

Cynthia Ellison Mehary Oral History Interview
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Administrative Information

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Biographical Note

Cynthia Ellison Mehary served as a Peace Corps volunteer in Ethiopia from 1965 to 1967 as a business teacher.

Access

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Oral History Interview

with

Cynthia Ellison Mehary

July 20, 2006
Buffalo, New York

By Frieda Fairburn

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

FAIRBURN: [00:00:06] My name is Frieda Fairburn. I'm in Buffalo, New York. I'm speaking to Cynthia Ellison Mehary.

MEHARY: [00:00:14] Yes.

FAIRBURN: [00:00:14] Who was a volunteer in?

MEHARY: [00:00:18] Ethiopia.

FAIRBURN: [00:00:18] When was that, Cynthia?

MEHARY: [00:00:20] That was between the years 1965 through 1967.

FAIRBURN: [00:00:26] Oh, that's interesting, OK. Remind me to bring that up again later. All right, Cynthia, what were you doing when you first got the idea that Peace Corps might be a great thing to do?

MEHARY: [00:00:39] Well, I was a student at the University of Buffalo studying to become a teacher. And at that time, President John F. Kennedy had started talking about, you know, the Peace Corps. And I remember one of his speeches said, ask not what you can do. Ask not what your country can do for you, but what you can do for your country.

FAIRBURN: [00:01:10] Mm hmm.

MEHARY: [00:01:11] But anyway, at that time they had some representatives, I guess, from the Peace Corps that would come out to the university. And I started attending their meetings to find out really what this was all about. Now technically, it took me five years to go through the university. I had a difficult time the first year. Um. So I don't know, I guess I could chalk up the first year in college and until I finally made up my mind or was able to get into a program, because at that time I was thinking I would be a teacher, but what kind of a teacher? That was the question.

FAIRBURN: [00:01:55] A good one.

MEHARY: [00:01:57] I was thinking maybe English, but I didn't really do well with the liberal arts courses in that first year. So my advisor recommended that I take a two year associate's degree and go into the secretarial program, which is what I did. And when I took those secretarial programs, I just loved them. So I graduated with an associate's degree in applied science, as they called it then, but I still wanted to be a teacher. And in fact, after I graduated, I worked at this former Westinghouse as a secretary for just one summer. And then I reapplied to the University of Buffalo in the business education program. They had one there at that time. And so I returned to school that September, so I had to take the other two years. I took five years. And in between there, you know, there was a lot of things going on in the United States.

FAIRBURN: [00:02:57] Oh, sure.

MEHARY: [00:02:57] You know, there was the, um, our Black revolution going on with Martin Luther King. And, you know, I wasn't actually actively

involved, but I was aware of what was going on. Um. And also at the school, you know, as a young person trying to find myself, so things that I may have had a little bit of interest in, I would at least go to their meetings to, you know, to find out what was going on. And also, I remember at that time they always had different people come out to school. And maybe we were sitting on the lawn there, for example, and someone would come up to you and say, do you have any comments that you would like to say about such and such and such? You know. Also, let's see.

MEHARY: [00:03:53] My high school background was in music. So I used to play the piano and the accordion. There again, I didn't see myself doing that much with those two instruments. The piano, for example, you had to be the very, very best, I've always thought, in order to get something going. So it kind of left me up in the air as to what was I going to study? So I ended up in this business, and then going to different activities because there was so much going on on the campus. And then also the fact that I'm African American and there were so few of us. Um. Out of that student body, I think there must have been about 20,000 students. And at that time the school was known as University of Buffalo. They had not even gone with the state yet.

FAIRBURN: [00:04:50] Right.

MEHARY: [00:04:50] So I think there were maybe all of 10 of us who were students and that lived in the city of Buffalo and would commute back and forth, because we would always meet at the student union, you know. And to this day, if I see them, they are, we all know each other.

FAIRBURN: [00:05:10] Wow.

MEHARY: [00:05:11] And there were African Americans who stayed on the campus, but because they were in the dorm, it was difficult to get to know them.

FAIRBURN: [00:05:18] They had a different social center.

MEHARY: [00:05:20] Right. Yeah. So our little lives kind of dealt around just that 10 of us.

FAIRBURN: [00:05:26] All right.

MEHARY: [00:05:28] And I guess we did the best we could as far as being there on the campus and so few of us. But anyway, when all of these different things were going on and they came with the Peace Corps and I would go to the meetings. And I think it was then when I graduated from the applied sciences degree, um, I remember sending an application in to the Peace Corps.

FAIRBURN: [00:05:56] Mm hmm.

MEHARY: [00:05:56] And I had studied also French. I had two years of French in high school and I had taken a year of French in college. And so when I applied, they immediately sent me a thing indicating that I was to go to some country in West Africa, a French speaking country. But see, I still had in my mind I needed this other education. So I turned it down. I didn't go that year. So I continued my education and I continued going to their meetings whenever they would have those things on the campus. And then when I graduated in 1965, then I reapplied. And one of the questions on the application form was, where do you want to go? Well, I didn't know where I wanted to go because I didn't know that much about Africa. All I know is I wanted to go to Africa. And I think I put down some countries like South Africa.

FAIRBURN: [00:07:09] And they said sorry.

MEHARY: [00:07:11] The person looked at me and said, oh no, I don't think you can go there. So I said, well, wherever you think would be the best place for me. And they chose Ethiopia. So that's how I got to go there.

FAIRBURN: [00:07:23] And you found out fairly quickly, is that? I mean, you said you graduated like May of '65 and you had already done your application?

MEHARY: [00:07:29] Oh yeah. Oh yeah. I had already sent the application in before I graduated.

FAIRBURN: [00:07:34] OK.

MEHARY: [00:07:35] And I had two things. I had a choice there. I had been accepted to teach in the Buffalo city schools. I'd taken the test and whatever I needed, I was ready and set to teach. And also, I had applied to the Peace Corps, so I had an option there of what I wanted to do and I chose to go to the Peace Corps.

FAIRBURN: [00:07:58] Any conclusions on why you went that way?

MEHARY: [00:08:01] Well. I grew up, I wasn't born in the city of Buffalo, but I grew up here. My parents moved here from the South and their goal was that all of the children should get an education. You know, just like Martin Luther King, we need an education to advance ourselves and so forth, coming out of that era. And as a result, my father was very, very strict on us. There were two of us at that time, and then later I had a younger sister. And coming from a very strict family, we were not allowed to participate in a lot of things that I would see other young people participating in. And so when the Peace Corps came up, I said.

FAIRBURN: [00:08:50] Freedom!

MEHARY: [00:08:50] This is my way out. I want to see the world. I want to visit and want to go other places. I've got to do this first. And that's what I chose.

FAIRBURN: [00:08:59] And Dad's reaction?

MEHARY: [00:09:01] He didn't like it. He kept saying, I don't think you should do that. And not only with that, but several other things which I did, which he may have been right about, but he would always say, I don't think you should do that. And then when I got the acceptance. And I had my heart set on going to Los Angeles because I'd never been outside really of the city of Buffalo, except to go back down south to visit my grandparents. And I thought, oh my God, maybe this is not the thing for me to do. But I

went ahead anyway. And, you know, they sent the ticket and, um. I guess being in the neighborhood where I was, I didn't know that they would go to people around you and ask questions about you. So, you know, my neighbors across the street and so forth. What's going on? These people are coming to us and they're asking us about you. And I'm thinking, why? What are they asking you? Who are these people? And so the whole block where I lived, they all knew that I was getting ready to do something.

FAIRBURN: [00:10:09] Uh huh.

MEHARY: [00:10:10] And um, so anyway, I chose to go ahead with this to Utah, and I knew that Salt Lake City was a very racist type of a place, and uh, with the Mormons being there. But I figured, well, you know, go ahead. Now, another thing that really bothered me back then is I wanted someone to be with me. I didn't want to go alone. And all the time that I was going to the Peace Corps meetings in college, I had a few girlfriends, you know, and I asked one girl in particular because she and I were very close. I said, I think I'm going to join the Peace Corps. Why don't you join also? And she says, oh no. She says, I have a boyfriend and I'm planning on getting married. I'm not going anywhere. And so I said, well, OK. So she went her direction and I went mine.

FAIRBURN: [00:11:11] Did you, were you a little nervous about that?

MEHARY: [00:11:13] Yeah, I was, because I left here. It was my first plane ride. First plane ride alone leaving Buffalo going to an unknown place.

FAIRBURN: [00:11:27] Salt Lake City.

MEHARY: [00:11:29] And so I remember getting on that plane. And I was so scared I was just shaking. It left from here to Chicago. I thought, oh my God, what am I doing? But then I got to Chicago. And they told us to meet at a particular place there at the airport. So I finally found that place and we were sitting around. It was like a little rotunda. And everybody was looking at everybody else, and no one wanted to say anything.

FAIRBURN: [00:12:08] Checking them out.

MEHARY: [00:12:10] So finally, someone said, are you going to Utah? Are you with the Peace Corps? And that was the beginning of a wonderful, a wonderful experience.

FAIRBURN: [00:12:18] Excellent. Excellent. So you're all in the same boat together at the same stage?

MEHARY: [00:12:23] Yes. But I enjoyed my experience with the Peace Corps.

FAIRBURN: [00:12:31] OK. How about let's talk a little bit about, you know, the training?

MEHARY: [00:12:34] The training part was really exciting for me. It was a chance for me to see some other things, to meet other people, because there were volunteers that came from all over the United States. There were a lot of them from Ohio. I don't know how there were so many from Ohio, but there was no one from Buffalo. There was no one from Buffalo. You know, I kept looking at.

FAIRBURN: [00:13:00] Any other New York state, do you think?

MEHARY: [00:13:03] Um, yeah. New York City.

FAIRBURN: [00:13:04] New York City, ah, that's a long ways away from here.

MEHARY: [00:13:05] But no one from Buffalo. And I always even to this day, like Eleanor, I finally met Eleanor, you know, and it's like, finally get someone. But where all the other people, you know? But that experience in the training was very enlightening for me. I got an opportunity to meet people from all over the United States. Even though Utah, Salt Lake City, was an experience, at least I got to go to the tabernacle there and to see that and to listen to.

FAIRBURN: [00:13:38] Did they make you feel comfortable as an African American there? Were your fears put aside?

MEHARY: [00:13:44] Pretty much. Yeah.

FAIRBURN: [00:13:45] Good. Great.

MEHARY: [00:13:46] We were always together. We didn't really go out alone or anything like that, because some people would say, like Fridays after we had a chance to relax from all of our studies and what training that we were going through. Then someone would say, well, let's go this place, then that place. And so we would kind of all get together and do those things. And it was also an opportunity for me to, let's say, go out at night, you know, to the clubs and so forth.

FAIRBURN: [00:14:16] They have them in Salt Lake City?

MEHARY: [00:14:18] Oh, yes, they do.

FAIRBURN: [00:14:19] Oh, see, I have stereotypes.

MEHARY: [00:14:22] Yes, they do. They did at that time, yeah. So we found out where to go. And there were also volunteers I found that came from affluent families. So they, um, those volunteers, I guess, their parents have given them or they had a lot of money, so they were able to rent cars. And I'm thinking, oh my goodness. So on the weekends, they would rent these cars that we'd get in them and go where we wanted to go.

FAIRBURN: [00:14:49] All right. Yeah. All right.

