

Sally Waley Oral History Interview
Returned Peace Corps Volunteer Collection
Administrative Information

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Date of Interview: August 24, 2018

Location of Interview: Shawnee on Delaware, Pennsylvania

Length: 38 pages

Biographical Note

Sally Waley served as a Peace Corps volunteer in Cambodia from 2012 to 2014 in a health education program.

Access

Open.

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Suggested Citation

Sally Waley, recorded interview by Evelyn Ganzglass, August 24, 2018, page #, Returned Peace Corps Volunteer Collection, John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum.

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Oral History Interview

with

Sally Waley

August 24, 2018

Shawnee on Delaware, Pennsylvania

By Evelyn Ganzglass

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

GANZGLASS: [00:00:02] This is Evelyn Ganzglass. I was a Peace Corps volunteer in Somalia from 1966 to 1968. And today is August 24th, 2018. I'm interviewing Sally Waley, who was a Peace Corps volunteer in Cambodia from, um, from 2012 to 2014. So with that introduction, let me ask you, why did you join the Peace Corps?

WALEY: [00:00:36] I think there are a few reasons I joined the Peace Corps. One was because I always said I would, and my dad said I wouldn't. And uh, another one was because I grew up volunteering and I always felt like I was more present in my life when I was giving back and volunteering. And then also, I worked in international development and I wanted to. I worked in international development policy and I wanted to actually work in international development on the ground.

GANZGLASS: [00:01:09] So what was your background? Where did you grow up?

WALEY: [00:01:12] I grew up in Austin, Texas, and I went to UT for undergrad and I went to D.C. I was at George Mason for my graduate program.

GANZGLASS: [00:01:23] In international relations?

WALEY: [00:01:25] International trade policy. And then I went and I worked for the organization Society for International Development, and I learned a lot about the different, different tracks of international development and policy and kind of how it was being shaped and influenced and what it was doing in the world.

GANZGLASS: [00:01:46] And you decided that wasn't enough and you wanted to actually go live overseas. Why did your father not want you to go?

WALEY: [00:01:56] I think he just didn't believe that I'd do it. I think it always sounded so far-fetched, and I was young when he said that. I remember talking to having a conversation with him in the driveway of our house and I said, I'm going to join the Peace Corps, and I think I was probably 12. And he said, no you're not.

GANZGLASS: [00:02:11] And then how old were you when you finally joined?

WALEY: [00:02:13] Twenty-two.

GANZGLASS: [00:02:14] Twenty-two. And he still didn't think you would do it.

WALEY: [00:02:18] I think he'd gotten the picture by then. I'd just studied abroad a lot. I traveled a lot. I think he kind of knew.

GANZGLASS: [00:02:25] You wore him down. And what did your friends think about all of this? I guess you were living in D.C. at the time, right?

WALEY: [00:02:32] Yeah. I was I was living in D.C. and, you know, I kind of grew up as a, I was always outdoors and we had horses and animals and I was always camping and hiking. And, you know, my grandparents had a farm. I was very engaged and kind of, you know, a lot of like physical outdoors stuff. And then I moved to D.C. and, you

know, I kind of had to put on suits to go to work every day. And my friends in D.C., nobody had really seen that side of me and they said, you're going to do what? And they didn't, I think, think I could make it. But I was like, you know, I have this whole other part of my life.

GANZGLASS: [00:03:11] Was that part of the challenge, that you could make it, or going back to your roots of being outdoors?

WALEY: [00:03:18] It was certainly a challenge. You know, I didn't I don't know that I gave the challenges a whole lot of thought or, you know, and I think with Peace Corps, you don't really understand the challenges until you're there. I talked to a lot of people about their experiences before I left, and you don't really get it until you're there. The challenges that really come up are much less tangible or easy to explain in a conversation when you're sitting in America.

GANZGLASS: [00:03:41] And so we'll get to some of those when we talk. So you decided you wanted to join the Peace Corps, you applied. How long did it take to get in?

WALEY: [00:03:51] I think from when I applied to when I left, it was about a year. So I think in at the time, that was pretty quick. It was it seemed like it was.

GANZGLASS: [00:03:58] Interesting how the time frame of applying to selection was, it extended over time. Much longer by the time you came along.

WALEY: [00:04:09] Right. Well, the first class they passed the bill and, like, two months later there were boots on the ground.

GANZGLASS: [00:04:15] That's right. So what was the whole process like for you to get into Peace Corps?

WALEY: [00:04:24] The main thing I remember was the medical clearance took forever, and I think, you know, I'd kind of I wrote down everything that had ever been wrong with me, and I didn't really have that much wrong with me, but they made me like, go evaluate everything. I remember

walking in to get blood drawn for a variety of tests they wanted to do, and the woman looking at my orders and looking at me and pulling about 15 vials out and said, girl, I'm going to suck you dry. I also remember going in for my interview and. I was living in D.C., so I went into the headquarters building and you need a driver's license to get in, and I realized I'd forgotten my driver's, and I'd driven there. And so then I was like, oh jeez, driving without a driver's license, I can't get into the building. And so the woman who was interviewing me came downstairs and conducted my interview in a supply closet on the first floor because that was the only space that was available.

GANZGLASS: [00:05:25] That was elegant.

WALEY: [00:05:26] Yes. She was like, welcome to Peace Corps. I think that supply closet is now the, um, it's where Jodi works. It's the returned volunteer services or something. It's nice now. But when I was there, it was a broom closet.

GANZGLASS: [00:05:41] That should have told you something.

WALEY: [00:05:42] Yeah, yeah.

GANZGLASS: [00:05:45] So you were interviewed and then you are offered.

WALEY: [00:05:49] I was initially offered a position working on water irrigation systems in West Africa, and I suspect, because it was around that time, that I was slated to go to Mali and that year Mali was pulled from the program. And so they said, well. I had applied as a business development volunteer and they said, well, we can wait and place you as a business development volunteer somewhere else in Africa, or we can send you as a health volunteer to Southeast Asia. And I had done some work for my graduate program in Southeast Asia, and I said, oh yeah, send me to send me to Southeast Asia. I'd love to go there.

GANZGLASS: [00:06:26] So for health though, right? And you were a business major.

WALEY: [00:06:30] Right, right. I think I took two semesters of nutrition in college, and I think that's what tipped my application that way.

GANZGLASS: [00:06:38] So what was the project you were actually involved in?

WALEY: [00:06:41] I was a health extension agent.

GANZGLASS: [00:06:44] So what is a health extension agent?

WALEY: [00:06:47] So I think what we were supposed to, we were working with rural health centers in Cambodia. Cambodia has a network of health centers throughout the country, and we were working with them to try and bring health education into the surrounding villages. And so I didn't. A lot of my fellow volunteers in health sector, you know, sat at the health center every day and weighed babies and talked to people about nutrition and kind of did their service there. My health center was very small and very, very busy. And so I spent most of my time outside of the health center working with village, uh, village chiefs. Each village in Cambodia has two appointed village health volunteers, which was a neat system that can kind of keep track of births and deaths and any illness that's going through. And so I worked with them and kind of did a program of education on a series of health topics. And per Peace Corps, I also worked at the school and I worked in.

GANZGLASS: [00:07:51] We're going to get to that later. So you were selected and they said Southeast Asia. And then how did Cambodia come up?

WALEY: [00:08:01] I knew, I'd gone online and, you know, I knew which month I was going to leave. And so I kind of knew it was either going to be the Philippines or Cambodia. And I think I found out it was Cambodia, like a month and a half before I left. It was pretty near to, you know, I didn't have a whole lot of information before I left.

