

Emilie Roy Corey Oral History Interview
Returned Peace Corps Volunteer Collection
Administrative Information

Creator: Emilie Roy Corey
Interviewer: Joan Kane Boyle
Date of Interview: June 8, 2004
Location of Interview: New York City, New York
Length: 11 pages

Biographical Note

Emilie Roy Corey served as a Peace Corps volunteer in Brazil from 1964 to 1966 on a public health project.

Access

Open.

Usage Restrictions

According to the deed of gift signed July 6, 2004, copyright of these materials has been assigned to the United States Government. This interview is in the public domain.

Copyright

The copyright law of the United States (Title 17, United States Code) governs the making of photocopies or other reproductions of copyrighted material. Under certain conditions specified in the law, libraries and archives are authorized to furnish a photocopy or other reproduction. One of these specified conditions is that the photocopy or reproduction is not to be "used for any purpose other than private study, scholarship, or research." If a user makes a request for, or later uses, a photocopy or reproduction for purposes in excesses of "fair use," that user may be liable for copyright infringement. This institution reserves the right to refuse to accept a copying order if, in its judgment, fulfillment of the order would involve violation of copyright law. The copyright law extends its protection to unpublished works from the moment of creation in a tangible form. Direct your questions concerning copyright to the reference staff.

Technical Note

This transcript was created by Sonix software from the MP3 audio recording of the interview. The resulting text file was lightly edited and reformatted according to a standard template.

Suggested Citation

Emilie Roy Corey, recorded interview by Joan Kane Boyle, June 8, 2004, page #, Returned Peace Corps Volunteer Collection, John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum.

DISCLAIMER

This transcript was generated automatically by Sonix software from the audio recording. The accuracy of the transcript cannot be guaranteed. Only the original audio recording constitutes the official record of this interview and should be used along with the transcript. If researchers have any concerns about accuracy or would like to recommend corrections, they are encouraged to contact the library reference staff.

Oral History Interview

with

Emilie Roy Corey

June 8, 2004
New York City, New York

By Joan Kane Boyle

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

BOYLE: [00:00:00] To of Emilie Roy Corey by Joan Kane Boyle on June 8th, 2004. Hi, Emilie.

COREY: Hi Joan.

BOYLE: I'd like to ask you to start off by just talking a little bit about how things were before you were in the Peace Corps. What preceded that? What made you decide to go into the Peace Corps?

COREY: [00:00:28] Well, in June of 1964, I graduated from Simmons College in Boston, Massachusetts, after four years of undergraduate school, I really didn't have a sense of what I wanted to do or where I wanted to be. So the opportunity to be in the Peace Corps was for me at that point an extension of my education. I took the test on campus and while I was happy to go to Brazil, Brazil was not. It was, it was a sort of generic test for any Peace

Corps project and I took the first trading opportunity that came along, which was then in the end of August and the beginning of September of 1964 at the Experiment in International Living in Putney, Vermont.

BOYLE: [00:01:41] And training, when I talk any about that, what what you thought of training, what your experiences were there that gave you an intro to what was coming or just what you thought?

COREY: [00:01:55] Well, the training at the Experiment in International Living was a very intense. It was seven days a week. From early in the morning until 9:00 or 10:00 at night, every day except Sunday when we were free in the morning and didn't strike back to training until late in the afternoon. There were quite a few interesting people in the training group and. It was a very interesting process that training focused on. Six hours language training a day and. Training for kind of medical type procedures, public health things. Learning about sanitation, learning about medication, learning. Give each other shots. And that was the second component because it was a public health project we were training for. Which we knew ahead of time and the third part of the training was sort of a. I don't know, sort of conditioning, the sort of effort to get everyone on the right propaganda page about American foreign policy. And so we spent some time almost every day talking about. What's happening in the world and what the position of our country was. In those days, of course, that was there was the Vietnam War going on, and that was something we all talked about a great deal. And the training was three months long. Unfortunately, it was in Brattleboro, Vermont, which was getting colder as the fall progressed and even had snow before he left. And although we were training for a hot country. I didn't make a lot of sense to me, but, you know. What can I tell you? The group, I think, quickly came together and people made friends and. Typically, the government put us in alphabetical order, and so a lot of us became close with our alphabetically next people.