MEHARY: [00:14:50] And I didn't get to see the Grand Canyon at that time, but I did get to go down to where is it, the salt? The salt mines?

FAIRBURN: [00:14:59] Oh, the Great Salt Lake?

MEHARY: [00:15:01] Yeah, I did get to see that and I saw mainly, you know, the city itself and the university where we were studying. But just the idea of being with other people and enjoying their company.

FAIRBURN: [00:15:21] Like you weren't in it alone anymore.

MEHARY: [00:15:23] Yeah. So we finished the tour and we were studying and it was rigorous. We were supposed to learn.

FAIRBURN: [00:15:34] The language of the country you're going to?

MEHARY: [00:15:36] Mm hmm. And also, they had some of the guys from the country who were supposed to, or who were there to explain to us what it was like to live in their country.

FAIRBURN: [00:15:49] OK. Did you find them interesting? Were they open and?

MEHARY: [00:15:52] Yes, they were. Yes, they were.

FAIRBURN: [00:15:53] All men?

MEHARY: [00:15:55] Yes, they were all men. We didn't get, there were no young girls there. But they would tell us things about their country and we would listen and, you know, try to understand. But what I found from that is no matter how much people tell you how things are, you never really know until you get there.

FAIRBURN: [00:16:13] You got it. Yeah, OK.

MEHARY: [00:16:15] The sounds, the smells, the feeling. You don't know that until you are actually in that place. So that part itself was interesting.

FAIRBURN: [00:16:28] How was the language training for you?

MEHARY: [00:16:30] Now, the language training for me. Because that's why they had the two programs, I understand. Our program, we were to learn to speak using the phonetics. And the other group I understand, they were taught to read.

FAIRBURN: [00:16:52] Oh, so you were going to be only verbally?

MEHARY: [00:16:55] The spoken, right.

FAIRBURN: [00:16:57] Orally.

MEHARY: [00:16:57] Right. So I never got to understand the Amharic alphabet.

FAIRBURN: [00:17:06] Uh huh.

MEHARY: [00:17:07] I never ever learned what that alphabet is. And after I got to Addis Ababa, I would ask, you know, people that I was working with or other volunteers or, uh, the maid that was there, you know, what different things were. Or the educated Ethiopians, you know, how to read the language, but we were never taught that. We were taught how to speak the language.

FAIRBURN: [00:17:35] And how did you do with that?

MEHARY: [00:17:36] And I did pretty good with it. And while I was there, I was able to communicate to the help that we had. I was able to also travel downtown, you know, get a taxi and go downtown and buy what I wanted to buy. I could go to the market and bargain with them to get the things that I wanted.

FAIRBURN: [00:17:58] Oh good.

MEHARY: [00:17:59] So it became quite comfortable in that respect. You know, you learn the basics. A little bit of what the alphabet is, how to count and so forth. But the reading part, it just never, because we were not taught that.

FAIRBURN: [00:18:13] It shortchanged because you couldn't pick up a newspaper and see what was going on, you had to ask.

MEHARY: [00:18:17] No, it had to have the English there. If the English was not there then, you know, I didn't know.

FAIRBURN: [00:18:21] Did they publish newspapers in English in Addis?

MEHARY: [00:18:26] Uh, let me think. I better not say no.

FAIRBURN: [00:18:31] But you didn't have access. It might as well be no because you didn't have.

MEHARY: [00:18:34] There were newspapers there and I think they may have had them where there was English under some. But the newspaper itself was published in Amharic.

FAIRBURN: [00:18:47] OK, what else were you taught for, um, like you had Ethiopian cultural studies. Did you have any American history that you were asked to undergo any? Any other courses other than your technical stuff and some histories?

MEHARY: [00:19:10] There were some Ethiopian history. In fact, they encouraged us to purchase two books, which I still have.

FAIRBURN: [00:19:17] Oh, very good.

MEHARY: [00:19:18] Wax and Gold and another book.

FAIRBURN: [00:19:22] And did you read them?

MEHARY: [00:19:28] I didn't have time.

FAIRBURN: [00:19:28] For your retirement, my dear, for your retirement.

MEHARY: [00:19:31] I didn't have time, I was having too much fun.

FAIRBURN: [00:19:32] Oh, good. Well, that's all right.

MEHARY: [00:19:33] You know, I was having too much fun. And plus they had given us, you know, our training manuals, which were all with the phonetic alphabet there. So it's a lot of, um, time spent with that.

FAIRBURN: [00:19:44] Well, so what were you being prepared to teach?

MEHARY: [00:19:48] I was. It was general because we were all there to teach different things. There were people in English and math and science and history and so forth.

FAIRBURN: [00:20:03] And you were going to be teaching?

MEHARY: [00:20:04] I was going to be teaching business courses.

FAIRBURN: [00:20:06] Business. All right. How much preparation did it to give you about Ethiopian schools? Did they give you some background on what to expect?

MEHARY: [00:20:17] You know, I really don't remember.

FAIRBURN: [00:20:19] Doesn't matter, just what you remember. That's all we want to know. You'll find out soon enough.

MEHARY: [00:20:25] We were again given, you know, like I said, there were two or three books that we had there on Ethiopian history. Haile Selassie was the emperor then, so we were given a little bit of the politics behind that regime and what had happened prior to that time, and they also encouraged us not to get involved in the politics while we were there. So but see, I wasn't a political person so that didn't even phase me.

FAIRBURN: [00:20:56] Did you know what to expect in an Ethiopian school when you walked in? Or was that kind of a surprise?

MEHARY: [00:21:01] That was a surprise.

FAIRBURN: [00:21:02] Did you do some, uh, student teaching in Utah to prepare you to teach?

MEHARY: [00:21:08] No.

FAIRBURN: [00:21:09] So but you'd done student teaching.

MEHARY: [00:21:11] I had done my student teaching prior to that time.

FAIRBURN: [00:21:13] So you at least been in the classroom.

MEHARY: [00:21:14] Yeah.

FAIRBURN: [00:21:15] So you had some expectations where others may not have.

MEHARY: [00:21:17] I had, you know, a year, in fact two semesters of student teaching. I'm trying to think.

FAIRBURN: [00:21:29] No, it doesn't matter.

MEHARY: [00:21:30] I don't remember.

FAIRBURN: [00:21:31] They were doing American government courses, but most people slept through them in my group. I can't speak for others.

MEHARY: [00:21:38] And I do remember since we were at the university, we'd have these classes university style, you know, you go into a lecture room and there you are.

FAIRBURN: [00:21:47] Yeah.

MEHARY: [00:21:47] But if you've been up all night trying to decipher your lessons and to understand the Amharic and just the other things that were involved there, by the time you get to these classes. There were a few, like you said, that I slept through. I don't even remember.

FAIRBURN: [00:22:06] How about health preparations, health issues?

MEHARY: [00:22:09] Oh, yes.

FAIRBURN: [00:22:09] Well prepared for that?

MEHARY: [00:22:10] Yes, they gave us quite a bit about the health issues. Now, in fact, part of our training involved swimming. And we had gym classes, you know, exercise classes. I had the swimming classes. Now I guess I didn't do my duty and I'm suffering even to this day. I don't know how to swim.

FAIRBURN: [00:22:37] Did you ever fall into the river in Ethiopia?

MEHARY: [00:22:40] Well, let me tell. Let me tell you. I had made up my mind that I was going to go to the Peace Corps and I said, whatever I have to do, I'm going to do it. There's not going to be any stumbling block. So in high school, I didn't do what I was supposed to do as far as learning how to swim, because I want to mess up my hair and all of this. So I didn't learn how to swim in high school. But when the Peace Corps said, oh yes, you have swimming classes, we're going to teach you how to swim. Then I was doing well. I could even float on my back and turn over and do all these great things. Then one day someone came to, I guess the director of our program, and said, well, they don't really need to know how to swim because the lakes are infested with all kinds of diseases. And then there's the alligators, crocodiles, and what have you, and we don't suggest that they go swimming. So they cut the program. I never learned how. That was the end of my swimming.

FAIRBURN: [00:23:33] Oh man.

MEHARY: [00:23:34] Yeah. So that part, OK. And then they, of course, told us about how to be careful with our food, the water particularly, and preparation of the food. Preparation, you know, they told us what we had to do.

FAIRBURN: [00:23:53] Boil your water, filter your water.

MEHARY: [00:23:54] Boil it, filter it, and put the tablets in and those kinds of things. And also about malaria. And we, they gave us a whole slew of the shots prior to the time that we left, so we were well prepared for that.

FAIRBURN: [00:24:12] Did you notice any psychological investigation? Did you undergo any of that stuff?

MEHARY: [00:24:21] I'm remembering, yes, we did, but I don't remember the details of that. And I say that because when it came to the close of our training, there were some members of the group that didn't pass for whatever reason. And so they didn't go.

FAIRBURN: [00:24:39] They were deselected, I think that was the term?

MEHARY: [00:24:41] Yes, they were. That was the word. They were deselected at that time. And I guess I was just not aware of why.

FAIRBURN: [00:24:49] Do you remember having an interview with a psychologist? Were they? I remember somebody giving me the results of my test on the Peace Corps thing and my language evaluation. And then they gave a kind of a profile from the staff that had given some comments about me.

MEHARY: [00:25:08] Maybe, but at this point.

FAIRBURN: [00:25:09] It must have been fine because there you are.

MEHARY: [00:25:11] I really don't remember. I know we did, as I remember now, we did talk with different people at different times.

FAIRBURN: [00:25:19] We had these sensitivity training sessions and you were supposed to raise comments about somebody. You know, is there anybody here you're not getting along with? And our group refuse to cooperate. So we played word games until they canceled sensitivity training. But maybe by the time you came along, they decided it was not a very good deal and didn't waste their time. All right. Anything else you remember about training?

MEHARY: [00:25:54] Um. Just overall, it was just a good experience.

FAIRBURN: [00:25:57] Good.

MEHARY: [00:25:57] Overall, it was just a good experience for me. And it was a chance to say, OK, now I'm moving forward in an opportunity to go other places, to meet other people, and find out what life is all about.

FAIRBURN: [00:26:15] OK. All right, so remember the day you went to Ethiopia, the flights to Ethiopia?

MEHARY: [00:26:25] Yeah, I remember that.

FAIRBURN: [00:26:25] Tell me about it.

MEHARY: [00:26:25] We were, at the close of the training, we were given our tickets home and they told us what to pack. How to pack, how much we could carry, and so forth. And then when we were to meet in New York City at the Kennedy airport. You need another pen?

FAIRBURN: [00:26:45] No, I'm fine, thanks.

MEHARY: [00:26:48] So I came home and packed my bags. My family, I think they just kind of looked at me. They didn't really say too much. My mother was always the quiet one, and she went along with whatever her daughter wanted. And I was the oldest. So I was the one who was making the way for the others at the time. And so my father didn't really say too much. You know, he already said, I don't think you should do that. But at this point, you know, I'm an adult, so.

FAIRBURN: [00:27:23] Absolutely.

MEHARY: [00:27:25] So I got myself ready. And we went to New York and we all met at the Kennedy airport. And I think maybe the airport as it is now was not the way it was then.

FAIRBURN: [00:27:39] Yeah, for sure.

MEHARY: [00:27:40] Because they told us which area to meet, and it was a huge rotunda there so we met, you know, all of us that passed our

examinations. We were happy to see each other. So they had a chartered plane for us.

FAIRBURN: [00:27:53] Wow.

