

**Michael Davidson Oral History Interview**  
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**Biographical Note**

Michael Davidson served as a Peace Corps volunteer in Kenya from 1964 to 1966 as a land settlement officer (Kenya I).

**Access**

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Oral History Interview

with

Michael Davidson

November 11, 2015  
Washington, D.C.

By Evelyn Ganzglass

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

GANZGLASS: [00:00:00] Should do it. Today is November 11th, 2015. My name is Evelyn Ganzglass, and I'm interviewing Michael Davidson, who was a volunteer in Kenya from 1964 to 1966, and he was involved in land settlement. So with that little introduction, I think we should probably start the interview. Most of the interviews start with just a little background about who you are and what you're doing now. And then we turn back to what were you doing before Peace Corps and then talk about Peace Corps. So why don't you start with a very brief summary of what you've become since Peace Corps?

DAVIDSON: [00:00:54] Okay. Well, my name is Michael Davidson, and I'm very happy to sit down with my neighbor, Evelyn Ganzglass, with whom and with her husband Marty shared the Peace Corps experience in Kenya, an early Peace Corps experience in Kenya. I was in, well, they were in Somalia.

GANZGLASS: [00:01:21] Somalia.

DAVIDSON: [00:01:21] And I was in Kenya. So I gather you'd like just a bit of biography.

GANZGLASS: [00:01:27] Just, just about you're now retired, but you've done? A little bit about your family. And then we'll just go back to before.

DAVIDSON: [00:01:39] Ah. Well, I'll just do it briefly chronologically from after the Peace Corps, and then we'll pick up going, you know, into the Peace Corps. I had finished law school immediately prior to going into, to the Peace Corps. And there was a colleague in the, in the project, Donald Aiken, who also finished law school. Most of the volunteers were recently out of their undergraduate studies. Some, you know, some had gone on to do some other things, but most of them were recent undergraduates. But Don and I had gone to law school. When I came back, my first legal job was with the NAACP Legal Defense Fund. So I was a civil rights lawyer for a period of years in the late 1960s and early 1970s.

DAVIDSON: [00:02:37] I then taught law at the State University of New York in Buffalo, principally in a clinical program in which I worked with students on the actual practice of the law. My wife, Karen, and I and our two young children moved down to Washington, D.C., in 1977, where I first spent a couple of years doing judicial administration work at the United States Court of Appeals for the District of Columbia Circuit. I was its chief staff counsel. And then in 1979, I began what ended up to be a substantially long career with some breaks in the Congress and, you know, principally in the United States Senate.

DAVIDSON: [00:03:34] And I served as the Senate legal counsel from 1979 to 1995, where I represented the Senate as a whole and its committees and members in separation of powers litigation conflicts with the Executive branch, assisted investigatory committees, worked on

impeachment matters, and Senatorial ethics matters. And we were in court all over the country, including some number of cases in the United States Supreme Court. From 1995, following a change of political control in the Senate, although I had worked under both Republican and Democratic leaders up to that time, I did leave the Senate.

DAVIDSON: [00:04:38] I spent a number of years undertaking projects at the Aspen Institute at Brookings and sort of similar undertakings. Did some litigation in the course of that on separation of powers issues. And then went back to the Congress in 2002, worked as general counsel to a joint inquiry of two intelligence committees looking into the response of the intelligence community to the matters preceding 9/11 and then following 9/11. And then in 2003 began with the Senate Intelligence Committee, first as minority counsel, and then after a change of political control and as a result of the 2006 elections, as its general counsel from 2007 to 2011, after which I retired, which was then the second time from federal.

GANZGLASS: [00:05:51] Not so good at that.

DAVIDSON: [00:05:53] Federal service. And in the last couple of years, I've both enjoyed retirement and for three years, including this past spring semester, taught at Georgetown University a seminar in the government department on national security and the Constitution. Two of those years I had the pleasure of co-teaching with Charlie Savage of the New York Times, who's just published a book called Power Wars, which everyone should read. And, uh, my wife and I, Karen, divide our time between D.C. and Colorado. One of our children lives in Colorado and we've got some grandchildren there. That's our son Jesse and our granddaughter and grandson are out there. And then our daughter Kate now is in Portland, where she's the Oregon Public Broadcasting host for All Things Considered.

GANZGLASS: [00:07:06] And we hear her all of the time on the radio. So clearly an illustrious career. Let's go back to, you said before Peace Corps you had just graduated from law school.

DAVIDSON: [00:07:20] Mm hmm.