COREY: [00:04:45] There were two selection processes during the whole time we were there, one in the middle of the three months and one at the end, which were very stressful and painful. And in the final analysis, about one

third of the group was eliminated from going forward to serve in Brazil itself. And all in all, it was I think it's an intense process, part of the rationale for the intensity was that. People who were in training needed to develop mechanisms for coping with stress so that when they were overseas, they would be able to handle it, although really being in Brazil was never as stressful as being in training. So being sort of laid back country and the training. Five mostly American people psychologists and psychiatrists was intensified more rigorously than probably they needed to than it needed to be the most interesting observation about the training from my point of view was the it seemed to me that. There was a preconceived profile of who the appropriate Peace Corps volunteer was, and those participants who didn't fit the profile were the ones who didn't survive the training process. Anybody who was a little different or a little deviant in any way was not likely to get through the training. That's my observation. And so we lost about a third and the rest of us had to short leave with it just before Christmas, actually. And then and then we all went to JFK, got on an airplane and went to Brazil.

BOYLE: [00:07:12] Talk about when you first arrived in Brazil and what you sort of remember. I know it's been it's been a while.

COREY: [00:07:20] Well, I remember a lot, actually. The first the first thing I remember was it was a very long trip from New York to Miami, from Miami to, um. We had another stop in South America until we landed at four o'clock in the morning in Belém, which I guess it was just the least expensive way to send us by. I think we stepped in Ecuador and we got off the plane and there were guards with machine guns and we arrived in Belém at four o'clock in the morning and we had to go through customs at four o'clock in the morning in Belém. And I remember somebody dropped a bottle of bourbon on the concrete floor in the airport and the whole place was just reeking. Bourbon, it was very unpleasant because it was also very hot. They left a cool place and went to a hot place. But when we got to our final destination, which was Recife for our training group, we were all placed with Brazilian families, or Brazilian people who, and we spent a couple of weeks in orientation to the country, in the capital city before we

were each taken on individual basis to our assignments throughout the northeast, mostly within commuting distance to receive the most likely the furthest out was five or six hours into the interior, but in the small towns around Recife, in the interior of Pernambuco were the replacements for all of the trainees from our group. And I was placed at the time. My name is Emilie Roy and I was placed with Judy Ross alphabetically, um, in a town called Caruaru, Pernambuco, which is about two hours in the interior from the capital of Recife. Caruaru was a fairly large town at the time, about 400,000 people and a market town where all the people from the villages around came and there was a huge market on Saturday, there was a little smaller market on Wednesday in the middle of the week, but the market on Saturday was known throughout the Northeast as a huge market outdoor market with stalls where virtually anything could be purchased and displayed and so it was also a transportation hub where a lot of the mostly bus transportation at this point. In 1964, the busses came in Caruaru from all the outlying communities and you could change for a express bus to take you from Caruaru to Recife, which was the capital. And each person was or the people were dropped off by the project leader into their communities and were helped by local people to set up to find and set up accommodations for themselves. It was another volunteer with us, a male volunteer, Paul Bastien. And we had a little house, which was somewhat out of town. A short bus ride or rather long walk into the center of town. But we were pleased to be there and we settled in. Tried to make friends with our neighbors and start addressing some issues. We also had sort of jobs with the department, the State Department of Public Health. So we reported every day for half a day and worked with the public health. Sanatoriums to develop some projects.

COREY: [00:12:30] I remember being dropped off at the town and looking around and being concerned about how we were going to make out what he wanted to do. We met some Brazilian people who immediately took to us, helped us. The people were extremely friendly and helpful and supportive. And it was really quite a positive experience. One of the one of the doctors from the hospital. There was a couple they were both doctors and they worked at the hospital and they sort of took us under their wing and I

remember that they would pick us up on Friday night. And take us to the market and then drive us home with our our purchases, our marketing for the week. We were supposed to get along with it for the week, and they were very kind and generous to do that for us. Unfortunately, Friday night market was the time was the time for the best market because everything was fresh and new and. And the best stuff was available, but it was also the most expensive time because it was the time when the vendors accepted the most money they could for their for their products, and it was only after a while we learned that. Needed to save money. He wanted to go to the beginning of the market, but to the end of the market, which was on Saturday, late Saturday afternoon, early evening when. There was stuff left over and the vendors didn't want to carry it back. Was maybe picked over and wasn't the best, but it was certainly the cheapest. But the doctors thought, you know, we were Americans and we could afford to go on Friday night. That's when they went and they took us so long and it was very kind of them to do that. We certainly appreciate the help that they gave us. That's her story.

BOYLE: [00:15:20] So this is really talking about the first part of your time there. What about sort of toward midpoint or is there any event or are there events that are special? You talked a lot about sort of what what happened week to week. Are there special things that happened and went on that you can recall?