GANZGLASS: [00:08:17] Did you have any thoughts about Cambodia?

WALEY: [00:08:21] No. No, I knew that it was close to Thailand, and I'd heard a lot about Thailand, and I knew almost nothing about Cambodia.

GANZGLASS: [00:08:29] And that was OK. Did you start researching about Cambodia?

WALEY: [00:08:33] Not really. I worked. I was at my job. Right before I left, I was planning this big conference and it was happening like a month before I left. So I really was like, great, going to Cambodia, you know, and I just did not have any time to think about it or research or yeah.

GANZGLASS: [00:08:49] So where did you meet then with the other volunteers?

WALEY: [00:08:54] In D.C. So I'd actually packed up all my stuff and moved back to Texas for a month to stay with my parents. And then we got our staging orders and I figured I was going to go out to the West Coast. And they said, going back to D.C. I just left there.

GANZGLASS: [00:09:10] So you stayed in a hotel? Did you stay in a hotel?

WALEY: [00:09:13] And yeah, I stayed a couple of nights with a friend, a couple of friends. And then I went to the, um, because my cat was going to stay in D.C. with my former roommate. And so I went and spent one night with my cat. And then we stayed at a hotel in Georgetown, the Hyatt, or I think it was the Hyatt in Georgetown. It was nice.

GANZGLASS: [00:09:39] Yeah, it's pretty fancy for Peace Corps. And what happened in the staging? Anything of interest?

WALEY: [00:09:48] Well, I had a really, really unfortunate timing for my staging. My dad was diagnosed with cancer the day that I left for Peace Corps, so I showed up to staging knowing that he was about to get that diagnosis. And I don't really remember much of staging. I actually didn't know if I was going to go. And I and, you know, we staged for a couple of days and I remember we were kind of doing like the, you know, you had your sheet, you had to find people that like only brought one bag and find people that spoke another language. And I was totally out of it and not, you know, not able to engage and the whole staging process kind of flew by me.

GANZGLASS: [00:10:33] How many people?

WALEY: [00:10:34] There were 60 of us. I think there was supposed to be 60. I think there were only 58. I think two people didn't show up.

GANZGLASS: [00:10:40] Just didn't show up.

WALEY: [00:10:42] I don't know what happened to them.

GANZGLASS: [00:10:43] So then you did go overseas after that, so you got through staging.

WALEY: [00:10:51] We all got on a plane.

GANZGLASS: [00:10:53] And what where did you go from D.C.?

WALEY: [00:10:56] We flew to Bangkok and we spent the night in Bangkok, and I remember being kind of amused that nobody was really taking, you know, this big group of 58 people and they were like, here your plane tickets get to camp, you know, and I kind of thought somebody was going to come with us or, you know, but no they kind of we all kind of like elected one person.

GANZGLASS: [00:11:16] You just went by yourself.

WALEY: [00:11:19] Mm hmm. And Rich Durham was our one guy that we said, you're going to show us through the airport. And he, you know, was of our cohort and just kind of guided us all through the airport.

GANZGLASS: [00:11:31] That's really interesting. So had the group for what you, you are not tuned in, but had the group formed as a group?

WALEY: [00:11:39] Yeah, I think so. I remember sitting, you know, in a couple of airports and we all kind of in the waiting, you know, in the gates waiting for our planes and people were chatting and playing games and I was kind of like I was trying to sleep. But I remember people kind of were

bonding at that point. And yeah, I was trying to get through, get through the trip.

GANZGLASS: [00:12:04] Ok, so you got to Bangkok and then what happened in Bangkok?

WALEY: [00:12:09] We all got on a bus and they drive on the other side of the road in Bangkok because I remember us all trying to get on the bus and we all realized we were like standing on the wrong side. The door was on the other side. And we spent the night at this hotel. It was kind of, it was way out of town because people were wanted to go down into Bangkok and we realized we were like a 40 minute train ride out or something. So I think maybe a couple of people did, but most everybody just went to sleep and then we had to get. We got up to go and we had said, you know, we're leaving at this time. And then I think at some point somebody was like, nah, we better leave earlier. And I must have missed that message because I remember getting up and I was like, leisurely eating breakfast and somebody was like, ready to go? And I was like, oh, oh no, I thought we had like three more hours, but we all got back on the bus on the right side of the door and drove out to the airport. Bangkok to Phnom Penh is like a one-hour trip. It's super close, but we must have arrived, you know, in the middle of the night or something I can't really remember, where we couldn't get to anything.

GANZGLASS: [00:13:13] So there was no culture shock and other than the same side of the, the wrong side of the street in Bangkok.

WALEY: [00:13:22] Right. So Bangkok from, not until we got to Cambodia, because Cambodia, when you cross over the border into Bangkok, it's like going 30 years into the future. It's a big city. It's got like it's got better public transportation than most American cities. So not there. It was Cambodia when we really.

GANZGLASS: [00:13:42] Oh, so you got off the plane in Cambodia? And what were your first thoughts in Cambodia if you were awake.

WALEY: [00:13:51] Yeah, it was a long trip. I remember we all kind of walked. We're all waiting for our luggage. And I only had one bag. I had a backpack and it kind of, people had a lot of stuff with them. And I remember everybody getting their little trolleys and we all come in and we came out the doors and the Peace Corps volunteers in-country were there waiting for us, and they had flags and signs, and they all cheered when we walked out. We took a group picture and then we got loaded into the back of these trucks like kind of with benches on either side and kind of like a cover over the bed, all packing into these trucks and sitting across from each other and, you know, wondering where we were going and then driving through it. It was kind of funny because there weren't any windows, so we couldn't really see what we were driving through on the way to the hotel or kind of wherever we were going. I think it was nighttime by then. We must not have left in the morning. I think we got to the airport really early in Bangkok and sat there for several hours.

WALEY: [00:14:50] Um yeah, we couldn't really see where we're going and I think it was right. Then we got off loaded onto a couple hotels. There were too many of us, so we stayed in two side by side hotels and we all went across the street for dinner and there were. It was a place that went out of business at some point during our stay, but we had to go there a bunch where because they served like 10 cent beers. And I remember and they had these big beer towers and we all got these big beer towers and nobody could believe how cheap everything was.

GANZGLASS: [00:15:19] So that was your first day.

WALEY: [00:15:21] Yeah.

GANZGLASS: [00:15:22] And then did you have in-country training as well?

WALEY: [00:15:25] Yeah. So I think we stayed in the capital for two weeks and had some training and then got all our vaccines and we're getting a shot like every day. Got all our vaccinations and did some kind of preliminary language training. And then we went out, we all went out to, there's two training villages that we went out to. The education

volunteers went to one and the health volunteers went to another. Ours was called to Anktusam, I think the other one was called Train. And we'd meet up every week in Pikaiyo, which was the provincial town for like a hub day where we all got together. And the day that we got placed in our, so we went out to the training village. I think we spent a couple of nights in a hotel out there. And then the day we got placed with our training host families, we were going to live with for a couple of months, it was my birthday, my 23rd birthday.

WALEY: [00:16:25] And I didn't, you know, I didn't really know anybody. I was still very, you know, upset about everything that was going on in my dad's health. And um, and I remember, I spoke like four words of Khmer. I mean, they bring us out to this host family, like first thing in the morning. Actually, we sit in the *wat*, the local temple, and for like an hour and the monks are blessing us on our journey, which was really cool. And then they kind of brought us out to our training host families, and we're in the back of a tuck talk with all our luggage on it. And I remember being one of the first ones to be dropped off and thinking, I have no idea where I am. I have no idea where anybody else is going on. And being dropped off and expending my Khmer in like two minutes because I knew how to say what my name was.