MEHARY: [00:27:54] Yes. So at the point in time, because it was in the evening. We didn't leave early in the morning. We left around 6:00 or 7:00, I remember. And here was this chartered plane all full of young, wide eyed, bushy tailed volunteers. So we get on this chartered TWA plane and we head east into.

FAIRBURN: [00:28:27] Oh. Yes, across the.

MEHARY: [00:28:30] Across the ocean. We never slept.

FAIRBURN: [00:28:33] Oh, of course not.

MEHARY: [00:28:34] We never slept. We were up all night.

FAIRBURN: [00:28:37] All excited.

MEHARY: [00:28:39] And they were serving food. Not liquor, but you know, I think they did have or something. People were up playing cards and talking and laughing and walking around to the point that I think at some point, the airplane pilot said, you know, I think you'd better sit down. But they sat down for a while and then people are up walking and talking and just laughing. And that was the first time that I could see the sun come up. And we were going into the sun. It never got dark. It was light, we were going into. We were going into the sun. And so our flight. We left from New York and we went to Athens. And so we were in Athens, I think, for a day.

FAIRBURN: [00:29:27] Oh, wow.

MEHARY: [00:29:34] We didn't get to see anything though. I think, I remember we got off the plane. And I'm not too clear whether we even went into the city. I'm kind of foggy about that.

FAIRBURN: [00:29:50] Was the group getting a little sleepier at this time?

MEHARY: [00:29:52] Yes. I'm pretty sure. Yes, we did, we got off the plane. They had hotel reservations for us, so we were on again a chartered bus that took us into Athens because I remember seeing bits and pieces of some of the city. And then we spent the night there and had a chance to relax and, you know, eat and so forth. And they talked to us again about going to Ethiopia and what to expect, the climate and the precautions that we should take. So then the next day, we got back on another chartered. It wasn't the same one though. I think it was, um, the Ethiopian Airlines. And so then we left from Athens on that chartered plane. And from there the next thing was, uh, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia.

FAIRBURN: [00:31:02] Mm hmm.

MEHARY: [00:31:03] So, I don't remember how many hours it was. Yeah, I'm pretty sure it was the Ethiopian Airlines. Yeah, this picture here. So when we get there, they had told us also that the weather, some of the weather conditions. So in September, we are thinking it's going to be cool. [tape break]

FAIRBURN: [00:31:33] OK, off the airplane.

MEHARY: [00:31:34] OK, so we got off Ethiopian Airlines, and then they put us again on a bus. And there were other volunteers on the bus who had already been in Ethiopia for a while, so they met us at the airport. And I guess assisted us in terms of getting all of our things and helping out with that because we were, I noticed most of us that were new, we were seated. And then since they were, they had been in Ethiopia for a while, they were standing up.

FAIRBURN: [00:32:20] No, that's OK. Just some oil on the paper.

MEHARY: [00:32:21] And I guess we were encouraged to ask questions about things that we saw along the way. And at that time, the airport was quite a distance outside of the city. And I guess as you got closer and closer

to the city, there was like a divider that had grass and so forth, a median or something. And so I'm looking out the window. Now I don't know how the other volunteers felt about this, but I'm looking out the window and all I could see was just people walking in all directions, but a lot of them just sitting on that median. And I couldn't understand why were they just sitting there? Women, particularly.

MEHARY: [00:33:20] And of course, they had on their, um, their Ethiopian attire, but it was all brown instead of white. So I asked one of the volunteers, I said, why are those people just sitting there like that? I mean, what's the matter? So he just said, oh, they do that. Well, what he meant is these people are very poor.

FAIRBURN: [00:33:41] Uh huh.

MEHARY: [00:33:42] And that's why they just walk and they go different places and their clothes are the way they are. But he really didn't explain that. He just, I just remember his comment. Oh, they do that, something to that effect. He didn't really answer my question. And so then we go into the city and they put us up at the Addis Ababa Hotel. And at that point, then that's where we stayed there for several days while they farm us out to our localities, tell us where we're supposed to go.

FAIRBURN: [00:34:15] Well, you didn't know what your destination, your actual site yet, until you got to?

MEHARY: [00:34:19] No. OK. So some of us were placed in the city. Others were outside of the city in places such as Harar, Irgalem, Debre Birhan. Some up to the north of Addis Ababa. I don't think there were too many that were placed up in Asmara at that time. But each person had their own place that they were to go. Now I was placed in the city of Addis Ababa. And there was another volunteer, her name was Mary Mannigan. She and I were roommates, we ended up as roommates, and we were one of the last to be placed. Because they wanted to get the other people in position. Now as to how those other volunteers got to their destinations, I'm not too clear exactly how they did that.

FAIRBURN: [00:35:26] That's alright.

MEHARY: [00:35:26] Whether, you know, whether they gave them taxi or whether they had a bus to take them out there. But I do know that many of them were placed in those villages. And if there were, with the girls particularly, there were always two. All right. And it was I think a real experience for them, because there were not the comforts that we were used to out there. No running water, toilets, or that kind of stuff. And even the cooking may have been an experience for them as well.

FAIRBURN: [00:36:08] When you heard you were going to be in Addis, were you disappointed or were you relieved? You knew there was the potential for being out.

MEHARY: [00:36:18] Well, you know, it didn't faze me. It really didn't faze me one way or the other. It's just like, oh, OK. We're going to be here in the city of Addis Ababa. And I just remember they also, when they finally told us where we were going to be, then they said, well, you know, look around or ask different people. And we were kind of baffled as to who to ask. And they said, see if you can find a house close to where you're going to work.

FAIRBURN: [00:36:49] They didn't do your housing?

MEHARY: [00:36:51] No, they didn't. No, not for us. So Mary and I, we took a taxi because we knew, they told us you're going to teach at Tafari Makonnen High School. All right. And they said it's in the northern part of the city. So I remember we took a taxi to that location to figure out where we were going to be, what the compound of that school was like. OK. And then we started talking to, I guess some of the local people, I'm not clear exactly how this happened, but we did talk to some of the local people and they pointed out different houses where we could have, where we would live. So we were able to get, um, get a house within walking distance of our school, which was actually right behind Haile Selassie's palace.

FAIRBURN: [00:37:51] Oh my goodness.

MEHARY: [00:37:52] So in the mornings as we would walk to school, his lion was walking the wall back and forth, you know, and I thought, OK, is this lion, and looking down at us and other people, of course, because it was a dirt road, of course, you know, kind of paved, but not really that well.

FAIRBURN: [00:38:10] So do you think you were lucky in finding such a good accommodation or is it the two of you together? You know, the people in that area were happy to have you or you just lucked out?

MEHARY: [00:38:21] I think we just lucked out. Yeah, I think we just lucked out. They also, you know, told us in terms of getting someone to help, because they said, you know, because the altitude of Addis Ababa is like 8,000 feet above sea level. So they said it's going to take you a long time to cook. Boiling water is going to take a long time and so forth. So they did talk to us about those things. And so as we found housing, we went to look at it and, you know, both of us agreed it was OK. And it was, um, two bedrooms. When we opened the front door, it was kind of like those doors that you open out.

FAIRBURN: [00:39:05] Oh yeah, OK.

MEHARY: [00:39:06] And there was one bedroom on the left and one on the right, so we each chose which bedroom. And then the center portion was the living room. And then I think behind one of the bedrooms, a little area there, which we used as a dining room. And then behind that was a smaller room, which we set up as a kitchen. So after we got our housing, then we proceeded to go out and people were, you know, the local people were helping us in terms of getting some furniture, which we bought.

FAIRBURN: [00:39:39] Oh, it wasn't furnished at all?

MEHARY: [00:39:41] No. No, we had to buy our furniture. And then they told us how to, you know, rent the stove and the cylinder of gas and how you could also rent the little refrigerator. And then when it came to hiring the help, again we kind of relied on the local people. But I think now that I'm

remembering, um, these guys who were there as our teachers. I think he, what was his name? There was one guy named Samuel. Yeah. This one, he came back. He went back to Ethiopia about the time that we did. So he kept in contact with us.

FAIRBURN: [00:40:33] He looks Ethiopian, doesn't he?

MEHARY: [00:40:34] Yes. He kept in contact with us. So after he may have even helped us find.

FAIRBURN: [00:40:40] Oh, he's your instructor in Amharic? Oh, that's why he looks Ethiopian.

MEHARY: [00:40:45] Yeah. So he kept in contact with us. And he may have even helped us, you know, find housing and find, you know, what they call as a bunion, who is a guard. And the lady who would come once a day to clean the house, but mainly she was there for the cooking. There wasn't that much cleaning to be done. So I'm trying to think who else was there. This person also, I think he went back to Ethiopia. I remember him.

FAIRBURN: [00:41:27] Well, that's a real advantage, isn't it?

MEHARY: [00:41:29] Yes. The others. There was another one man. Which? Um, I don't know, we became buddies also. But he had come from Ethiopia, and I remember in conversations with him, he said that he wasn't ready to go back to Ethiopia yet. I guess there was some problems with the politics there.

FAIRBURN: [00:41:56] Oh, yes. He was kind of an exile.

MEHARY: [00:41:59] Yeah. Can't remember what the heck his name is. I should be ashamed because we kept in contact for a long time.

FAIRBURN: [00:42:07] It will come to you right after I leave.

MEHARY: [00:42:09] We kept in contact for a long time, you know, he would write letters and ask how we were doing. And I would write back. And then

eventually he said he got married. He married an American here. But I don't really remember if he ever, ever went back to Ethiopia.

FAIRBURN: [00:42:25] Hmm. Was your roommate at the time, was she African American?

MEHARY: [00:42:28] Yes, she was.

FAIRBURN: [00:42:29] Oh. You think there was an advantage? Although there have been lots of whites in and out of Addis over the years.

MEHARY: [00:42:38] I don't know. I don't know one way or the other whether it was. It just was that the two of us were business teachers. She was, um, she had been trained as a business teacher, and I too. So they needed business teachers at that particular school. And incidentally, the Tafari Makonnen school was, um, a Jesuit school.

FAIRBURN: [00:42:59] Oh wow.

MEHARY: [00:43:00] And it was run by the Jesuits.

FAIRBURN: [00:43:02] It should have been a good school.

MEHARY: [00:43:04] And it was a very, very good school. The children that were there were Ethiopian children, of course, from I guess some families that could afford to send their children there. Not only did it have, um, a business department, but there was a home economics department as well as your regular English, history, math, and science. So those children were getting a pretty good, I guess American or English background.

FAIRBURN: [00:43:35] Those traditional studies as well.

MEHARY: [00:43:37] Right, right.

FAIRBURN: [00:43:38] Had there been Peace Corps in that school before? Did you replace somebody or were you the first?

MEHARY: [00:43:51] We may have been the first. I don't, I don't know if there were other ones or not.

FAIRBURN: [00:43:57] Doesn't matter, I just.

MEHARY: [00:43:58] Maybe there were.

FAIRBURN: [00:43:59] Sometimes it's fun to be the ground breaker and sometimes it's fun to follow.

MEHARY: [00:44:07] Maybe there were. I don't remember. But then. But then maybe there were because there were some white volunteers in that school that I'm remembering. Maybe one or two.

FAIRBURN: [00:44:18] Well, they could have been.

MEHARY: [00:44:19] And I have to, I've got to go look at my pictures.

FAIRBURN: [00:44:24] There may have been English or Canadian volunteers too.