COREY: [00:15:42] Yeah, there were some interesting things that happened. Our house was in a kind of a developed development area, but there was no running water in the houses. So we we one of the first things we did was we got our house all fixed up. We put screens on the doors and windows. We put we put a screen over our water tank so that mosquitoes wouldn't grow in it. We we did good Peace Corps stuff that we had learned how to do that, that our neighbors thought we were demented, especially with the screens on the doors and windows, because they felt that that was inhibiting the flow of air and that we were not getting fresh air. It wasn't circulating. We had a little outhouse in back and we proceeded to clean it up. One point I threw a can of dedaphon down the basin and as soon as

the sun set, it started getting a little darker with the roaches and bugs came out of basin and covered the walls, the walls were black. And we took some two by fours and banged them and stomped on them with our sweet little loafers. And I went inside my little house and cried, eyes out. But, you know, we've learned how to live and survive. One of our big success stories was there was a young woman across the street from. Had tuberculosis and was really wasting away with. Getting her to the hospital and getting her on some medication and we went over every day and gave her shots and gave her pills to take. And I'm happy to say that although it was even hard for us when we started to find a place on her body to give her the shot because she was so emaciated that she recovered and and got well and and did well and carried on, she that was one of our success stories. The other thing we did not and that little development was the the water for the whole place was to was delivered daily or every other day or every week or whenever they got around to it, to a big water tank in the middle of the square. And that and people took their water cans and jugs and got in line and loaded up the jugs and filled up their own wells or tanks, whatever they had in the back of their houses, to use water for whatever their needs. And when we first arrived, the water truck wasn't coming hardly at all or certainly not on a regular basis. So we were able to approach the mayor. The powers that be, at least because we were Americans and we were making a stink, at least we were able to get the water truck to come to our little development on a regular basis. So I guess that's another little another little victory for. The Peace Corps volunteers, they were personnel changes and people coming and going, and as it turns out, I was left in this little house, in this little development, a little bit outside of town by myself, and was not particularly happy being there all by myself. So through the auspices of another Brazilian friend who took me again to the mayor, I got myself a little tiny house right in right in the middle of town, which was much more convenient for everything, much more convenient for the fare, much more convenient for the bus depot, much more convenient for me to go to the. Health station that I was working with in the morning, and so I arranged to have this little house and I was living there happily by myself for the rest of the time that I worked in Caruaru.

COREY: [00:20:44] The house had water, it had electricity, it had a bathroom indoors, and it was right next to the transit police, so I felt secure and it was central enough so that a lot of my colleagues from the outlying districts, whenever they came into town, would stop in to use the bathroom. Rest for a while till the next. Their next bus left or whatever, and I was always happy to see them and and soon a couple more volunteers came into town and while they were not staying with me, they would congregate usually on a Friday night after going to the market or Saturday night, whatever we had agreed on. And we would have some dinner together and spend an evening of just being together and catching up. That was always something to look forward to. We had. We did we put screens on the doors of that house to. Even though people felt that it was a silly thing to do. The Brazilians didn't think the screens mattered, but we did, and we all had our jobs in the Department of Health and went after them and we started some projects, one of the projects I started was registering children and keeping records on their immunizations, which for some reason the Brazilians hadn't thought about doing that. So whenever any immunization came along, everyone got it because there was no record of whether they had already had it or not. And so that was. The things we also showed films in the. In the barrios and outside, in the little communities of little, where we had a huge generator and. And a big. Projector and we showed movies outside in the evening. We always had to wear our sneakers when we showed the movies because the generator and the projector would invariably give us a shock from the power you generate, but it all worked out rather well and people enjoyed the movies, although it's hard to know exactly it's measured in any way, whether they were really interested in seeing these cartoons about how to build outdoor lavatories, how to boil water and good public health stuff, which we seem to mostly show. We also gave polio vaccine to a lot of kids. We borrowed a jeep from the Peace Corps and we went literally school by school, by school in teams we had organized ahead of time and we vaccinated in one day, hundreds of kids showing the Brazilians how efficient American Peace Corps Volunteers could be in this fabulous project. We got a lot of

kids with oral vaccine that day. We had occasional conferences, we had a conference and come to my town.

COREY: [00:24:48] Meaning sometimes in the capital, which was always fun and everybody was there. There was a beach and ocean beach and we all. Spent time there and we all had a certain number of days vacation, which we most all of us chose to travel around the country and see different parts of what was going on in. So it was always a very interesting. Very interesting experience. Brazil is a huge country with wonderful, interesting parts. Interesting people. Bad roads, but mostly travel by airplane. It was there was a cheap flight to Rio that stopped at every little town, every every town on the coast, every major town on the coast, which I took. Their flight points and met Pele, world famous soccer player, as he traveled from one small town to another small town being that was the only way you could get there by air and the team. It's soccer team, and so that was really a highlight of that trip as meeting him and talking with him and. Seeing how what a really lovely person he was. What a fine athlete. So we you know, the time passed quickly, we did our projects, we interacted with each other as much as we could when we could, we I think we all enjoyed that, looked forward to that and liked being together to share our experiences and to kind of shore each other up. That could have saved.