GANZGLASS: [00:17:17] So where did you learn the Khmer?

WALEY: [00:17:19] Just in that first couple of weeks, they taught us like how to say our name and how to say how old we were and like some common greetings.

GANZGLASS: [00:17:27] And this was in Phnom Penh?

WALEY: [00:17:34] Yeah, in the capital.

GANZGLASS: [00:17:36] So you got dropped off.

WALEY: [00:17:39] I got dropped off. I was trying really hard to tell my host family that it was my birthday. I didn't know the word for birthday, but I knew how to say today and yesterday, and I knew how to say 22 and

23. And so I was trying to say today I'm 23, but yesterday I was 22. And it really it was not getting across and I realized later, I learned later that people in Cambodia don't celebrate birthdays. They all turn the next year on the new year, so they don't even celebrate individual birthdays. They kind of do now because it's a little more westernized, but they traditionally do not. And so not only was my.

GANZGLASS: [00:18:18] Did they celebrate birthdays at all because in lots of countries they don't.

WALEY: [00:18:20] Not really. I mean, a little bit now, though sometimes people will get a cake for little kids. They will for like, you know, if you're under like three, you'll get a you'll get a you'll get a kind of a birthday party. But no, no. And I didn't like, my Khmer was not good enough to say what I was talking about, but also culturally, it wasn't going to translate regardless of, you know, how I said it.

GANZGLASS: [00:18:46] So you then lived with this family for a couple of months and what was the training? I guess two questions, what was life living with this family and then what was the training?

WALEY: [00:19:00] Yeah. So we lived. In Cambodia, most people just kind of stay in the same room. There's usually like one or two rooms in a house, and so most people just live in the same room. And so the house had it was wooden up on big wooden stilts and it had like a little concrete kitchen underneath it. And so I lived in one room and the rest of the family lived in the other room. And the dad was a soldier, so he wasn't there. He was up on the Thai border. And then it was a mom and a grandma and two daughters. And I think they had a brother, too. But he didn't live there either. And the daughters were both in high school, and they were really nice, and I would they, you know, wanted me to help them with their English homework. And so I did that and then they would help me, you know, try and understand my.

WALEY: [00:19:48] The grandma was, I really, really liked her a lot. She was, I mean, she probably wasn't that old, but she looked like she kind of looked like Jafar from Aladdin with, like kind of the teeth. And she

always had this big smile on her face, and she would try and teach me Khmer by taking the Khmer dictionary they had and just reading words out of the dictionary. And I remember at one point going to my Khmer tutor and being like, I can't learn, like I don't know what to do. And she's like, just tell her that it's too much like, you can't learn like that. Thank you. I'm glad that like, you know, somebody local is also. Because I was like, am I going to offend her if I tell her that I can't just read the dictionary in this language? So they were really, really, really nice, and they'd had an American volunteer stay with them before, so they cooked food that they knew I would like, like fried chicken.

GANZGLASS: [00:20:41] You didn't have Cambodian food at that point?

WALEY: [00:20:46] Cambodians think that they invented fried chicken also. I mean, I don't know where fried chicken came from, but Cambodians have the idea that it is their food, but it's like a really.

GANZGLASS: [00:20:55] Maybe many people invented it.

WALEY: [00:20:57] I think, yeah, simultaneously, I think that's probably true. But we did. We did Khmer food, but they had kind of like, there's a lot of like fish sauce that goes into Khmer food. And something called prahok, which is a fermented fish paste, goes in everything. And it's fermented fish paste. It's awful and it pretty much ruins anything you put it in. And so they kind of knew that I wasn't going to like that. And so they kind of like, they kind of like took all the Khmer down a notch in the food they made. And so I was like, yeah, the food here is going to be great. It turns out it's not that great.

GANZGLASS: [00:21:30] So you lived with them for several months and what was the training that was going on?

WALEY: [00:21:35] So we went. So we had two types of training. We had a language training where we learned Khmer for half the day and then we had a technical training where we learned how to be health educators for half the day. Thee program was brand new. We were the sixth group to come through Cambodia, but only the second group to

be health educators. So the technical training, really. We were really and you know, I have never been a health educator. I didn't really know what I was getting into. And I think a lot of us were really hoping for a really robust training that was going to tell us exactly what we were supposed to do as Peace Corps volunteers. And we didn't get that because they were still kind of developing their program out. And yeah, so I think we were people were pretty frustrated a lot of the time with that. They had some technical trainers come in from other like NGOs that were there. But then the main leader was a volunteer who was a couple of years ahead of us, and he was great. But I think that just the material in the, you know, I think they just didn't really know what to do.

GANZGLASS: [00:22:43] So what is health and how do you prepare for it?

WALEY: [00:22:47] We learned. There was kind of, essentially, we talked about what we were supposed to impart on our villages. So we were supposed to educate on non-communicable disease. So, things like hypertension and diabetes and of course, nutrition as the underlying thing there. And you know, we weren't supposed we weren't really supposed to talk about or we didn't, you know about like. I can't remember what else. Well. I'm trying to think. There was like some things that were precluded because non-communicable diseases, of course, you know, things that you're kind of doing to yourself rather than talking about like TB and things like that, like mosquito borne illness. We talked about that a lot. And then we talked about strategies for behavior change.

WALEY: [00:23:37] We talked about how to ways to explain, you know, why open defecation is detrimental to health for a village. And we kind of like, you know, built models and showed, you know, kind of what happens when it rains. And then we did like mosquito net demonstrations and we learned how to make tippy taps, which is, like in Cambodia, there's typically not running water. And so it's difficult to wash your hands with like a bucket because you got to use one hand to, like, dump the bucket of water over your other hand. And so we built these things that were like, they're big jugs that has a hole in the top and you put it on a stick that's then supported by like two other

sticks standing upright and then you attach a rope to it. And so there's like kind of a pedal on the rope. And so when you put your foot down on the pedal, it tips the water over so that it kind of runs out imitating like running water. So remember making those were fun to make.

GANZGLASS: [00:24:46] And what was the language instruction like?

WALEY: [00:24:50] It was really good, I was really like. We all got broken up into individual language groups. So there were like five per language group. And so there were a bunch of different language instructors and in our language group there were five of us and we were super lucky because we got one of the one of the best instructors. She'd been working with Peace Corps for several years. She's just incredible. She actually lives in the States now. She's this incredible woman who just kind of as like taking it, she transformed the village that we were living in because she spoke English impeccably and like, essentially taught like all the kids in that village speak English very well because of Sepain. So then she started a kind of a classroom at her home where she would have international volunteers come in and teach lessons because she also had a guesthouse attached to her home so people would come into the guest home and they would kind of stay with her and volunteer for several days teaching English.

WALEY: [00:25:56] And then while we were there, she also started a like a women's weaving operation. And so they make the traditional like cloths that are used in Cambodia as both sarongs and as like head scarves and the multipurpose cloth called a *krama*. So she made that and it was employing a lot of women in her village. So she was amazing and she was a great teacher. We got to go over to her house every day for language class, which was this beautiful home out in the rice paddies, and she served us tea. Or I think her mom served us tea every day. But we learned, you know, really basic. We just we learned spoken Khmer. We never learned written Khmer, because it's got the most number of, uh, it's an alphabet language, but it's got the most number of letters of any alphabet in the world.

GANZGLASS: [00:26:48] Oh really?