MEHARY: [00:44:28] And we did meet English volunteers. One young lady who came, I think, the second year that we were there. She even stayed with us for a while.

FAIRBURN: [00:44:39] This is a coed school?

MEHARY: [00:44:41] Yes, it was.

FAIRBURN: [00:44:41] So there were other women on the staff at the time.

MEHARY: [00:44:44] No, there were no women staff. Oh, no, no, no. They were all men staff. We were, um, we were the women. The others were men. But the children, there were girls and boys.

FAIRBURN: [00:45:03] Is it high school standard or junior high school?

MEHARY: [00:45:06] They were ninth through 12th graders. Now, the difficulties in teaching there was that the children were not English speaking. So they're, I guess at their elementary level, they learned some basic English, enough so that whatever we were teaching them, they did understand to some extent, but we were told certain words to use, certain ways to present the material. And since this was a vocational, quote, type of a situation, the teaching didn't really involve that much talking, because if you're teaching them how to type then, you know, you can say certain words enough of the language to talk, to show them what to do, how to sit, and then you do the alphabet with them and then teach them, you know, the skills.

FAIRBURN: [00:46:13] They were actually just copying stuff, it didn't matter if they could read it.

MEHARY: [00:46:14] Exactly, right. And then as they became more proficient in this, because I think they had about four years where they had the typing. And I'm thinking we taught that shorthand, but I don't really think they did that much with it. It was mainly the typing, the accounting, filing. I remember we did a lot with the filing. And maybe some introduction to business. Those basic courses is what we taught.

FAIRBURN: [00:46:56] Filing in the English alphabet?

MEHARY: [00:46:58] Yes. Filing with the English alphabet. But anyway, we were able to manage with, you know, manage the instruction, no part of that. And, of course, learning enough of the language so that we could proceed with what we had to, what we had to do at that time.

FAIRBURN: [00:47:25] Was anybody teaching English as a second language in that school?

MEHARY: [00:47:28] Yes, yes. And, of course, the Jesuits had extensive training in both languages so that they were there to, I guess, give us as much help as necessary with that part of our work.

FAIRBURN: [00:47:47] Did you find that arrangement an easy one, working with Jesuit administrators and other Jesuits?

MEHARY: [00:47:53] Mm hmm. I didn't have a problem with that. It was not difficult for me.

FAIRBURN: [00:47:58] You had ample resources? And obviously you had typewriters.

MEHARY: [00:48:01] Yeah, we had typewriters at that time. There were books. It was, you know, whatever else they need, the paper and so forth. Not like here in the United States, of course, but you know, they had sufficient, they had sufficient supplies. Now where they got these things from, I haven't a clue, you know? But because they were French Canadian Jesuits, I'm quite sure that they were able, they had connections and they could get things, you know. And they lived on the compound, the campus. So it was a nice campus, you know, they had home economics department building here, the business building here, the Jesuits had their house here, you know. And if you wanted a picnic, well, there was enough grounds around that sometimes they would have picnics right there on the grounds.

FAIRBURN: [00:48:50] Obviously related to their religious services, did one have to be Catholic to go to the school?

MEHARY: [00:48:55] Oh no, no. They never forced us to attend any religious services, in fact.

FAIRBURN: [00:49:01] Nor the students?

MEHARY: [00:49:02] No, I don't think they forced them either. That wasn't part of it. Now as to whether those students stayed on the campus there, I think some of them did. But most of them would go home in the evenings to their family.

FAIRBURN: [00:49:16] Cause you're in the city.

MEHARY: [00:49:16] Right. To their families, whether the actual parents were within the city, or they had some relatives that they would live with. So they came to school each day.

FAIRBURN: [00:49:26] Mm hmm. So you said you would walk, you walked.

MEHARY: [00:49:28] Yeah, we would walk. We would walk to school.

FAIRBURN: [00:49:30] So what was the time of your day, your schedule?

MEHARY: [00:49:33] Well, it started approximately around 7:30, 8:00 and we stayed there to maybe 2:30, 3:00.

FAIRBURN: [00:49:41] Five days a week? Six and a half?

MEHARY: [00:49:43] Five days a week.

FAIRBURN: [00:49:44] Five days. Wow. Did you have any non-teaching responsibilities? Did you volunteer to do anything or? OK, it doesn't matter. Doesn't matter.

MEHARY: [00:49:58] I don't remember any volunteering.

FAIRBURN: [00:49:59] It was a while ago, my dear, you're entitled to forget.

MEHARY: [00:50:04] I do remember, though, um. Since they had these different departments, we were asked to teach, let's say, the girls who were in the home economics, asked to teach them how to do the filing and how to do the typing. If they felt that those would be good qualities for the girls to have.

FAIRBURN: [00:50:22] Sure.

MEHARY: [00:50:23] And I don't remember the names of any of the girls at this point, but I remember there were several of them that graduated and they got jobs using those skills.

FAIRBURN: [00:50:37] Oh, OK.

MEHARY: [00:50:38] Perhaps in some governmental office or what have you. Most of those girls did marry very early. We got an education just from talking to the girls. Their English was pretty good, you know, they would. In fact, we had, um, we invited a group of the girls over to our house and had a little party for them there. They would tell us some cultural things there that they thought we needed to know.

FAIRBURN: [00:51:07] Any of them invite you to their homes?

MEHARY: [00:51:13] Uh. Actually, no.

FAIRBURN: [00:51:13] How about your neighbors, did they invite you into their homes?

MEHARY: [00:51:18] Not the Ethiopians. There was, uh, there was white immigrant that moved next to us in their compound. We were invited over there several times, but I think they were only there for a year.

FAIRBURN: [00:51:32] So did you feel the Ethiopians were a little bit aloof, that they were just not? Or maybe these were sophisticated Ethiopians who didn't?

MEHARY: [00:51:42] OK, the sophisticated Ethiopians, the ones we met through, who of these guys were that were in training, because they would always find out where we were and come by, you know. Because there, even though it was a large city, all they need to do is ask, oh, there's some volunteers, do you know so-and-so? And people would say, oh yeah, they're living over such-and-such, you know? So we kept in contact with the ones that returned to Ethiopia, and they were the ones that would come by and invite us to their homes.

FAIRBURN: [00:52:12] Oh, that's neat.

MEHARY: [00:52:13] And also take us to the different Ethiopian restaurants that were there and introduce us to the food.

FAIRBURN: [00:52:19] Good.

MEHARY: [00:52:19] And if the holidays would come, they would come by and pick us up and say, oh, well, you know, we're having a particular holiday and they're going to do this, you know, I'll come and pick you up. They had cars and they would take us to where all of the activities were in front of the.

FAIRBURN: [00:52:35] I was so worried that you were just sitting in your house.

MEHARY: [00:52:36] Oh, no, no. That house thing, we were not sitting.

FAIRBURN: [00:52:40] Excellent.

MEHARY: [00:52:41] Believe me, no.

FAIRBURN: [00:52:42] Good.

MEHARY: [00:52:43] No, we had a lot of activities. Now, also just before my roommate and I left the hotel. Um.

FAIRBURN: [00:52:56] You mean before?

MEHARY: [00:52:57] Before we went to our site. I don't know how this happened. The two of us were talking and there was there was a young white guy sitting in the hotel lobby there, and I said to her, I said, well, you know, we don't know anyone here. Maybe we should ask that guy over there, you know, how do you get around in the city? Because he looked like he was a military person, you know. And why was he, you know, this white man over there? About a middle aged guy, I think he was in his maybe 30s, late thirties at that time, and we were young 20 year olds. So she was afraid to go and say anything to him. And I guess me, I just said, well, you're here, you know, I'm big and bold. So I went over and I said, hello to this guy, and I said, we're Peace Corps volunteers and who are you? And you know, we would like to know pretty much how long you've

been here and, you know, what's going on in this city and, you know, so forth and so on.

MEHARY: [00:54:06] Well, that was the beginning of a very, very good friendship, because he was with the American military diplomatic corps. And he also would come back and he befriended us. All right, now, here's this young white man. And he was taking trips out to Athens every so often and over Jerusalem and here and this blah blah blah. And so he would come to us sometimes and say, well you girls had better be careful because this is happening at this place and this is happening in such and such a place, you know? And even to this day, that man, his name is Earl Lovett, we get Christmas cards from him. He's married, you know, and after we left the, I left at least, because Mary stayed an extra year, then his tour of duty in Ethiopia was up, so he went to wherever else the government sent him. But he always kept in contact with us, and he was a very, very good friend of ours, you know? Now when you're in these foreign countries, even though you want to participate with the native people, and even though being an African American, you're the same color, you're not the same culture.

FAIRBURN: [00:55:12] Right.

MEHARY: [00:55:13] And it's difficult for them to accept you and to understand who you are and then vice versa. So it took us a long time to really become comfortable with the people there, even though we had different ones who were coming and taking us around and, you know, introducing us to the culture itself. But you're really not completely acculturized. And so we found ourselves many times wishing that we could get certain American foods. Maybe just go shopping, because there were no malls in Addis Ababa. And as I listen to Eleanor and, you know, she said, well, didn't you have a shopping center? A shopping center, where? There was no such thing.

MEHARY: [00:55:58] If you wanted to buy something, sure, you would take a taxi. And by the way, the taxis only cost 25 cents. So you hail a cab, get quarter out, an Ethiopian quarter, and you tell them where you wanted to go. And then when you get out of the cab, you give them the quarter and

you can go to the area. You wouldn't go to exactly where you wanted. You'd go to the area. And they would drop you off and then you would walk to where you wanted to go. So you could go to the area, if you wanted to have a dress made, you'd go to that area and pick out your material, and the tailor would then measure you and make your dress. And if you wanted food, then you would go to that area and then you would buy, you know, your meat or vegetables or whatever. Now in the Italian section of town, of course, you would find canned foods. And some other items that you could not find.

FAIRBURN: [00:56:54] Like wine.

MEHARY: [00:56:54] Wines. Toilet paper.

FAIRBURN: [00:56:54] Oh, yeah.

MEHARY: [00:56:56] Those kind of things. OK. Um, in the Italian stores. And so there was a lot of mixture of cultures, the Italian culture, the Ethiopian cultures, and we found we made friends with people from other countries. Indians from India. Armenians. Uh, those people from Beirut. There was the Israelis. So we had all kinds of friends at that time, you know, and they would invite us to their homes. This, what is it, this baklava? That's, I was introduced to baklava there.

FAIRBURN: [00:57:39] Baklava, the sweet stuff?

MEHARY: [00:57:41] Right. I was introduced to that over there. Those people would invite us over. Mary and Cindy. They called me Cindy there. Come over. We're having this. And so we would, you know, get ourselves together, find out how to get there, get in a cab, and we would go. And it was lovely. We had a very, very good time while we were here.

FAIRBURN: [00:58:02] Did you feel secure? You were in a big city. Was that a nice, safe place to be at that time?

MEHARY: [00:58:07] At that time, yes, it was. Yeah. And we had the guard who took care of the home.

FAIRBURN: [00:58:13] At the house?

MEHARY: [00:58:13] At the house.

FAIRBURN: [00:58:14] But if you were out in the taxi, you didn't feel uncomfortable?
Could you walk around?

MEHARY: [00:58:17] Oh yeah, we walked around.

FAIRBURN: [00:58:18] At night?