GANZGLASS: [00:07:20] Why did you decide to go into the Peace Corps?

DAVIDSON: [00:07:25] Well, the one thing I, I knew as I approached the end of law school is that I didn't want to start with whatever that path may have been in the practice of law here in the United States, and that I did want some experience that had the potential of taking me elsewhere. And I started on two tracks. I put in an application to be a military lawyer and for some reason chose the Air Force and went off to Stewart Air Force Base, living in New York at the time, to be interviewed there. And so I was on that track.

DAVIDSON: [00:08:22] And then I had seen an announcement about a Peace Corps program for lawyers that was to be in Malawi. And it sounded quite intriguing. It was a program, as I now recall the description, in which lawyers would sit in rural settings with elders and sort of take down traditional methods of resolving disputes which had been passed down orally from sometimes long ago. And the thought was to have this project in which that would be recorded in some way. And that seemed to me to be an interesting thing to do. So I inquired about that.

DAVIDSON: [00:09:22] And then fairly soon after making that inquiry, the Peace Corps reached out and said, oh, we've got this program that we're starting in Kenya, and it would be the first project in Kenya. So Peace Corps numbers its projects, this was Kenya I. A little overstatement in that the Kenya II was an education program. And I just from my own recollections think of them as quite together. We flew to the Kenya together and interacted there. But the land settlement program was Kenya I.

DAVIDSON: [00:10:14] And I subsequently learned that in the formation of the program, the planning had begun sometime prior to 1964, the Peace Corps had developed a plan to do some particular recruiting for that program. I'd love to see the Peace Corps document that describes it. But, you know, but I've been told about it, and perhaps it's in the archives somewhere. And in any event, there was some effort to recruit for this program. And as I understood it and as it seemed natural once having been engaged in it, this was a somewhat unusual Peace Corps program. So if I could take a moment, let me.

GANZGLASS: [00:11:14] Tell. That's.

DAVIDSON: [00:11:15] Let me, let me talk about that. Kenya attained its independence in 1963, and it was independence following a struggle. There was an armed rebellion in Kenya, known as Mau Mau. But, you know, may have had other, you know, other names within, within Kenya. But there was a period of armed rebellion. And a good deal of the struggle, of course, was for political independence and the great values that go with, with that. There was also a significant economic aspect to it.

DAVIDSON: [00:12:15] Europeans from much earlier in the, in the 20th century had settled in the highlands of, uh, of Kenya, lands that went from maybe the high 4,000 and 5,000 foot elevation to seven or 8,000 feet. Temperate. Both the climate and the land allowed for the development of cash crops which were exported to Europe.

DAVIDSON: [00:12:58] And there was a settler presence and a settler kind of. The land that European settled was land which when occupied by Europeans impeded the sort of natural extensions of African settlement. The African population, as populations around the world and particularly in the Third World, were increased in the course of the 20th century. And people were hemmed into lands which were limited and exclusive for African settlement and barred from settling in the

European areas. There were, it was an African presence because people labored on these European farms.

GANZGLASS: [00:14:03] But they owned them before?

DAVIDSON: [00:14:06] Well, the anthropologists have their understanding of, of history. To some great extent it was, as I always understood it, a matter of impeding natural growth, you know, rather than necessarily intensive settlement themselves. So, uh. It's a good historical question, but I'd always seen it and understood it as an impediment to natural growth, then producing intense overpopulation in African areas.

DAVIDSON: [00:14:53] In any event, part and parcel of independence, the various parties, Kenyatta in Kenya, the British government, the world more generally through, um, through the World Bank understood that there needed to be a transition in the highlands and that a peaceful transition would involve not the seizing of European land, but its acquisition through loans provided by the United Kingdom and by the World Bank, essentially buying out many European settlers. Some of whom then moved to Rhodesia and.

GANZGLASS: [00:15:51] Started all over again.

DAVIDSON: [00:15:53] That's right. Or South Africa. Some of them went to Australia and some number of them who remained in, in Kenya. You know, both finding areas in which they would continue as farmers or became engaged in other parts of the agricultural economy or work for the government in the transition in the settlement program. This gets us to the Peace Corps program. The original concept of the transition. Loans coming in from UK and the World Bank. European land being purchased. African farmers being settled, but settled in a more intense way than the area had been lived on under European farming.