WALEY: [00:26:49] And it doesn't read linearly in any way. It kind of like depends on whether it's a vowel or a consonant and kind of wrap around each other and they don't go in order. I know like if I see a word and I know what it says, I can figure out how the letters make that sound. But it's not an easy language to learn. So we learned everything phonetically and we learned a lot of like health, health based words to help us with our jobs.

GANZGLASS: [00:27:16] So did you think your training was good?

WALEY: [00:27:19] Basically, I thought my language training well, I think the technical training was not great because they were still trying to figure out the program. The language training, I thought, was excellent, but I also learned how to speak Khmer in southern Cambodia and then I got placed in northern Cambodia.

GANZGLASS: [00:27:38] It's different.

WALEY: [00:27:38] Yeah.

GANZGLASS: [00:27:40] It's different accent or different words?

WALEY: [00:27:42] Both, but not so much where it's not really like a different dialect with accents. I mean, we would have I would have Peace Corps staff come up to visit my site and, you know, native speakers and I would be translating for them. So it was when I showed up.

GANZGLASS: [00:27:57] So it's that different.

WALEY: [00:27:58] Yeah, I mean, it's not a different dialect, but it's, the province I was in is kind of it's just a little bit different from the rest of the country and, you know, more serious the way than some of the other provinces.

GANZGLASS: [00:28:13] So training was, what, two months? Two months and then what happened? How were you placed in other places? And I guess the question is how many of you were in training at that point?

WALEY: [00:28:27] So there were there were there were still 58 of us. We all made it through training. I think we were challenged a little bit because our Peace Corps country director said nobody ever no class ever makes it through training with all of their members. And so we all did. Of course, a couple of people dropped off like the next week. But at that point there was all of us were still there.

GANZGLASS: [00:28:47] So people dropped off as opposed to being deselected, for example.

WALEY: [00:28:51] Right. Yeah, no, that was all. I'm not sure that anybody left non-voluntarily, but there were, yeah, there were a few. I think we lost, um, by the end, when we did close of service, I think there were only 45 of us. I think we lost almost a quarter of our group after, before the two years were up. Several right at the beginning and then a few kind of at the end for a variety of reasons, they just, you know, health or they were going back to grad school or family stuff. Different reasons towards the end.

GANZGLASS: [00:29:29] Life. Ok, so where were you placed?

WALEY: [00:29:31] I was placed in Siem Reap province. Siem Reap is the province where the Angkor Wat is, which is one of the, I don't think it's one of the seven wonders, but I think people call it like number eight. Maybe the seventh one. I don't know. It's this beautiful, yeah, beautiful temple complex. I was about 40 kilometers outside to the east. Siem Reap, everybody knows that province because that's where all the temples are, but it's actually one of the poorest provinces in the country. And so I lived in a pretty small village and it was pretty great because I was like a couple of hours by bike from the city so I could go in if I wanted to.

GANZGLASS: [00:30:17] On bike?

WALEY: [00:30:18] Yeah, or hitchhiking. Hitchhiking is a little faster, but not much. But otherwise I was far enough removed from kind of the crazy tourist-ness of Siem Reap, so it was a nice mix.

GANZGLASS: [00:30:31] Having been there, I was shocked at how seedy touristy it is. Yes.

WALEY: [00:30:39] Yeah, it's got a certain seedy charm to it.

GANZGLASS: [00:30:48] So what was the town you were in like?

WALEY: [00:30:55] It was, it's called Samrong and it was small. But we had a high school. It was kind of bigger than some of the villages around us. We had the health center and we had the high school in the high school was new. The high school had only been open like five years. And there were kind of like, how many villages did we, like our health center covered like nine villages and each of the villages had less than a thousand people. And I think total there were like 7,000 people in the kind of district that we covered, and I lived right in the middle of them. I lived right across the street from the health center with a family.

GANZGLASS: [00:31:44] How did you end up with that family?

WALEY: [00:31:48] Peace Corps. In Cambodia, when they select a site, they go out and they find, you know, they talk to the either the school director or the health center director and say, can you help us find a family that would be willing to host a volunteer? And there's like some criteria that has to be met, like they have to have their own room and a door that locks and it can't be like any sort of endangerment to the volunteer, either like with sanitary reasons or like, you know, for any reason. My family, my host mom was a nurse at the health center. And so they had found her and I think they don't typically place people that you're going to work with. But I did get placed with somebody I worked with. And she's fantastic and that family is, while I lived with them. My host mom and our host dad was, um, he worked, uh, taking out landmines. So he wasn't home very often either. He worked kind of near the, all land

mines are typically concentrated near the borders at this point, so he worked up near the border. And then we had three host kids uh, Vennave, Vennut, and Vennah. And the oldest was a girl and she was 14 when I got there and then Vennut, the boy, was 12 and then Vennah was eight, she was a girl.

GANZGLASS: [00:33:10] And what was the house like? Is this on stilts as well?

WALEY: [00:33:17] No, it was concrete. And I wish it had been on stilts because the wooden houses on stilts were much cooler because they got a nice breeze through the walls. This one is concrete and a lot of mosquitoes, like more mosquitoes than I've ever seen in any house in Cambodia. We had tons of mosquitoes.

GANZGLASS: [00:33:32] Did you have mosquito netting?

WALEY: [00:33:35] Mm hmm. I did actually slept under, the walls were concrete, so typically you hang mosquito nets and I couldn't hammer nails into anything. And so I got this thing. It looked like a giant like food cover that you would put over like food while you're not eating it. Big dome shaped thing that like unfolded like an umbrella and was mosquito netting. But the thing is, you couldn't tuck it in to anything. And so I would often wake up with like mice in my bed with me, like on my face or like I woke up with a frog in there one time and I started trying to like, anchor down the sides with books. So I kind of slept often surrounded by like 20 books trying to hold down all the edges of this net. Sometimes that didn't work, either.

GANZGLASS: [00:34:18] And what was the job? What was the job like that you had? Talk a little bit about the health center and what you did.

WALEY: [00:34:27] The first day I showed up at the health center and again, this was, you know, it's taken me about 30 seconds to realize that my Khmer that I had been learning was like, not very useful anymore, or it was going to need to adapt severely. And my health center director who had studied a little bit of English, essentially said in kind of. Oh, and then I speak I speak French. And so. Cambodia was under the

protectorate of the French for about a hundred years until the late forties. And so people there, some of the older people and then some of the people in the medical profession still speak a little bit of French. So I can't, I don't really remember what language he was speaking to me in, but it was probably French and English and Khmer. I remember him saying, and he's very matter of fact, and he's kind of, and he moves very quickly and then stops and stays still. And I remember him doing that kind of gesture and saying, so what are you going to do here at the health center? Do you need an office? Do you want to see patients right away? And I was like, oh my gosh, I have no idea what I'm supposed to do here.

WALEY: [00:35:30] And so I said, I think I'll just watch for a little while. And so I sat and I watched for a long time, um, until I realized that, you know, really my health center staff was not going to learn anything from me. They were really good. We didn't have a doctor on staff. They were all had been to like nursing school and we had a pharmacist. But I wasn't a doctor, so I wasn't going to teach them anything. And so I decided that what I would do was work with kind of the network of the village health volunteers and the village chiefs. And so I would sit down and I would develop a curriculum on mosquito borne illness or hypertension or nutrition. And so I developed kind of a variety of curriculum, and I would go out and teach it in each of the villages.

GANZGLASS: [00:36:24] And you decided that or you decided that with him? Or how did that happen?