MEHARY: [00:58:19] Yeah, but not so much at night alone though. Women. You know, we'd tend to do things together, but we never felt as if we were insecure or afraid to go wherever we wanted to go. There was not that going on at that time, you know, you would hear people talking about the possibility of overthrowing Haile Selassie. But it wasn't a major concern.

FAIRBURN: [00:58:47] Did you visit any of your former training friends out at their sites?

MEHARY: [00:58:53] Yes, we did.

FAIRBURN: [00:58:54] And how was that experience?

MEHARY: [00:58:55] That experience was an experience. I remember we took. We took a bus because we, Mary and I, were trying to decide how we were going to get to, uh, where was this place? Dire Dawa. So I think we took the bus, I know we took a train at some point. But we took a bus and that was the first time going outside of the city. And so you see a completely different type of environment.

FAIRBURN: [00:59:30] Sure. Wow.

MEHARY: [00:59:32] And there we were on this bus. And I didn't know that Mary had a problem with heights, but Ethiopia is 8,000 miles [feet] or more above sea level.

FAIRBURN: [00:59:43] Feet.

MEHARY: [00:59:43] So here we are on this bus and we're going down. And when you get outside, you see the mountains and you see the hills and the valleys, and it was just beautiful. And then way in the distance, you would see what they called tukuls, which is their huts, a group of them, or maybe just one with children around. But when we were up on the roads were like this and right here is a drop off. She had a fit.

FAIRBURN: [01:00:11] Was she on the outside?

MEHARY: [01:00:13] Well, it didn't matter where she was on the outside or the inside. She could not look down. Well, I enjoyed it because that was my first time of being in a situation where you could look for miles. And if the clouds were up, it would have a shadow over there, but not where you were.

FAIRBURN: [01:00:28] Beautiful, yeah.

MEHARY: [01:00:28] You know, and I would just look at this and I said, oh god, look at the scenery and the trees, and you know. That was that again was awakening, a sensual awakening for me, to be able to see the environment, you know, and notice the differences in the land and those kinds of things. But we took this bus and we were going up and around and around and getting up, and then, of course, the bus, you know, there with the, um, what do you call it?

FAIRBURN: [01:01:04] We have to shift gears?

MEHARY: [01:01:06] Oh yeah, oh yeah. And every time the bus would stop and shift the gear, rrrrr, you know, we wondered, is it going to make it to the top or what? So then get to the top and then you got to shift gears again and go around this hill and then you start going down and then you start going up again. So anyway, we did that. And then finally, we got to the place to visit our friends. And we stayed there, I guess, just for the

weekend to visit them. And it was nice. They didn't have the comforts that we had, but it wasn't really that bad. Um. It wasn't that bad.

FAIRBURN: [01:01:39] Not that bad.

MEHARY: [01:01:41] No, it wasn't really that bad. I found it, you know, their home was comfortable and I just enjoyed being with them. Yeah. But now the thing is, because Mary and I were in the city, whenever there was a vacation it meant that whoever was coming in. You know, if the Peace Corps said, OK, you're on vacation and all of the volunteers have to meet in the city, invariably our house was full.

FAIRBURN: [01:02:07] There was no Peace Corps rest house there?

MEHARY: [01:02:11] No. They either had to stay at the hotels or.

FAIRBURN: [01:02:12] So you were it.

MEHARY: [01:02:14] We and whoever else. They were other volunteers that were in the city also.

FAIRBURN: [01:02:18] Did you have much contact with the other volunteers?

MEHARY: [01:02:21] Yes, we did. Yes, we did.

FAIRBURN: [01:02:23] So you did communicate? You'd say, hey, I've got 15 people at my house. Who can you take?

MEHARY: [01:02:27] Yeah, you know. And of course, some of them, you know, we had a phone.

FAIRBURN: [01:02:32] Oh! Oh my goodness, let me write that down.

MEHARY: [01:02:36] So, you know, when they would get to, they would take their busses to the city. They get to the city. They would call. You know, Mary, Cindy, you got room for me? Come on over.

FAIRBURN: [01:02:44] Good.

MEHARY: [01:02:45] You know, on the couch, on the floor, whatever. And then at that time, we would have our little parties and get together and what have you. So we'd catch up here.

FAIRBURN: [01:02:52] Well, that's good.

MEHARY: [01:02:53] So some of them stayed at our house and some of them stayed at, you know, other volunteers. [tape break] Now, this is my roommate.

FAIRBURN: [01:03:02] Oh, yeah. OK. Are you still in touch with her?

MEHARY: [01:03:04] Yes, I am. She lives in Cleveland, Ohio.

FAIRBURN: [01:03:07] OK, let's start with that. So you are in touch with your old roommate, Mary?

MEHARY: [01:03:16] Yes. Yeah. We lost contact for a while. She stayed an extra year. She wanted to do three years in the Peace Corps and, um, I came home. And then. Well, I don't if I should even put this on the tape.

FAIRBURN: [01:03:33] Well, don't.

MEHARY: [01:03:34] But anyway, I came home and, you know, I started working and what have you and few other adventure things there. And so I lost her address and her phone number. And then in the meantime, then she comes home. She goes to Cleveland and she starts doing a lot of traveling around, and she came to Buffalo, but she had my parents' home phone number. And I used to talk about Mary and my other friends there. And so anyway, Mary called and see, by that time, I had moved here, OK? So Mary called my mom and she was saying, well, I'm Mary, and I'm looking for Cynthia. So then we got in contact again after about five or six years.

FAIRBURN: [01:04:23] OK, let me let me go back to Ethiopia before you're ready to leave. The longer you were at the school there, any change in your attitude about it? Did it get a lot easier? Were you bored, were you still interested?

MEHARY: [01:04:41] I don't think I was bored. I was still interested in, you know, working with the kids there, with those children. Young adults, I should say. Um. But I think at some point in time, began thinking about going home because the two years were up. And of course, the directors and so forth were contacting us, trying to make plans and arrangements for us to get back to the United States. Now, the whole time that you're there for those two years, you weren't allowed to go to any country and particularly the United States. You couldn't go to Europe and, you know, you weren't allowed to go to a modern type country.

FAIRBURN: [01:05:30] Right.

MEHARY: [01:05:33] So after, about the end of the two years, you're almost ready to go, to come back to, as they call, civilization. But in between then, I'm going to have to go back to those trips. We did take a trip by bus up to Asmara, and we spent maybe a week up there visiting and we went to the Kagnev Air Force Base. And, you know, again, had a chance to interact with Americans and to eat some hamburgers.

FAIRBURN: [01:06:15] Oh, yes.

MEHARY: [01:06:17] Because of course, you can't do that and shopping and so forth. And that part I enjoyed. And I think there were one or two volunteers there that could speak, uh, Tigrinya, I believe is the language there. And I think they enjoyed their experiences also. But it was much warmer, the climate was much warmer in Asmara. We also got a chance to go from Asmara down to Massawa [also called Mitsiwa], I think that's the port. I remember we went there. And that is sea level, so it's right on the Red Sea. Extremely hot. Very, very hot there. Shortly thereafter, we went back to Addis Ababa. There was a, you know, you look. I'm thinking, how did we get to do all of this traveling? Because we did a lot of traveling when we were there. We had, I guess with the small income,

we always some kind of way got enough money to get our bus fare and to manage to go where we wanted to go.

FAIRBURN: [01:07:34] That's great.

MEHARY: [01:07:34] So for one of those Christmases, we were able to go to Jerusalem.

FAIRBURN: [01:07:43] Wow.

MEHARY: [01:07:47] And I'm trying to think, how did that happen? I think it was with the Jesuits. They had a tour of Jerusalem, and so we got to see Bethlehem and all of those tourist spots around there. They were having some political problems because I remember we were on the tour bus and the driver had a guard and they kept the gun with them at that time. And we were only allowed to stop at certain points. They would take us to where they wanted us to go. And then, you know, we would get out of the bus and go into various cathedrals and churches and then get back on the bus. I found that very interesting because there were so many places where they would say, oh, this is where Jesus was born or this is where Jesus died. And I'm thinking, well, how could that be so many? He's only one person. There were just hundreds of them. This is where, this is where. All right.

MEHARY: [01:08:52] But we got to see a lot of those churches and those cathedrals. And the Dome of the Rock, every single time I see it on TV, I think, oh, I was there. Took my shoes off and we walked inside there. Chills up your spine, you know? And all the time I was there, I was thinking this was a Christian, um, church, and now I realize it isn't. It was Muslim.

FAIRBURN: [01:09:16] It's a mosque.

MEHARY: [01:09:17] Yeah. But we got a chance to see the Jordan River and, you know, just a lot of things.

FAIRBURN: [01:09:25] So you weren't restricted, you didn't feel confined there?

MEHARY: [01:09:28] Oh no.

FAIRBURN: [01:09:29] But so one question that I neglected to ask you early on. When you first came to Ethiopia, did you feel this notorious culture shock? Did you feel?

MEHARY: [01:09:39] Yes.

FAIRBURN: [01:09:41] And your response to it was?

MEHARY: [01:09:44] My response was I'm ready to go home.

FAIRBURN: [01:09:48] Oh really? Were you close?

MEHARY: [01:09:49] Initially, my response was.

FAIRBURN: [01:09:50] Close to going home?

MEHARY: [01:09:51] I'm ready to go home. But then here I made the commitment. It took me about six months to really get used to things and to feel comfortable with the life there, because there were so many things that you couldn't do. You know, like I mentioned about the toilet paper and eating the ice cream and boiling the water and, uh, you know. But then as you became more comfortable with your surroundings, you realized that we were in a better situation than those who were out in the boondocks. Because we did have, you know, a toilet inside, and even though the water was from up there and coming down and whatever. And even outside of the house, there was a huge water reservoir there just for our house. But my initial thing was, I didn't, I didn't want to stay there. It was a culture shock. And it's funny because when you're there, you don't want to be there. And then when you get used to being there and enjoying it, and then when you come home, you want to go back.

FAIRBURN: [01:11:00] Yeah. So it took you think about six months before you felt comfortable and adjusted?

MEHARY: [01:11:06] Yes. It took me about six months.

FAIRBURN: [01:11:07] So then so that means you had like another year and a half of service. When did you start thinking about the future? The month before you left? Two months, six months?

MEHARY: [01:11:19] It may have been about three or four months.

FAIRBURN: [01:11:21] Three or four months. What were you thinking about doing in the future? You decided not to extend.

MEHARY: [01:11:28] No, I didn't want to extend. I was really ready to go home. I wanted to see my family. And then I was thinking in terms of working here in the city of Buffalo and, you know, just getting on with my life.

FAIRBURN: [01:11:51] Do you remember the close of service debriefing, I think they would call it?

MEHARY: [01:11:58] Yeah. Not too clearly. I do remember they gave us a certificate.

FAIRBURN: [01:12:08] Oh, yeah.

MEHARY: [01:12:08] But it wasn't. The Americans that gave us the certificate, I think the Ethiopians, because, you know, this was a joint effort. Those gentlemen, we had a meeting or we were all together, all of us volunteers. They called our names and then we went up and they presented us with the certificate of completion. Probably some of Haile Selassie's dignitaries.

FAIRBURN: [01:12:36] Oh, that's fun.

MEHARY: [01:12:37] I remember that.

FAIRBURN: [01:12:37] So you have an official certificate that you'd actually served and what you had done?