BOYLE: [00:26:55] And then toward the end of the two years, how did it all come to pass, what happened at the at sort of closed down?

COREY: [00:27:06] Well. Toward the well into the second year of that, I was working in Caruaru a project called the Reader Project Rural Technical Assistance Project that was a project agency for international development. And the project was for American University and Brazilian University to work together in outlying areas in the Northeast, identifying potential for development of local industry. So this project came along to my town, was a project with the Polytechnic University in Brooklyn and the University of Recife. And they when they came to town being Americans, they came to see me and I offered to help them get established in the

community and to help them. Find out what was going on and introduce them to various community leaders, and so that was what happened toward the end of my stay, which then actually had me coming back after I finished and working a little bit a few months longer on the on the reader project. But at the end it was the Peace Corps' decision to bring everybody to Rio for a debriefing and spent a week in Rio de Janeiro doing this debriefing, which was getting us all in a bunch of a bunch of us in a room and having somebody from Washington write everything down that we said on a yellow pad. Sure. As soon as he left the room, he threw it away. But that was what he did. Part of the debriefing was, I guess, for us to have an opportunity to ventilate about what things had happened that really annoyed us and made us very unhappy. And then to hear a little bit about the positive experience. So in retrospect, I would have to say that was probably a very wise thing that that Peace Corps did.

COREY: [00:29:39] A lot of people then left and went back to the states and a number of people traveled around South America to other countries, which, while they were not while they were there, hadn't had an opportunity to visit. Some people I think even went to Europe. I went back to my town in Caruaru to work on the reader project. And I always felt that that the reader projects were had a little bit different focus and Peace Corps in terms of their interest in the development of local industries for local economic development which I think in retrospect, economic development was a very positive goal for the work that the Agency for International Development was doing and even the Peace Corps was doing. There were, I think, six or eight projects of these types in the Northeast with American universities and local Brazilian universities. They developed all kinds of local industries, chicken farming, leather industry, a cheese factory, they went to one I visited one in Bahia, which was a, you call it, a bee keeping where honey was produced and marketed, it was very interesting.

COREY: [00:31:23] The ones that were worked on in my area will have the leather factory. Cheese factory. And the idea was to use the local resources to develop some local capital and to help. With the expertise from American

universities, both students and faculty, you get all this stuff organized and have this development. Take place. But at after the end of a couple of months, I finished that job and went back to the States in time to be home for Christmas. Worcester, Massachusetts, in December of 1966.

BOYLE: [00:32:13] And did you tell everyone all about it?

COREY: [00:32:16] Yeah, people were very interested to know what had happened. But what the experience was like and there was just in general from my family and friends and interest in what had transpired. And I think it was everybody was very positive about. I think everyone thought it was very courageous to go on for two years and do something. But, you know, you go somewhere you've never been and do something that you've never done it kind of thing. So, yes, it was all together the positive. And interesting experience.

BOYLE: [00:33:09] What happened after that, Emilie, I don't mean to bring us every year since, but can you talk a little bit about what you've been involved in?

COREY: [00:33:21] Sure. Since the Peace Corps experience, well, one of the first things I did when I came back is I moved to New York and I tried to get a job and the interesting reaction was, so into the Peace Corps, did you go to graduate school, or what other experience do you have? So it really wasn't. I mean, well, there was a sort of emotional positive response, the practicality of it as an experience for somebody who was trying to make a living in New York in 1967 was that it wasn't. I mean, it didn't have that much. So I went to Florida and worked for a political campaign for a little while by people that I had met working on the media project, I worked at the Polytechnic briefly from, again, people I had met on the media project and. I finally got married and settled down and went to work for the City of New York, the Department of Social Services, I suppose the idea of working with people and helping people with something that. And the Peace Corps experience reinforced and ultimately I did go to graduate school in social work and became involved with developing services for

the elderly in New York City and worked in that field for a long time. And I think the Peace Corps experience is one that does not leave you ever and that makes you aware of the differences that people in people with the similarities of people in that. It's a sort of I think a humbling experience in that until that the time that I went overseas, I just thought everybody was the same as me and everyone thought like me. And that's presently not true in the world. So to have that kind of exposure certainly broadens the way a person looks at the rest of the world. So for that I think I have always been extremely. Happy and grateful to learn that early on in my life. Always from that particular point of view, very helpful.

BOYLE: [00:36:16] Thank you so much for your time and especially for that last piece. I think it's rather marvelous because it's been a long time now since 1964, 1966. And let me see how many years is this? And it's it's just been a pleasure listening to you talk about those days. Thank you so much, Emilie.

COREY: [00:36:47] You're very welcome.

[END OF INTERVIEW]