WALEY: [00:36:28] I think I said, you know, what if I go out and teach in the villages instead of being here? And he was always very agreeable, he was like, great. Anything I said and I and I did kind of I always wanted him to, like, give some feedback or like kind of buy into an idea, or give me some criticism or something, but he always, always like, great, you know, do whatever you think. And so he, you know, he hooked me up with all the village chiefs and I had all their numbers. And I remember the first one I did was, I think it was, I did, I think I did blood pressure the first time. I had my little blood pressure cuff and I was kind of, when I worked with him. This is what I'm going to do. I had worked with a

tutor to try and make my lesson plan make sense in Khmer and make sure I knew how to say everything correctly.

WALEY: [00:37:30] So then I showed up at the health center and I said, OK, I'm going to go. He'd helped me arrange like what time I was going to go and we invited people, but I hadn't ever been out to the village that we were going to, and I didn't know who the village chief was or the village health volunteer. I can't remember which one was helping me on that one. And I said, OK, it's you know, 1:30. I'm going to meet with everybody at 2:00. And he said, all right. I said, OK. And I was kind of I was hoping somebody would come with me. And they were really busy. And I said, Ok, well, where is it? And he was like, oh, you just bike south. And so, OK, how far do I bike and he said about two kilometers. I was like, all right. What does the house look? And all the houses kind of look the same. He's like, what does the house look like? Who should I ask? And he was like, just bike. I was like, all right. This was pretty early on. And that was one of the scariest things I had done was bike south trying to figure out this house that I didn't know.

WALEY: [00:38:32] And so I just biked and they had a little kilometer markers. And so when I got like a kilometer and a half, I just started asking. I was like, does anybody know where young Dom lives and people would kind of just keep waving me on. And so I'd keep going. And finally, I guess finally, I found it. I passed it and I had to go back, but I finally found it. And you know, when I showed up, nobody was there because nothing happens on time. And so I sat there and I waited. And finally, you know, young Dom shows up and I said, is anybody going to come? And he goes, oh, no, no, maybe we should go ask people. And I said, OK. And so we went around the village and asked people to show up and, you know, the ones that are freer are typically the elders of the village. And so it was all these elders and I was up there talking and I was like, can anybody understand me? I don't know.

WALEY: [00:39:22] Eventually, what I did was I started teaching health lessons at the high school and I had this girl's health club and they were great. There was like a, you know, it was kids who wanted to show up. So they were all super motivated and smart and, you know, wanted to

wanted to learn more. And so eventually what I did was I had them come out to all these lessons with me and had them, you know, I taught them the lesson and then I had them teach it because they spoke way better than I did. And that ended up working out really well, because that was a cool, you know, then they were volunteering in their community and they were learning the lessons better because they were having to repeat it. And that was really neat. I didn't know if any of them would want to come with me. And I asked them.

GANZGLASS: [00:40:02] So you had to figure all that out.

WALEY: [00:40:03] Yeah.

GANZGLASS: [00:40:05] Did Peace Corps help you with any of this?

WALEY: [00:40:08] No.

GANZGLASS: [00:40:09] So did Peace Corps staff come out to visit you?

WALEY: [00:40:13] They came out once, I think they kind of. Well, actually, I know this because I remember our country director saying one time I kind of forget that you're up there, Sally. And I was like, yeah, nobody's ever going to see me.

GANZGLASS: [00:40:24] So they don't come and your director didn't.

WALEY: [00:40:28] My director came once. She actually came really early on, like, right when I first got there, she came and saw me.

GANZGLASS: [00:40:32] The Peace Corps director?

WALEY: [00:40:33] Mm hmm.

GANZGLASS: [00:40:34] But the guy in the health clinic, he didn't give you much direction?

WALEY: [00:40:38] He came out once, too. Um, but I just remember thinking everybody else got visited a lot, and I think they all, both the people came out to see me once and I kind of was like, I wasn't near any other volunteers. I think like they'd go and they'd visit a bunch of volunteers at a time, and I was kind of by myself. And so nobody came out to see me, which was, I mean, I didn't care.

GANZGLASS: [00:40:59] You didn't care?

WALEY: [00:41:01] Yeah, I mean, I like it was I think I had expected in training to understand what I was supposed to be doing. And once I realized that I was not going to know from training what I was supposed to be doing, I kind of just figured it out.

GANZGLASS: [00:41:17] So what did you figure out?

WALEY: [00:41:21] Um. They always trying to instill in you community buy-in. And I didn't quite get that right at first. I tried to do a big agriculture project where we're going to do like irrigation, and we were really excited about it. It was me and another volunteer that wrote this big grant. You know, all this equipment, we were hoping that they would form co-ops and it was about. It was about nutrition because people came into the health center and we would say, well, your baby is underweight. You know, we talk about things you could maybe feed him and people would, these moms would say, I don't have any money. And so we were trying to do, you know, nutritious gardening for the super low income people in our villages.

WALEY: [00:42:08] And I got, you know, I got my health center director in on it and I was like, all right, well, can you help me decide, you know, which families might want to participate in this? And so we did that and we got this really great village health volunteer who I mentioned before. And he was fantastic.

GANZGLASS: [00:42:25] A Cambodian?

WALEY: [00:42:28] Yeah. And um, and then we got USAID Harvest in there to help us do some of the trainings, and we're really excited about it. It seemed like a really good premise, but they kind of kept looking. So we all went to this training and I remember one of the big things about this training is that all of the slides for the presentation were in English, and that didn't make any sense. And then they gave, like all the farmers, a survey to fill out at the beginning, kind of like a post and pre and post survey to see what they learned. And I'm watching them hand these out and I'm thinking, I don't think anybody reads at all or writes, and I'm like watching people struggle with this. And then, you know, we'd gone through that training. We got back to the village and I was kind of trying to direct how we were going to do this like, OK, we're going to build this garden first and we're all going to go and help build the other five gardens. And it just, it didn't work, and I needed to have let it be self-directed, but I wasn't sure how to do that. Anyways, it didn't really work, and that was one of the first things I did. And then, you know, really realizing that I just needed to. I mean, everybody had told us this anyways. I just didn't figure it out until I did it wrong on my own. But to work on projects that made sense in the community and that kind of came together, like having my high school girls go out and teach these lessons like that worked really well because it kind of was, you know, marrying, it was a fit. Yeah.

GANZGLASS: [00:43:59] Do you think you could have been better prepared for that? Or do you have to just learn that on your own?

WALEY: [00:44:06] I, my Peace Corps mantra that I repeated to myself throughout the day was I'm doing the best that I can because I really felt like. I really felt like I should have been better prepared or I wasn't doing good enough or I wasn't trying hard enough. But I didn't know how to do any better than I was doing. And so I think, yeah, I think I was figuring out that as fast as I could and the best ways that I could.

GANZGLASS: [00:44:35] So is that a good thing or should have gotten more training? I'm not saying you should have.

WALEY: [00:44:42] Yeah, I think my biggest my biggest hurdle was that I just had no idea what to do. I think it would have been better to have had some sort of like preliminary assignments in like a concrete way where, you know, our directors were coming and saying, OK, you were supposed to go out and do this community survey. How that go? Or something. And I just I really just I had no idea what to do when I showed up.

GANZGLASS: [00:45:05] So were you depressed by that, anxious?

WALEY: [00:45:09] Oh yeah, I was. Oh yeah, all of the above. Just really, really scared and stressed and felt like I wasn't. I mean, I felt really guilty a lot. I felt like I just wasn't trying hard enough that I wasn't doing enough. It was very, very, very stressful.

GANZGLASS: [00:45:27] And how did you deal with that?