MEHARY: [01:12:42] Right. And we did get a debriefing, but there again, I don't really remember what they said or what they would talk to us about, or anything of that nature. But I know, I know we did have some meetings.

FAIRBURN: [01:12:55] Do you know at this at the final meeting, were all of the volunteers from your training group there or just some? Like was it done geographically, just those around Addis?

MEHARY: [01:13:05] Yes, it was. Right. Yeah.

FAIRBURN: [01:13:08] So you never saw some of the trainees ever again after you left them at the airport?

MEHARY: [01:13:15] That's right, yeah, yeah.

FAIRBURN: [01:13:17] That was common then.

MEHARY: [01:13:19] Yeah, unless they came into the city and we were, you know, friends and they called and said, we can come by your house. Some of them, I never saw them again.

FAIRBURN: [01:13:29] You had no reunions. Your group?

MEHARY: [01:13:35] Our group per se. Maybe they did. But it may have been a situation where I just didn't go. The one big reunion, the 25th anniversary reunion in Washington, D.C.

FAIRBURN: [01:13:54] Oh, yes.

MEHARY: [01:13:55] I got together with Mary and two of us flew down, and then we got an opportunity to see all the volunteers.

FAIRBURN: [01:14:00] I was there, I didn't meet you there.

MEHARY: [01:14:03] Well, you didn't know me. But I got a chance to see a lot of the volunteers from our group.

FAIRBURN: [01:14:09] That's great.

MEHARY: [01:14:13] But I haven't been to any of the reunions since then, and maybe I should qualify that. Buffalo, when I came home, they had a returned volunteer group, and I participated in that for a while. But it seemed like after a couple of years, you know, there was no literature being dispersed. And then we were going on with our lives and then after a while, things kind of, you know, disintegrated. And then I would get maybe every once in a while some literature from the National Peace Corps organization, and they wanted to know what group or affiliation I was with. And since there was nothing in the city of Buffalo, then sometimes I would check off Rochester or I would check off the one in Ohio. So there were a couple of times that I would go to visit my girlfriend, Mary, and her group was so active. They're still active. So I would go to their meetings. And I just kind of put my name on their list to see the different things that they were doing, and they have a large active group of returned volunteers.

FAIRBURN: [01:15:24] Is there a Friends of Ethiopia group? A country group?

MEHARY: [01:15:30] Um, there may have been. You mean here?

FAIRBURN: [01:15:33] No, it would be a nationwide group in that case. You have either the geographical group like western New York or Buffalo. And also there's like the "friends of," like I'm in the Friends of Nigeria, and that covers the whole country. They may have gone by the wayside and they're not contacting you so obviously, you don't know. OK.

MEHARY: [01:15:56] Now also, while we were there in Ethiopia, not only did we get to travel to these places, but one summer, they said those of us who were in the city, you should have a complete experience. So I was placed in one of those outer lying areas. And um, there, it was just for a month. Whoever the volunteer. We exchanged. And here I was alone, actually. She lived there by herself too. In her house, I had to chop the wood, make my own firewood, which I didn't know how to do. So her lady who did the cooking, she came and showed me how to chop the wood and make a fire to cook food. But my main purpose of being there

was, um, there was a hospital located nearby and they needed someone to work in the hospital in the records department. So since I had the business background, my project at that time was to go to their office and help them to organize their records. So I did that.

FAIRBURN: [01:17:14] This will be on your school break project kind of thing?

MEHARY: [01:17:19] Yes. So I did that for one month. Now, um, of course, the records are in English as well as Amharic, the writing. But I worked with, um, some young people there, and I showed them what to do and how to alphabetize. So I had a group of young people around me to explain what to do. So we got it in, I think at that time, some semblance of order so they could find.

FAIRBURN: [01:17:44] Very useful project.

MEHARY: [01:17:45] The records of the patients. Um, not being a nurse, it was quite an experience for me because that was the first time that I could see the poverty of the country. There were people who were coming from the outer line, even further than where I was, who, um. I think I had asked someone, I said, why are the people like that? And they saying something about they're hungry and they haven't eaten for so many months. And I said, well, why can't you just give them food? And I think this nurse or whoever I was talking to said, well, you know, you can't just give them food to eat if they haven't eaten in so many months or whatever. You have to give it to them gradually or in IVs or whatever the procedure was.

MEHARY: [01:18:38] Also, that was when I saw elephantiasis leprosy and a lot of other diseases. It was more prevalent in that place than it was. It was in the city also, but not as prevalent as it was in the outer. So I saw a lot of, a lot of poverty that short time that I was out there. I think there may have been, um, foreign nurses and doctors that working in that hospital. Now, back to Addis Ababa, where we were working. Not only did we have to be careful with the preparation of our food, but we were told not to eat their delicacy, which was the raw meat.

FAIRBURN: [01:19:25] Oh yeah.

MEHARY: [01:19:25] So many of the people, the Coptic Christians, they would fast. And you could always tell because the two people that we had as helpers, they would not eat during certain times of the month or certain times of the year. But then when the fast was over, let's say they didn't eat during the day, but they had one meal later in the evening. Part of that meal was, I guess, the raw meat, which was actually the beef cut up and then dipped into that spicy sauce, but the meat was not cooked. So as a result then, the young man who was our guard was always suffering from the tapeworm. Very, um, and you could, we could tell because he would always say, well, I got to go. You know, in his language, he would tell us he had to go to the hospital.

FAIRBURN: [01:20:20] Uh huh.

MEHARY: [01:20:22] You could see when he started losing a lot of weight.

FAIRBURN: [01:20:25] Did he survive?

MEHARY: [01:20:26] Yes, he did. And then certain things, they would not eat pork, for example. The food there, after you get used to their traditional food, which is the injera and the wat, I quite, I enjoyed it.

FAIRBURN: [01:20:55] Describe.

MEHARY: [01:20:56] Now, the wat is a very spicy stew. You have *doro wat*, which is chicken. And they have a special way that they cut it up, by the way. They don't cut it up the way we do here in the United States, but they have certain ways that they cut the meat up. And actually, in preparation, what they do is they take the onions and they would fry the onions, and then they would put some of the butter in it, then the *bere*, which is the pepper, the red pepper.

FAIRBURN: [01:21:30] OK.

MEHARY: [01:21:30] And then constantly, you know, kind of make a stew with that and add water. And they would boil eggs and put a whole egg in there. They would have several whole eggs in there. And then they keep, you know, boiling that and stirring it and what have you. And then when that's almost done, then they will put the pieces of chicken in. Now that's *doro wat*. They also have, um, the wat which can be the beef and also the wat which has, um, lamb in it as well. So there's about three or four different kinds. And that's the stew. Now the bread is similar to a pancake, that we know as pancakes, but if you look at it, it's a pancake that's only been cooked on one side, right?

FAIRBURN: [01:22:17] Uh huh. OK.

MEHARY: [01:22:18] You can see the bubbles. And they have a huge, uh, tin pan that's about this big around, and so they would pour that, uh, mixture or whatever around, and then it would cook on the bottom and the top would still have the holes in it, you know, the pancake.

FAIRBURN: [01:22:47] And they cut it up right there on the pan?

MEHARY: [01:22:49] Oh, no, no, no. They don't cut it up, they slide it over into the basket. In fact, I have one of the actual baskets behind my chair there. You see, behind you?

FAIRBURN: [01:22:59] This chair?

MEHARY: [01:22:59] No, no, no. The actual basket is something I brought back. [inaudible] So and the injera. So they would make one injera and they would slide that off, make another injera. So there would be maybe sometimes five or six layers of the injera. And then when the mealtime came, family, friends, they would all sit around the basket. I've forgotten what the name of it is. And the injera is there. You're in your place. Then they would pour the different stews around. OK? So when it came time to eat, you'd tear off your portion of injera, dip it into whatever stew you want, and then you would eat. That's how they would do that.

FAIRBURN: [01:24:07] And then it came around again and you could get a different kind of stew?

MEHARY: [01:24:09] Well, yeah, you're sitting down. And if you want, you know, you could just reach around or whatever. Ok, so you will just dip it out like that.

FAIRBURN: [01:24:16] Now is this, when they're feeding people that much food, what are you talking about, 15, 20 people, more?

MEHARY: [01:24:26] You never had more than about five, six.

FAIRBURN: [01:24:28] Oh, really? With all that?

MEHARY: [01:24:32] Mm hmm. Five or six. And then, you know, it's enough so that you can have a meal the next day.

FAIRBURN: [01:24:37] Oh, great.

MEHARY: [01:24:39] But you didn't put it all there.

FAIRBURN: [01:24:40] Good leftovers.

MEHARY: [01:24:41] There were leftovers.

FAIRBURN: [01:24:42] So that was fun.

MEHARY: [01:24:45] Now, um. We didn't have the facilities to cook the food there like that, but you could go to the marketplace and buy the injera. And there were different types of injera. You can find the dark injera with the dark teff. That's what their wheat was called, teff. Up from the dark teff up to the white teff. The typical color, though, is a grayish looking color, which is similar to what you see right there. That's the typical color of it. But you can get the white, which looks just like this napkin.

FAIRBURN: [01:25:23] How would you spell injera in English?

MEHARY: [01:25:24] I-N-J-E-R-A.

FAIRBURN: [01:25:29] I-N.

MEHARY: [01:25:32] J-E-R-A.

FAIRBURN: [01:25:32] E-R-A, OK.

MEHARY: [01:25:32] Injera. And wat, W-A-T.

FAIRBURN: [01:25:35] OK, so it's a kind of bread plus the stew that goes with it.

MEHARY: [01:25:42] Yeah. Now, it's very spicy. The actual food is quite spicy.

FAIRBURN: [01:25:46] You gave me a taste of the spicy stew.

MEHARY: [01:25:48] Very spicy, very hot. But it's tasty. Once you get used to it, it's very tasty. It's very delicious.

FAIRBURN: [01:25:57] So do you cook that style here?

MEHARY: [01:25:59] Oh no, I have never, no.

FAIRBURN: [01:26:01] Is there a decent Ethiopian restaurant in Buffalo?

MEHARY: [01:26:05] I haven't found one. Now I, um, one year we went to Detroit for some reason or another, a conference I think it was, and we're walking downtown, some other friends and I, and I see Ethiopian restaurant. I said, oh, I've got to go in.

FAIRBURN: [01:26:20] We are going.

MEHARY: [01:26:21] So we went right in there. These people knew nothing about Ethiopia. They knew. I said, we're going to try this. I've got to have some of this. And even there, it was not the same. They had watered it down, you know, because Americans don't like food that is too hot.

FAIRBURN: [01:26:35] But it was run by actual Ethiopians?

MEHARY: [01:26:37] Yes, it was. Yeah. They are Ethiopians in the city of Buffalo, but I don't think they've gotten to the point that they have Ethiopian foods. And I had an Ethiopian student last year, and I used to come to go to class, and whenever I'd see her, I would always greet her in Amharic. And she would look at me so funny as if, you know, what's wrong with this woman, how does she know this? And finally, I told her, you know, about my background. And I asked her at the end of the year if she knew where I could get some berbere. She said, yes, I'll let you know, but, you know, kids, she never got back to me.

FAIRBURN: [01:27:16] Wasn't there something I was supposed to do here? OK, so did you have a future plan while you were still in Ethiopia? Or was it come back and get a job in Buffalo and carry on?

