] But, you know, she was ready. She was ready. So.

WIGGUM: [00:42:44] Nice.

MATTS: [00:42:45] It was. I wanted to stay a little bit longer, at least six months. But it was also okay.

WIGGUM: [00:42:53] Yeah.

MATTS: [00:42:53] It was okay to go. It was okay to go.

WIGGUM: [00:42:55] And what was it like when you got home?

MATTS: [00:42:58] Well, we traveled, three of us traveled on the way home to Poland and Russia.

WIGGUM: [00:43:04] Mm hmm.

MATTS: [00:43:05] So we spent about four weeks. And what happened when we were in Poland, uh, my colleagues went on to Ireland, and I was done. It was right before Christmas, and I wanted to go home. And the flights were canceled. And I had sent wires home to let my family know that, you know, the flight was canceled and I would be on another flight, which they never got.

WIGGUM: [00:43:26] Oh, dear.

MATTS: [00:43:26] So they were panicked for a week and a half, going back and forth to every flight. I had no idea. You know, I had sent the telegram.

WIGGUM: [00:43:34] You'd let them know.

MATTS: [00:43:35] But they never got this. So by the time I got home, everybody was very, very relieved and I was very glad to be home. Um, the readjustment was, was not the best. It was very difficult to readjust. It seemed like the food store was really hard for me to go into. It just seemed so loud. There were so many choices. I just couldn't do it for a good month. You know, you wanted soap powder. It wasn't OMO, which was their soap powder.

WIGGUM: [00:44:04] Yeah.

MATTS: [00:44:04] It was 15 brands. And, you know. Um. You know, I missed The New York Times. When I opened it, there were so many articles and so much, you know, so much to read. It was, um. I, everything seemed noisy, you know, the television seemed noisy, the doorbell seemed noisy. And of course, you know, I had left right after college. So all of my colleagues were into their careers and raising families and. And everybody had their little postage stamp, you know, house and car and plot of land and, you know, and I felt lost. I felt lost. And of course, everybody would listen to my story for about 30 minutes and then it was, okay, let's get to the real, you know, the real world. So I had a difficult adjustment.

MATTS: [00:44:43] I went back and did some volunteer substitute teaching. I had a hard time finding a job initially, teaching at the time I got back was not easy to get into.

WIGGUM: [00:44:55] Mm hmm.

MATTS: [00:44:55] And I went back and lived in Bethlehem for a while and stayed with my professor and his wife, who had both been volunteers, and did some substitute teaching. And then I did a, um, I taught gifted and talented kids, and I did this whole Africa program that I did on Africa and, you know, all these things I brought back, you know, the instruments and the pottery and all those kinds of things. But it was not, it was, it was very hard. It was very hard. I felt very alone. I didn't think I fit in. I didn't know, um. I knew I wasn't going back, but I didn't seem like I fit in here either.

WIGGUM: [00:45:37] Mm hmm.

MATTS: [00:45:37] And it was an adjustment. It was an adjustment. And when I work with younger volunteers now, people going over, I let them know that that's. Now it's a little easier because at least you have some connection and email and, you know, you can use more education going on. But at that time you were completely cut off and people's lives had moved on. And I had missed significant friends' weddings and babies and things like that. So it was, it was, um, it was hard.

WIGGUM: [00:46:05] It seems like also you had such a responsible job in the Peace Corps and then coming back, you were viewed as an unexperienced beginner.

MATTS: [00:46:14] Exactly. Exactly.

WIGGUM: [00:46:14] And that would be.

MATTS: [00:46:15] That's exactly right. That's exactly right. And I've always been a pretty serious person about my work and my passion and commitments. And even in college, I was a, I wanted to go to a college that we couldn't afford. And my mother went to financial aid and said, my daughter will do anything possible to go to school here. And I ended up with four jobs and was a resident director and had a lot of responsibility that college kids don't typically have. So that's always kind of been who I am.

WIGGUM: [00:46:42] Mm hmm.

MATTS: [00:46:43] But to your point, I wanted so much to take this experience and share it.

WIGGUM: [00:46:47] Mm hmm.

MATTS: [00:46:47] And yet, you know, you know, there was limited, limited interest. It was limited. And it took me, I finally did end up getting a teaching job up in upstate New York. Um. But it, and I took the experience and did, you know, workshops. I also did a big book drive with the New Jersey Returned Peace Corps Volunteers, and we sent two tons of books to Black South Africa to Chief Luthuli when he was looking for texts. We had to go through the textbooks and make sure there was no, you know, yards and feet and old history and all that kind of stuff.