WALEY: [00:45:33] Being social was always the best thing for me. If I went out and try to practice my Khmer and talk to people that always made me feel like I was. You know, I'd come from a job that I was really good at and I knew how to do, and I was productive and successful, and I came to this job where I had no idea what to do and I was not being productive. And so any time I felt like I was being productive, that was. And, you know, it turns out my most like kind of think productive aspect of my Peace Corps service was talking to people. And I taught English lessons to my host kids on the front porch. And, you know, any time I felt like I was being useful, it was what helped the most. And then kind of the unhealthy coping mechanism was me, like retreating into my room and just like kind of hiding. I did a lot of that. I read a lot. I read. I always read a lot, but with infinite amounts of time on my hands, I read like three books a week. And that was that was not that, because then any time I would like hide, that would make me feel even more guilty about not being productive. So I tried to, I tried to do that less and less.

GANZGLASS: [00:46:47] Did you talk to other volunteers about that?

WALEY: [00:46:49] Yeah.

GANZGLASS: [00:46:50] Did they have similar experiences?

WALEY: [00:46:52] Well, yeah, I think.

GANZGLASS: [00:46:55] Did that help, knowing that you weren't the only one?

WALEY: [00:46:58] Yes, but not really, because it made me feel better because I wasn't the only one, but it also didn't solve the problem. But that was, I think, you know, and I think part of it, too, was that I couldn't speak the language very well, and I eventually got to a point where I was teaching health lessons in Khmer and, you know, and chatting with people. But especially at the beginning, you kind of when you don't speak a language very well, it's always an effort to talk. And so you just stop talking as much. You don't come home and say, hey, how was your day? Would you do? Tell me about it. Because it's hard and it's hard for me, but it's also hard for my family because I'm watching them not understand me and like them, kind of like struggling to. It's just. I remember my eight-year-old sister at one point. Because everybody was so nice to me about it and they'd like, try and understand what I was saying. And I remember my host sister at one point, just like after like me struggling to say something for like several minutes, like threw her hands up in the air, just like huh! And walked away. And I was like, yeah, I know. That's how everybody feels. I'm sorry.

GANZGLASS: [00:48:07] So it's hard for them and hard for you.

WALEY: [00:48:09] Right.

GANZGLASS: [00:48:10] That in itself as a lesson, right?

WALEY: [00:48:12] Right. Yeah, it was not just me. It was like, I'm sure I put a lot of stress on this family too. Well, especially at first. Like, I was super concerned about my dad back home. I didn't know it was like what was going to happen, and I was really stressed out about being here and not being able to speak to anybody. And I know that they, I mean, I know they worried about me. You know, I was the first volunteer in my

village and they didn't know what I would eat. They didn't know what I liked. They, you know, they were trying very hard to make me feel comfortable. And I know that them stressing over that was making, you know, adding a lot to their plate, too. And that stressed me out.

GANZGLASS: [00:48:52] So was this a good thing overall?

WALEY: [00:48:56] Yes.

GANZGLASS: [00:48:58] So why was it a good thing?

WALEY: [00:49:01] I mean, the biggest thing was my host family. I was super close to them. They're so wonderful. I think my host sister I was closest to because she was 14, so she was, you know, slightly closer to my age than anybody else was. My host mom worked a lot and we're close too, but I think I spent the most time hanging out with Vennay. She was just she said she was just like such a teenage girl. She had boyfriends and she liked clothes.

GANZGLASS: [00:49:39] And you could relate to that.

WALEY: [00:49:40] Yeah. Yeah, I could remember being 14. And yeah, and then Vennut, my host brother, is just like the coolest kid ever. He's so curious. He was always bringing home like an instrument from school or a new book, or he'd always run into the house. You don't call people by their name in Cambodia. You call them by their like an honorific, you say aunt or older sister. And so my name in Cambodia was from my host kids was Bong, Bong Sally. And Bong means older. And so he'd always run into the house after school, run up the steps and say, Bong Bong! Look what I learned today, or look what I can do. Or do you know what this is? He is such a cool kid and just super curious and really good at school. So he was always fun to hang out with. And then my younger host sister, she. I've never had younger siblings, so I never was very good at interacting with kids, and she kind of was in her own room. So we didn't hang out then.

GANZGLASS: [00:50:39] How old was she?

WALEY: [00:50:41] She was eight. She and I did not hang out that much. She was, she watched TV a lot and it's funny. I've been back to visit and she's gotten really good at school and is doing really well now. Cambodian kids have this tendency to, like, be really, really terrible kids where they run all over the place and don't listen anybody. And then at like 10, they kind of like snap out of it and they're like, these perfect tiny humans who just like, do all the dishes and help with everything. And I think she was kind of in that stage right before that where she was kind of like, I didn't know what to do with her. She didn't know what to do with me.

GANZGLASS: [00:51:14] And you've stayed in touch with the family?

WALEY: [00:51:17] Yeah. We're on, uh. When I left, Vennay was the only one with a Facebook, so she and I kind of corresponded and then Vennut got a Facebook, and recently my host mom got a Facebook. So we've stayed in touch, and I've been back to visit once, about two years after I left. And so Vennay got married, she dropped out of school and got married right after I left, which I was like.

GANZGLASS: [00:51:45] Not good, not good.

WALEY: [00:51:46] Yeah, not good. But it was kind of. Her mom wanted her to stay in school, but her dad wanted her to drop out, and so she dropped out and got married. And then she got, she was pregnant pretty soon after that, actually lost her baby. She had a miscarriage at like eight months. It was really awful. She was like 18. Because I went back while she was pregnant and like, brought all these babies clothes, like my mom and my grandmother sent all these baby clothes and things. But she just actually had a baby a couple of months ago, a little girl.

GANZGLASS: [00:52:24] That's good. So you're close to the family, did you stay in touch with anybody else?

WALEY: [00:52:32] I haven't really in any sort of like communicative way, but when I went back, I mean, there's several people that I was very close

with it, like my English tutor or my my tutor, who was the English teacher at the school and young Dom, the village health volunteer that I worked with on the agriculture project and my health center director, and then several of my students from the high school that I'm pretty close with.

GANZGLASS: [00:53:02] Do you think your expectations were too high for what you could do?

WALEY: [00:53:07] Oh yeah. I think kind of like I mentioned, I was really good at my job before I left and I thought that I could kind of perform at a similar level. And, you know, I mean, the part of the thing was, I didn't know I was having to completely retrain and not only a new job, but a culture and a language. And in this world, that was totally different than I knew how to function in.

GANZGLASS: [00:53:32] So is that a good thing for Peace Corps? Should it be structuring the job more so that you can be more productive?

WALEY: [00:53:40] Well, I think um, because I've talked to I think the language was a huge thing and the culture is so different. I've talked to volunteers who served in like Latin America, South America and that spoke Spanish before they went. And the cultures and a lot of places that I've spoken to people about is fairly similar, um, fairly western and a lot of ways. And they spoke the language and they just didn't. I had this huge time barrier of me trying to be functional in this new language, and I really couldn't do anything before it was and it took months. I mean, it was at least six months before I felt like I could do anything. And you know, and I don't think that that's to the detriment of Peace Corps because, you know, that would preclude so many different parts of the world from being part of the program that I don't think that's an issue at all. But yeah, I think training wise, I think it would have been it would have been helpful to have a little more guidance.

GANZGLASS: [00:54:37] So the best part was meeting this family and becoming close to another, I guess, is a question is that the best part that you think about?

WALEY: [00:54:52] Yeah, I think just the relationships and not only with my host family and the my other friends in the village, but, you know, also one part of Peace Corps I didn't expect is that I was going to have this big cohort of Americans. And not only was I learning about Cambodian culture, I was learning about like, you know, we were from all over the states. And, you know, I learned things about how people lived in Minnesota. Like I was learning all this American culture, too that I hadn't really expected to learn. And you know, and I think Peace Corps, the biggest part of my quote unquote Peace Corps life now is, still really, really good friends with [noise]. Squirrel, do you think?