MEHARY: [01:27:28] It was pretty much come back and get a job in Buffalo, you know? Um. If I had been smart, I would have had, I think, better plans in terms of what I was going to do, because I didn't realize that I enjoyed the traveling so much. I didn't realize I enjoyed the, um, the company of international people. Because when I came home, it just wasn't exciting anymore. It was, you know, the people were the same old people. And I was just yearning to travel again, and I tried looking into other avenues, but Buffalo is such an out-of-the-way place. And when you start trying to write letters and call them, they say, well, you know, where are you? You have to come here and you have to do this, you have to do that. And I was just pretty much cut off.

MEHARY: [01:28:29] Because I found that I wanted to go back to school and do international studies, and the University of Buffalo didn't even know what I was talking about. I went up there several times. I said, well, don't you have an international studies program? Oh, no, we don't have that. And that was back in the '70s.

FAIRBURN: [01:28:44] Dear me.

MEHARY: [01:28:46] You know, now, of course, they've got international programming, everyone's, you know, involved in it, but back then. And so it kind of put us cooking some of the things that I, avenues that I probably would have taken once I came back. There as something I was watching on TV last night, and I said maybe I should have just gone into the Air Force or something like that, but then the Vietnam War was on and I didn't want to get caught up in that because there is a lot of stuff with that. So I don't know.

FAIRBURN: [01:29:21] So then is that what you did? You came to Buffalo and came back to your parents' home?

MEHARY: [01:29:27] Yeah, went back to my parents' home and I taught there for a year.

FAIRBURN: [01:29:33] Uh huh.

MEHARY: [01:29:40] Then I, um, see before I left Ethiopia, I had met a young man who had just come back from the United States. He was an Ethiopian citizen. He had just come back from the United States, studying out at the University of Arizona. And we became friends, you know, he was a nice young man. He really didn't want me to come home. He says, why don't you stay here for a third year and so forth and so on? And I said, no, I'm ready to go home now. But anyway, we continued writing. And when I came, when I got back to the United States, I'm thinking, well, this is not exciting. You know, I want to travel, I want to do this, I want to do that. And when I started looking up my old friends, you know, the few friends that I had, they were heavily involved in relationships or they were married. They already had children. And I'm thinking, well, you know, I would invite them, let's do this. Oh, well, I can't do this. I can't. And so it was like I was out of place. And I was just lost.

MEHARY: [01:30:42] So anyway, that next year I went back to Ethiopia and I married the young man.

FAIRBURN: [01:30:48] Ah ha. So you were in touch with him when you got home, you were writing and calling and all that stuff?

MEHARY: [01:30:51] Oh yeah. He was the one calling and writing and sending flowers, and let's come back, you know? So I went back and we got married. So we were married for about four years. In fact, two of those years we came to the United States. And we were out in Kalamazoo, Michigan, and went to school, both of us. And then we went back to Ethiopia. And I think at that point, I don't know, things started to change. So the marriage didn't last.

FAIRBURN: [01:31:27] Can I ask, did you have children?

MEHARY: [01:31:29] Yes, I have a daughter. We have a daughter.

FAIRBURN: [01:31:36] OK. That's nice. So then you were back single again.

MEHARY: [01:31:40] Yep. And I've been single ever since. Thirty years of singlehood.

FAIRBURN: [01:31:45] And your daughter is married now and you have grandchildren?

MEHARY: [01:31:47] No, she's not married. She's, um. That's interesting because, um, maybe because of the way I am and also her father. She's a very independent young lady.

FAIRBURN: [01:32:02] Nothing wrong with that.

MEHARY: [01:32:02] And she has done more traveling than I would ever have imagined. You know, she doesn't wince to pick up and say, well, I want to go this place. And the next thing I know, oh, I'm getting ready, I'm packing my bags, I'm going. She's been to India. And she's been to all of the major countries in Europe and she's been to South America.

FAIRBURN: [01:32:27] Pleasure or business?

MEHARY: [01:32:31] Some of them were business, and some of them were pleasure. And she's been to many places in the United States as well.

FAIRBURN: [01:32:38] Is she based here in Buffalo or is she coming?

MEHARY: [01:32:41] She's in New York City.

FAIRBURN: [01:32:42] New York City.

MEHARY: [01:32:44] So she has a group of friends, and they also like to do a lot of traveling. And she's talented and, um, intelligent, and as I say, very independent. She's there in New York, and she's working for a major magazine company.

FAIRBURN: [01:33:00] Wow.

MEHARY: [01:33:01] So she does well. Even one of the companies that she used to work with, um, that was one of the reasons she did all of this traveling because they would send her to these different places. Also, when they would have their management meetings, they would send the managers to the Bahamas for, what they'd call it? A regroup.

FAIRBURN: [01:33:22] OK. Whatever you call it.

MEHARY: [01:33:26] Well, I've been to the Bahamas three or four times now.

FAIRBURN: [01:33:28] That's very nice.

MEHARY: [01:33:30] So that's her life right now. I don't have any grandchildren.
[inaudible]

FAIRBURN: [01:33:40] But you formed her, so you live with these consequences, good or bad or whatever. And there seem to be very good consequences.

MEHARY: [01:33:48] Back to my time abroad there. Not only did I get a chance to go to the Middle East, but for our vacation, a group of us young ladies got together and we went to East Africa. So I've been to Kenya, Nairobi,

Mombasa. Uganda before Idi Amin. Tanzania. I've taken a safari into the treetops.

FAIRBURN: [01:34:28] Oh, yeah.

MEHARY: [01:34:28] You know, and I've seen the White Nile, what is it, the blue? [tape break] And you know, we were just there together. And some things I think we did then, of course, you would not do now. For instance, hitchhike.

FAIRBURN: [01:34:54] Oh, absolutely.

MEHARY: [01:34:55] We hitchhiked through Kenya. And there were a group of Indians, an Indian family, that picked us up. We're sitting in the back of their truck. They stopped and picked us up, and there we went to wherever we wanted to go. And then when we got there, you know, they'd drop us off and we said, well, where are we going now? So, you know, we'd do that until we got to a place where if we could get a bus. We would always be, not a special bus in this case. It was a bus where there were the native people, you know, with the chickens.

FAIRBURN: [01:35:25] Oh yeah, oh yeah.

MEHARY: [01:35:26] The chickens up above our head and they're standing up. And I remember we were, um, the two of us were sitting in chairs on the bus in the seats and here was a Masai man, and he's there with his big cane and, you know. Oh my god. But we had some experiences, really, really experiencing.

FAIRBURN: [01:35:49] And I'm sure you imparted that to your daughter.

MEHARY: [01:35:51] Oh yes, I did.

FAIRBURN: [01:35:52] Developed in her that kind of curiosity.

MEHARY: [01:35:56] Yeah. As she was growing up, I told her, I had to tell her her background about her father and my experiences as well. And then each

time I would go to some of those Peace Corps meetings in Ohio, she was there. Other things I would point out to her, even the characteristics of the Ethiopians and the Indians and East Africans. I had lived there long enough that I could look at people and tell pretty much what country they were from. I didn't know the language that well, but I could listen to the accents and even now, you know, where I work we have people who work as security guards and aides in the building. And if they're new and they walk in the building, I pick up right away, oh, he's African. She's this, you know? It doesn't take me but a minute and I pick up right away that they're from a different country.

FAIRBURN: [01:36:55] In your school, do you do any discussion or informational activities about Peace Corps? Do kids ask you about it?

MEHARY: [01:37:05] It's been a while, but I did.

FAIRBURN: [01:37:06] When you first came back, did you talk about Peace Corps?

MEHARY: [01:37:08] Yes, I did. I did talk about it to some extent, but I found they were all apathetic. They really weren't that interested in it, but not the kids weren't interested, but I found adults were. When I first came back and that year that I was there, they were all asking me. You know, because I would tell them and they would ask questions and they were interested in it. And I had two or three boxes of slides and I would show my slides to them, you know? But now.

FAIRBURN: [01:37:51] For us old timers, it seems like a long ways away. So you did attempt to get involved in one of the early Buffalo affiliates and now you're involved in the new one?

MEHARY: [01:38:07] Yes.

FAIRBURN: [01:38:08] You feel hopeful about that one?

MEHARY: [01:38:10] Yes, I do.

FAIRBURN: [01:38:11] What would you like to see that group do in Buffalo? Is it, do you think of it just as a kind of a nostalgia or otherwise?

MEHARY: [01:38:20] Well, nostalgia, but I would really like to see them become involved with the international community. I don't want to say do something to help, but be around international people, continue working with them, learning about their culture, learning what has happened over there, because so much has changed. And then also learning why are they here? How do they feel? What is, um, what's going on with them? Are they having culture shock? If so, then is there anything we can do? Maybe to help them carry on their traditions, their culture.

FAIRBURN: [01:39:11] Are you interested in getting involved in the International Institute with Pam Kethy?

MEHARY: [01:39:18] Yes, eventually, not right now.

FAIRBURN: [01:39:20] No, no, you're busy.

MEHARY: [01:39:21] Not right now.

FAIRBURN: [01:39:21] There's a little on your plate.

MEHARY: [01:39:22] Later on, you know, maybe a couple years from now.

FAIRBURN: [01:39:28] Well, that's good.

MEHARY: [01:39:28] With the Peace Corps, particularly, and I would like to see the group, um, recruit, do a little bit more recruiting. I know it's difficult because Americans now tend to be so selfish. Maybe that's the wrong word, but they're all into themselves. All Americans. And I've watched this over a number of years where, uh. I know when I was growing up, the family was trying to take care of the family and make sure the children had what they were supposed to have. But I find it's even more so now. People are just into what they can do for themselves and what they can get from themselves. And if you're not involved with, you know. [inaudible]

FAIRBURN: [01:40:21] Your neighborhood has undergone some changes in the 30 years?

MEHARY: [01:40:29] Yeah, a lot of changes. But those are the kinds of things that I would like to. The nostalgia, that's going to be there, but I'd like to see more young people get involved with having the opportunity to go abroad. Particularly young African Americans. I find that our youth are lost. They're floundering, they're reaching at some immediate goals, which may not be the very best for them. Thinking that this is going to work, but it only brings responsibilities and problems. I don't see our young African Americans taking advantage of some of the opportunities that are available.

FAIRBURN: [01:41:20] That have a hard earned by their ancestors.

MEHARY: [01:41:24] I see the difference in my youth when we did not have free scholarships and we didn't have, I mean no one was offering the scholarships as I see today. My parents had to pay for me to go to college. When the University of Buffalo transferred from a private institution to the state, sure, they gave us that little award, state award that they were offering, \$250 a semester. But my parents had to pay for me to go to school. And then simple things like bus fare to get to high school, I shelled out the money. But nowadays, you know, our kids are looking for other folks to do for them and they're not doing for themselves, but then, you know, Buffalo provides bus passes for them, free lunches for them, free education, free books, free, free, free.

FAIRBURN: [01:42:21] For all students or just for African Americans?

MEHARY: [01:42:24] For the majority of students if their incomes are what have you. Or if they live outside of a certain distance. But when I look at the general population of the school where I'm presently working, the majority of them are getting free bus passes. And when it comes to the end of the year when they're ready to graduate, a lot of the organizations and sororities, the city, the community agencies, they have these \$500, \$600 scholarships. And they're groping, they're just waiting for the kids

to apply, to give away the money. Yet those children will not even go to the guidance office to look up what the scholarships are. And when it comes to filling out the applications, they don't even want to do it. So the money sits.