WIGGUM: [00:47:21] Yeah.

MATTS: [00:47:21] So I kept involved with things like that, and I was very committed. I did these Read for Africa read-a-thons where I'd connect the teachers at the school with kids and they had like a pen pal. And they

would, kids here would send them their favorite book. And then we raised, they did a read-a-thon. So we raised money to send books to the kids. So things like that. I stayed pretty, pretty engaged and involved in those kinds of projects for quite a long time.

WIGGUM: [00:47:47] Yeah, good.

MATTS: [00:47:48] For quite a while so.

WIGGUM: [00:47:51] Is there something you'd like to tell people about Peace Corps or your experience that you think is particularly important for folks to know?

MATTS: [00:48:01] I think Peace Corps is something that everybody should experience to some degree. It doesn't have to be Peace Corps. It needs to be an experience in another part of the world, preferably a third world country, but not everybody can handle the difficulties there. I think the opportunity gives you a global perspective on appreciation for the values and the commitments that democracy stands for and the United States of America stands for. I think it gives you perspective about how we're viewed, um, and how what we, who we are is not superior or better, that we're all people, that we all have the need to love and to be loved. And we all have the desire to make a difference.

WIGGUM: [00:48:55] Mm hmm.

MATTS: [00:48:56] And it doesn't matter who you are and how big your job is or how much you get paid or how old or young you are, it's all the same. And I think it's a fantastic experience whether you do it when you're younger and, you know, you don't have the commitments and the ties and, you know, coming out of school was that for me. I think if you can do it when you're older, all the better, because you have that life experience and you can give back in those ways. And I think having an experience that's more than a two week vacation or a two week volunteer project really gives you, gives you the opportunity to become much more aware of yourself and the depth of, of, you know, why do we, why do we live this life?

MATTS: [00:49:43] I don't think it's easy. I think there are days that you're kind of depressed and kind of days like, what am I doing? You know, when the big entertainment you have is playing dictionary, where you open up a dictionary and find a word and play charades. You don't have the stimulation that you have about, you know, going to the movies or, you know, I mean, I guess you got the Internet now so that was different then. But I think you come to terms with a peaceful place inside yourself that is the core of who you are. And I have to say the Peace Corps for me gave me that. You know, I think about any time I look at a plastic bag that's being thrown out, you know, they wash their plastic bags and they used to hang them on the line.

WIGGUM: [00:50:29] Mm hmm.

MATTS: [00:50:29] I mean, now that's all changed. And now they've got the same issue everybody else does. But at the time, you know, that was a big deal. You know, the disposable stuff that we have, you know, was so, so valued. And then, of course, the development that's happened, you know, that we've done to our world, which has been positive. So I think the, the journey is, is the gift. I think that the friendships that you make with committed, like-minded people.

MATTS: [00:51:00] Peace Corps is interesting because I think people are so different and there's some very odd people in the Peace Corps, I have to admit. Um, but there's a commitment there. And a lot of my dearest friends are Peace Corps volunteers, not that I served with that, I've met through the years. And it's like when I walked in for this interview when I was a couple of minutes late, I knew I didn't have to call because when the Peace Corps person says they're going to do something, they do.

WIGGUM: [00:51:30] Mm hmm.

MATTS: [00:51:30] They're just very committed. And that's a distinguishing factor. I think Peace Corps people are more engaged with the world and wanting to understand what's going on. I think Peace Corps people are in service. They have a high service orientation, for those that go into the program for the right reasons. I know the process now is much more extensive and

different than it was at that, you know, when I was there. But I think it's a tremendous opportunity and a gift that the government, you know, sponsors. And I think it's the best foreign policy that we have. So we have to keep it alive and we have to keep the budget there and we have to find more opportunities to send more people into it.

MATTS: [00:52:17] My one question that I raise, though, at this point in my life and after all these years is, is Peace Corps still relevant? Do we have so much to teach or do we need Peace Corps in this country at times? So I think the values of Peace Corps and what we're about are still part of the program. But I think we have to evaluate what we do and how we do it in light of the development of the world and be mindful of that as well. And be mindful of not necessarily being the biggest and the best and knowing the answers, but to be in service to what can we share and what can we bring back. Yeah.

WIGGUM: [00:53:04] Well, thank you very much.

MATTS: [00:53:06] You're welcome.

[END OF INTERVIEW]