GANZGLASS: [00:55:32] I don't know.

WALEY: [00:55:38] Ok. Weird. Things in the walls. I mean is the biggest part of my post Peace Corps life is continuing to engage with Peace Corps as all of my really wonderful friends that I have from Peace Corps. And then the lessons that I learned from Peace Corps. I love continuing to hang out with Peace Corps people because Peace Corps people kind of have this like mentality about them, that super flex, you know, you can kind of anything goes. [noise] I'm waiting for it to fall through the ceiling.

GANZGLASS: [00:56:17] For those of you, for the interview, we are sitting in a room and there is noise in the ceiling of an animal moving around. And we are somewhat distracted.

WALEY: [00:56:29] I was watching a squirrel on the roof a minute ago, which is making me think that it's probably a squirrel.

GANZGLASS: [00:56:33] Ok, but that's part of the Peace Corps experience.

WALEY: [00:56:35] Yes. But see, this is kind of like, you know, Peace Corps people going, oh all right, there's a squirrel in the ceiling. So that kind

of that shift in mentality of, you know, me getting on that bike to go down and find the health volunteer and having no idea where I was going, I feel like, I can do anything really if I want to. And I think Peace Corps volunteers tend to think that. And being OK with being uncomfortable because I spent so much of my time there, you know, like people would bring me to like a ceremony or a party and they would like sit me down on the ground somewhere and like, leave me and I'd be there. I remember the first few times that happened I was so uncomfortable, and I'd wish that I had a book to read or something to do. And after a while, you just you kind of get used to being plopped down places and you're just thinking, staring into space, you know, observing. Occasionally people will come up to you and talk or I'll, you know, go over and start getting involved in the food prep or whatever, but just having the ability to be totally fine with ambiguity and discomfort.

GANZGLASS: [00:57:39] And how has that played out in your life since Peace Corps?

WALEY: [00:57:45] I think it's enabled me to. I mean, it's that those skills are so applicable to life anywhere. I was always, I grew up a really shy kid, and I kind of had to figure that out. By the time I got through college, I'd kind of gotten over that because I kind of realized how the world worked and how I was supposed to interact with people in a way that wasn't going to be uncomfortable. And then I showed up in Cambodia and I was like, oh I don't know how anything works. Like, I was back to square one. I was like having to relearn how to interact with the world. And I think that's kind of pushed me completely beyond any sort of like, I can, I can. And I think this is a common Peace Corps adage. But you know, if I can stand up and put like a condom on a wooden penis in front of like a room full of teenagers in a language that is not my third or fourth language.

GANZGLASS: [00:58:42] And feel comfortable?

WALEY: [00:58:43] Yeah, I can do anything.

GANZGLASS: [00:58:46] That's great. So reflecting back, so did you have vacations? Did you travel as well? Where did you go?

WALEY: [00:58:56] I traveled extensively within Cambodia, and that was really neat because Cambodia is not easy to travel within. There's, you know, a couple of places you can get that are not off the, you know, that are kind of have the regular bus busses and things like that. But there's some other places up in the mountains and into the forests and out onto the islands that are just. But when I was there was not set up for tourism and so it took a long time to get to those places and to know that you could get to those places or that there was somewhere you wanted to go. And so I did a lot of exploring inside Cambodia. And that was.

GANZGLASS: [00:59:29] Did you travel by yourself or with other Peace Corps volunteers?

WALEY: [00:59:33] Yeah, mostly with Peace Corps volunteers. It was kind of everybody getting together in other places. There was a lot of getting together and camaraderie about how stressed everybody was or, you know, learning from each other about what are you doing at site? Ok, maybe I can do that at site too. And then I got to travel outside. My family didn't come see me, but they said they'd meet up in Europe for Christmas one year, and I said, oh yeah, I'll definitely meet you in Europe for Christmas. So we did that. I went home.

GANZGLASS: [01:00:04] So you were allowed to go to Europe?

WALEY: [01:00:07] Outside the country, yeah. You just took leave. We got as Peace Corps volunteers, we had very generous leave allowances. I can't remember how much we like two days a month or something. So it was a bunch. I went home for a month, actually pretty soon after I got there. It was when my dad was getting like a major treatment for cancer. And so I went home for a month for right after Thanksgiving in between Christmas.

GANZGLASS: [01:00:31] Was that a jarring experience going back and forth?

WALEY: [01:00:35] Not, I think, right then because it was so soon it was like it was like four months after I'd got there, so it got in there. So it was pretty early on. It wasn't really that big of a deal. Coming like coming back after words was hugely jarring, but that early on it was, I think it was still kind of normal.

GANZGLASS: [01:00:58] What was so jarring coming back?

WALEY: [01:01:05] America and Cambodia are such polar opposite places, just I mean, esthetically when you look at things. I had a friend who was in the group ahead of me. She said she went back a year before I did and I said, how's America? And she emailed me back and said, I think it's really comfortable and it's easy and it's kind of boring. Kind of in this way that it's not a challenge anymore, it's not an exploration. It's being back here. And I remember, there are a few things that really struck me. The fact that people have lawns. I remember thinking about that in Cambodia and like thinking about the fact that people have lawns in America and that they mow them and keeping them at the exact same height. There's a real, I just laughed. It was hysterical to me that somebody had a lawn that they took care of. And I remember coming back and seeing curbs, and I'd forgotten that curbs existed.

WALEY: [01:02:01] And the kind of negative jarring things about being back in America were the entitlement and, you know. I remember one of the first things they did is me and my sister drove up to Ohio for my cousin's wedding and we were all out to dinner with my extended family and I remember somebody sent the pizza back because it was cold and I was just appalled. And I was like apologizing to the waitress. But that's what people do in America. Like, if it's not exactly right or exactly what they ordered, then it's a problem. And I remember having a really hard time with that. And everybody spoke English here and I thought that was kind of overwhelming and crazy for me.

WALEY: [01:02:44] My parents picked me up from the airport and we went to one of my favorite Tex-Mex restaurants in Austin and I almost had to leave. I couldn't be there. It was loud and overwhelming and I

remember my dad taking me into the grocery store the next day and saying it huge, huge. And he was like, you want to go pick out a bottle of wine? And I must have given him this look because he was like, we could just go pick out a bottle of wine together. I remember driving with my parents down this road and we were coming up behind this building and I was like, what? That building is huge. What building is that? And they were like, it's a Walmart. Just so different. And one of my friends said it really well when we got back that, you know, in Cambodia, when we got there and we were so overwhelmed and freaked out and had no idea what was going on, but people knew that, and they kind of treated us with kid gloves. They, you know, they knew that we were freaked out. And when I got back to America, I was so freaked out and overwhelmed. But I look like I'm an American, and so nobody knew what to do with me or nobody, you know, treated me differently and I needed somebody to help me or like, I don't know. It was overwhelming. And then there wasn't any sort of understanding of how overwhelmed I was.

GANZGLASS: [01:04:04] How long did that last?

WALEY: [01:04:07] A while.

GANZGLASS: [01:04:09] Does it continue?

WALEY: [01:04:11] Not really. Not really. I've been back for four years, and I think it's kind of dissipated, but I didn't go to, I kind of traveled. I traveled for like a year after I got back. And so I think if I'd been thrown into school or work, I would have been forced to get over it a little bit quicker. But since I wasn't, I didn't get over it.

GANZGLASS: [01:04:29] Where did you travel?