FAIRBURN: [01:43:17] That's terrible.

MEHARY: [01:43:17] And yet when I was in school, they didn't have these things for us.

FAIRBURN: [01:43:21] Yeah. So you managed?

MEHARY: [01:43:23] Yeah, we managed, you know, and when the opportunity came, we took advantage. Here the opportunities are right there and the kids, I don't want that. I don't want this. Well what for, you know? So I don't. That's my biggest problem when I'm teaching, you know with the kids. I see all of this stuff and I'm thinking, they could do better, there's nothing.

FAIRBURN: [01:43:45] To help or not to help. Is it worse? I don't know.

MEHARY: [01:43:48] I talk to them, and it's a whole different realm. They don't understand or they don't have the background of the family to say, hey, this is available to you. You have the opportunity, take advantage of it. And I guess there's so many other things out there, it's just not. They don't think of it as being opportunities.

FAIRBURN: [01:44:11] So, well, when you were in serving in Ethiopia, did you feel you were filling a need that Ethiopians had? You individually and your colleagues in the Peace Corps, filling a need?

MEHARY: [01:44:26] Yeah. Well, at the time, I thought I was filling a need. You know, giving them an opportunity to develop a skill, hopefully to obtain some type of employment, which I saw some of them did. Unfortunately, I haven't been able to keep up with any of the students that I had at that time. But I had heard that there were some, particularly the young men, the boys in the school. Some of them did get an opportunity to come to

the United States to study. So whatever, you know, um, we were offering them, some of them did get an opportunity to take advantage of it.

FAIRBURN: [01:45:13] You touched somebody, certainly. How about getting Ethiopians to feel more comfortable about Americans, were you able to have any impact that way? Was the American way of life too huge a shock for them or do you think that they learned something from you?

MEHARY: [01:45:40] I don't know. Also, it may have been. I'm looking at this two ways. Those Ethiopians who had come to the United, had an opportunity to come to the United States, and actually get involved in the culture here, and then went back to their country. Now, what we were doing, they could understand. But I think the typical native person, native Ethiopian, I don't really think that we did that much. Because I didn't see, for instance, the young man who was our servant, not servant, but the guard there, I didn't see him making any changes. And the young girl who was doing the cooking, I didn't see her making too many changes either. But we did have to teach her the things that were necessary for us to survive, the boiling of the water, how to cook foods the way we wanted it cooked. But then at the same time, she taught us some things too.

FAIRBURN: [01:46:58] Oh, sure. Yes, you learned about Ethiopia and Ethiopia learned about you. But how about this young woman when she gets, when she applies for a job with another European family? She can come in, I know how to boil water, I know how to be sanitary. I know that.

MEHARY: [01:47:13] Right.

FAIRBURN: [01:47:14] OK, so she spread that. How about in your classroom?

MEHARY: [01:47:18] In fact, now that we're mentioning it. Now, when I went back after the year, when I went back to Ethiopia, um, my husband and I looked her up and we hired her again.

FAIRBURN: [01:47:30] Because you knew she was well trained.

MEHARY: [01:47:32] Yeah, we hired her again.

FAIRBURN: [01:47:33] How about your technique in the classroom? You were taking to Ethiopia things that you took for granted in the American classroom, which was discipline, promptness. You were prepared. You, you know, probably worked with your class a little bit differently than a traditional teacher might have. Probably had some conversation in the class. You probably asked, looked for interesting things to do with the kids. Would that be a change for them?

MEHARY: [01:48:03] For over there?

FAIRBURN: [01:48:07] Mm hmm. Of course, it was a Jesuit school, just kind of sophisticated, that's a little bit of a problem. You've already had that.

MEHARY: [01:48:13] But that's what I'm thinking. They already have that. I don't think we were given any outside duties. You know, like now you have hall duty and you cafeteria duty and you've got your clubs. I don't remember having to do any of those things because the Jesuits pretty much handled all of those things for us.

FAIRBURN: [01:48:34] OK, so you had a special circumstance. How about, um, with your neighbors out on the street. Americans are notoriously more friendly. Would they say, oh, there's the American, wave at her? Or would they just say, there's the American, turn aside, ignore her?

MEHARY: [01:48:59] Now, see there again, I don't.

FAIRBURN: [01:49:01] OK. Well, you were, again, you were in the city.

MEHARY: [01:49:04] Yeah, we were the city, so. We really didn't have any problem one way or the other with that.

FAIRBURN: [01:49:15] That's fine. I just wondered, you know, how did they feel about having Americans among them? You probably weren't the first.

MEHARY: [01:49:21] And I think at that time, though, if you remember Haile Selassie was a friend to the American government and the American government was providing the Peace Corps, trying to give as much help as possible. So we were welcomed, as long as, you know, whatever the politics were going on at the time, which I don't know, as long as we did what we were supposed to do and stay out of trouble. You know, we were quite welcome. It wasn't a matter of them, you know, not wanting us there. They welcomed us at that time. And incidentally, I had several opportunities to meet Haile Selassie in-person. One was at his many parades. It's like every time he'd leave the country and come back, schools were closed. The emperor is coming back, so we knew we didn't have, the school would close a half a day. All the kids would, you know, be dismissed. And then we would get ready and walk to wherever the parade was.

MEHARY: [01:50:31] Sometimes it was not too far from the school because they have these, uh, what they call these circles. They call them, um, kilos. So we were at, I think, Sidist Kilo, six kilos from the inner city. That was further up north. So sometimes they would set up, um, places there, you know, with coverings and the podium and everything for the emperor with his guards and everything right there at Sidist Kilo. So it wasn't too far to walk. Otherwise, then if they had it downtown at another location, then we would go there. And they would have a full parade, I mean, just everyone on the sides of the street and this emperor. And then, you know, being a foreigner, sometimes as an African American, it's a disadvantage in those places because they don't realize that you are until you open your mouth. So at some point, you know, Mary and I wanted to get a little bit closer to him. And so we would try to say something in Amharic and they realize we're foreigners. So then we would kind of nudge ourselves up as close as we could get. And I know if we were, we were, uh, American whites it would be no problem and we'd just walk right straight through.

FAIRBURN: [01:51:37] Really.

MEHARY: [01:51:38] But then when I got married, my husband was an artist, so he wanted to. He did an art show and painted all of these pictures of various

parts of Ethiopia and so forth and put on a show. And then he invited, formally invited, the emperor. So there I was, standing like here to where you are.

FAIRBURN: [01:52:09] Yeah, did he actually expect him to come?

MEHARY: [01:52:11] He did come.

FAIRBURN: [01:52:12] But were you surprised when he came or?

MEHARY: [01:52:14] Well, no. I think at that point I didn't. I thought about it. But then he went through whatever the formalities were. And he said yes, and he came to a showing.

FAIRBURN: [01:52:25] Oh wow.

MEHARY: [01:52:26] And had his dignitaries there and there I was standing and I didn't. I was standing. I didn't know whether to shake his hand or what. So finally, the emperor raised his hand and I shook his hand. And I was that close to him. I met him several times.

FAIRBURN: [01:52:41] Did he remember you, the later times?

MEHARY: [01:52:45] I don't think so. I suppose he met a lot of people.

FAIRBURN: [01:52:47] That's impressive, that's good.

MEHARY: [01:52:48] And that was interesting also in that here you're thinking that he's a big person but he was short like me, small stature.

FAIRBURN: [01:52:59] But regal.

MEHARY: [01:53:01] Yeah, very regal. And I met, um. We continued our own religion, in that Mary and I started attending a Methodist church there. It was a missionary church. And so even after both of us completed our tour of duty, we kept in contact with these missionaries. They stayed there in Ethiopia until after their revolution and then came back to the

United States. In the meantime, she wrote a book about her experiences as a missionary there and then how her family helped Haile Selassie's grandchildren get out of the country and the different things that they did. So I've got a copy of that book. And we kept in contact with that family for a long period of time, and I don't know what happened. I think they moved or some, you know, you lose contact with these people.

FAIRBURN: [01:54:07] Things happen, that's true.

MEHARY: [01:54:07] Because I wrote, I think the last time I wrote, the letter came back, and I don't know where they are right now.

FAIRBURN: [01:54:13] OK, we have a few minutes left. Do you have any summary of the impact of your Peace Corps experience on your entire life or anything like that you'd like to say?

MEHARY: [01:54:28] It did have an impact on my entire life. That's for sure. I think when we, when we make choices, cause I told you at the beginning how I had a choice to either go to the Peace Corps or to just begin teaching. One of the impacts is that when I finally did come back to the United States, things had changed so much here that for me to start again with my life, it was difficult.

FAIRBURN: [01:55:06] Mm hmm.

MEHARY: [01:55:06] And I think if I had started right after college at that time and had been teaching, I would have had maybe 35 in 10 years ago and I could have retired. But the fact that I went to the Peace Corps and took that chance, and a couple of other chances in terms of my life, when I finally did get myself settled in, then the educational field had changed considerably. It's very difficult to find employment here, at least in the city of Buffalo. And I found that at some point in time, I was even applying to other cities trying to find steady employment.

FAIRBURN: [01:55:50] Hmm.

MEHARY: [01:55:54] But I have opted to stay right here in the city of Buffalo. And I ended up working, uh, at various places, one of which is Bryant and Stratton Business Institute.

FAIRBURN: [01:56:07] Oh yeah.

MEHARY: [01:56:07] With adults, using my skills and my experiences. I have also been adjunct professor at ECC Community College [Erie Community College], as well as Buff State [Buffalo State College], for a number of years. Um, so that again, expanded my career and my experiences.

FAIRBURN: [01:56:29] It also detracted from your New York state tension.

MEHARY: [01:56:34] Exactly. The years I spent in Bryant and Stratton, that's the biggest thing, because I was there for about 10 years. So I lost not only the years I spent in Ethiopia, because New York State doesn't accept Peace Corps, I also lost additional years by being with the Bryant and Stratton, which means now the impact on my life is that I'm still working, trying to catch up, which I probably will never be able to catch up.

FAIRBURN: [01:56:55] Often you do something for idealistic reasons, and you don't think when you're 20 something that this will have impact when you are 60 something, but unfortunately it does.

MEHARY: [01:57:06] So it has, um, it has impacted. But then I look at that and I say, well, if I had taken that choice and not had the opportunity, would I be able to do it now? To go to the Peace Corps? Would I even think about that? If, let's say that I had started teaching and hopefully gotten married and had children and grandchildren, then I would not have been able to do that right now, I don't think, with a husband and a family and so forth. It would not be the thing that I could have been able to do.

FAIRBURN: [01:57:42] Not unless you're widowed.

MEHARY: [01:57:43] Right. And even widowed, you don't know how your health is going to be. You don't know whether that.

FAIRBURN: [01:57:48] Property by then and you'd worry about that.

MEHARY: [01:57:50] Yeah, with a lot of responsibilities. So, um. I don't regret.

FAIRBURN: [01:57:58] Good.

MEHARY: [01:57:58] I never regretted that experience. It's the one part of my life that I said, if I could do just that section, that segment again, I would do it again.

FAIRBURN: [01:58:15] Good. Should we wrap on that?

MEHARY: [01:58:17] I think so.

FAIRBURN: [01:58:18] Excellent. Thank you very much for your time, Cynthia.

MEHARY: [01:58:20] You're welcome.

FAIRBURN: [01:58:21] I appreciate it.

[END OF INTERVIEW]