WALEY: [01:04:33] There were four of us from our group that went and traveled around Asia. We went to.

GANZGLASS: [01:04:41] You came home and then you went back to Asia?

WALEY: [01:04:42] No, we stayed for like three or four months and we went to Nepal and India and Burma and Thailand. And then I came back and me and another friend who had kind of, had signed up together but she went to Burkina Faso and I went to Cambodia. So she got back and then we went to Germany and France and Austria, Switzerland. And then I traveled around the states a lot. I went and saw all of my friends around the states that I hadn't seen in, you know, a couple of years.

GANZGLASS: [01:05:15] So after all that travel, then what did you do?

WALEY: [01:05:26] So I got. It was like to the day a year after I had finished service because I got a job using my noncompetitive eligibility status. I one of my friends actually, that I had traveled with and had done Peace Corps at the same time I did was working for Peace Corps headquarters and she sent me this job list and she said, hey look, there's a Department of Commerce job in Austin. You should look at it. And it was an economic development specialist which sounded really smart and it was NCE. And so I essentially.

GANZGLASS: [01:05:58] Does that mean? Explain what that means.

WALEY: [01:06:00] Noncompetitive eligibility is so returned Peace Corps volunteers have a year to have, they have essentially preferential federal hiring. The federal hiring process is absurdly onerous to try and get through, and the way the NCE works is for a year, they can just hire you without having to go through the competitive process of hiring a federal applicant, which is great because it favors veterans, so they get a lot of points. But if you're not a veteran, it's really difficult to get a job with the federal government. And so I saw this and I saw that I knew that my NCE status was about to expire and the job posting was about to expire. And so I just called up somebody from the Austin office and I said, hey can we get coffee? And I explained to him who I was and this hiring preference and why I was qualified for the job. And I had a job offer later that day, which was incredible. Yeah, I'd gone from like starting out this stressful job search process and I was like, suddenly employed.

GANZGLASS: [01:07:05] And did you stay in that job?

WALEY: [01:07:06] I still have that job.

GANZGLASS: [01:07:07] Oh, you're still in it.

WALEY: [01:07:09] I still work with the same organization. I do something slightly different, but yeah, I'm still there.

GANZGLASS: [01:07:13] You work for the Department of Commerce in Austin.

WALEY: [01:07:16] Yep. So it's the federal Department of Commerce, but it's the Economic Development Administration. And I came in and I was working essentially with I had like a portfolio of grants that I managed. And that's a pretty boring job because a lot of paperwork. But it's a really cool mission because the EDA works with economically distressed communities to do job creation through planning and funding. And so it's very Peace Corps-esque in its mission. And I remember we, early on, we're looking at this project to fund and somebody had gone up to talk with the people who were applying for this for this grant. And the project was this little town in Arkansas that had lost its lumber mill a couple of years before. And all these people had lost their jobs and now were having to commute to other towns or working in a skill set that was not their primary skill set in town and weren't making as much money.

WALEY: [01:08:19] And so my boss in our office went up to talk with him about potentially funding to help reopen the lumber mill. And usually on visits like that, you know, the mayor takes you around or the economic development person takes you around and the representative from the company is there. And it's just like two or three people and they kind of show you what the project is. And this one, they showed up to the site and like the whole town was there. All three hundred employees and their families and like everybody else and they were all there and they're like, you need to fund this. So we did and the lumber mill came back online and those people got their jobs back.

GANZGLASS: [01:09:02] That's great.

WALEY: [01:09:02] So it's a really cool organization. And I've been doing the last year or so all our special projects. So I've been building up programs to help, you know, help regions build capacity to help I work in innovation and entrepreneurship. So creating jobs through, you know, people building up their own businesses.

GANZGLASS: [01:09:24] That's great.

WALEY: [01:09:25] Yeah, it's a cool job.

GANZGLASS: [01:09:27] Good. What's your ongoing involvement with Peace Corps?

WALEY: [01:09:32] So I'm the president for the Heart of Texas Peace Corps Association in Austin, Texas. I've been involved in the board there for a couple of years as the incoming or there's the vice president and then the president. And then just for the past year, since January, as the president.

GANZGLASS: [01:09:51] What do you guys do?

WALEY: [01:09:53] We have a few different functions. We have social events. So it's a big kind of Peace Corps get together. It was actually one of the first things I did when I came back because I was like terrified of how to deal with America. And so I went and hung out with a Peace Corps group and that was a little, you know, it was kind of like a soft landing pad. We do volunteer events, we do grants, we have a grant fund, we fund active volunteer projects and then we fund other projects that we find are in line with Peace Corps values. And then we're trying to expand our kind of community conversations on cultural understanding. We're really excited and I don't think I'm allowed to tell anybody yet, but this recording isn't going anywhere for the next day, that we're hosting next year's National Peace Corps Conference.

GANZGLASS: [01:10:40] Oh, wonderful.

WALEY: [01:10:41] Yeah. So we're super, super excited about that. And it's going to be looking at kind of social impact in business or doing, you know, like social entrepreneurship and talking about when Peace Corps volunteers return, kind of how that experience influences what they do with their careers and their lives and how to build up that, you know, take those lessons away.

GANZGLASS: [01:11:05] So you'll be really busy in the coming year. Very, very busy. That's exciting.

WALEY: [01:11:09] Yeah, yeah.

GANZGLASS: [01:11:11] So you've brought Peace Corps back to the United States.

WALEY: [01:11:17] I mean, in the way that I think Peace Corps volunteers typically do. But yeah, in my life personally.

GANZGLASS: [01:11:23] That's totally third goal, getting involved in all the association activities as well as job that you're doing, right?

WALEY: [01:11:32] Yeah. Yeah, definitely. And yeah, we've been, I mean, our goal to try and incorporate more of the conversation that we can contribute now is certainly leans on third goal. But then and I think especially now, I think we're thinking, I think everybody's thinking about it more now about looking at cross-cultural understanding in a time where we're dealing with like America First.

GANZGLASS: [01:11:57] Lack of cross-cultural.

WALEY: [01:11:59] Yeah, total lack of cross-cultural understanding. And I think it's a really good opportunity, a big opportunity for Peace Corps volunteers to have some say in that.

GANZGLASS: [01:12:07] Do you think you had any impact in Cambodia?

WALEY: [01:12:11] Um. I think so, I think in kind of small ways. I think in ways that we're often unaware of in the ways that we touch people's lives.

But you know, there were there would be instances, like I brought it a map home at one point of the world and pinned it up on our wall. And I remember my host brother standing there and we were looking at it and he was like, what's all this? And I was like, what you mean, what's all this? He was like, what's all this blue stuff? Oh, there's the oceans. And, you know, just.

GANZGLASS: [01:12:40] He didn't know all of that.

WALEY: [01:12:41] Right. You know, people had no idea what to do with me, often because they'd never met anybody from outside Cambodia.

GANZGLASS: [01:12:51] That in itself was a learning experience.

WALEY: [01:12:57] Right. And then, I hope I, you know, because I taught a lot and it's hard to, you know, you don't really see the immediate impacts of that. And so I hope that I was beneficial in some ways, but it's hard to gauge.

GANZGLASS: [01:13:10] So overall, it was a great experience. Good.

WALEY: [01:13:15] Yeah, it was an awesome experience. I can't imagine having done anything better with my time.

GANZGLASS: [01:13:21] Great. Anything else you want to say?

WALEY: [01:13:29] I don't think so.

GANZGLASS: [01:13:31] Great, so good interview. Thank you.

WALEY: [01:13:32] Yeah, thank you.

[END OF INTERVIEW]