DAVIDSON: [00:17:07] You know, a 500 acre farm being divided into, let's say, 100 different plots. Some land set aside for community centers. Some land

for schools, but more people occupying the land than prior to that. The government would provide an arrangement. And the arrangement was settlement schemes. I describe this as a land settlement program. There were settlement schemes. And established an administration of those schemes in which schemes would be run administratively via settlement officer with a staff of agricultural, veterinary health, and co-operative officers. And the provision of the administrative services was initially planned for a couple of years. Decisions were made that that was short.

DAVIDSON: [00:18:24] So one idea for the Peace Corps program was to allow for a continuation, to bring in volunteers who first working with existing ceremonial officers, many of whom at the beginning were former European farmers themselves, to assist in a transition in which African settlement officers would come on. But that there would be some period of transition. And that the Peace Corps program would then evolve into a more traditional Peace Corps program of providing advice, working with cooperatives and, uh, and the organization of people to provide services for themselves. The, uh.

DAVIDSON: [00:19:23] And that description I hope, if it was clear enough, it underscores the uniqueness or the difference of this kind of program, because our group of 30 to 40 volunteers, as we came on and became settlement officers, in fact were taking part in a program as government administrators. And that's not a usual.

GANZGLASS: [00:20:00] Not at all.

DAVIDSON: [00:20:04] Uh, role for volunteers to play. And presented a set of issues that we're thinking about.

GANZGLASS: [00:20:11] So were you, were you spread throughout, thinly spread throughout this area or were you concentrated in the bigger communities, bigger towns? Or how did that work?



DAVIDSON: [00:20:27] Volunteers were dispersed to different parts of the highlands, some in the west, some in the central part of the country. There were at least a couple of volunteers who were closer to Nairobi. But basically we were away from Nairobi. I spent my first year on a settlement scheme called Kipipiri which was in the Kinangops, and the Kinangops form the eastern wall of the Rift Valley, going one. To get to Kipipiri, one would go down into the, to the Rift. I would go up to a town which at that time had a military base at Gilgil and then up the escarpment to Kipipiri.

DAVIDSON: [00:21:40] And on the, on the east side was the Aberdares. So the Aberdares were this wonderful mountain range. And on other side of the Aberdares, you were also in the highlands but on the Mount Kenya side of it. I would look to the, to the Rift Valley to the west and the Aberdares to the, to the east. And this was all a couple of hours from Nairobi, going generally north and a little west of Nairobi.

DAVIDSON: [00:22:19] The settlement scheme had about 500 farm plots, so 500 farm families. There was a nascent town center, quite rudimentary butcher shop. The police headquarters was there, and we were all issued motorcycles. All the excitement and danger that goes with, and the early accidents in the, you know, in the Peace Corps. It was some minutes away from where I was living to the town center. Just down, down the road, a very short walk was, there was a school. And I used to value my time talking to the teachers and talking to the students. Um.

DAVIDSON: [00:23:22] For the first couple of months, I, I worked with initially a European settlement officer, um, who had farmed up there. Very soon he moved out, was given a new assignment in the, in the Ministry of Land Settlement. There was an African officer appointed and then he was reassigned. And by May I became the settlement officer, which I served as until the end of, of the year near when I was transferred to a settlement scheme on the other side of the Aberdares and worked as a cooperative aide.

GANZGLASS: [00:24:16] Wow. So were, how were you prepared for that by the Peace Corps? Or should I say, were are you prepared for that by the Peace Corps?

DAVIDSON: [00:24:25] Well, I must have been carefully selected as having grown up in the Flatbush area of Brooklyn in east, east, east New York, part of Brooklyn, where my grandmother, my mother's mother, lived. She lived across from the last dairy in Brooklyn, which the poor cows were only taken out once a year. And that was, that was my only glimpse of agriculture.

GANZGLASS: [00:24:58] No, I meant the legal aspects of it.

DAVIDSON: [00:25:05] Uh. Now there were legal aspects, but we weren't.

GANZGLASS: [00:25:09] Oh, so it wasn't mostly a legal issue. So what did you actually do?

DAVIDSON: [00:25:14] Okay, um. Well, I'll tell you about the training.

GANZGLASS: [00:25:19] Okay, yeah.

DAVIDSON: [00:25:21] The training was the University of Wisconsin, and we were in Milwaukee. It was a branch of the university in Milwaukee. We were basically housed at a YMCA. And this wonderful program with a very strong language component was conducted there. And there were several trips to Madison where the main campus of the University of Wisconsin is and an agriculture school. So we had some introduction, but basically, uh.

GANZGLASS: [00:26:08] You weren't an aggie as a result.

DAVIDSON: [00:26:11] We, uh, we brought whatever we brought as liberal arts students and I had a legal background and I tried to think of legal

issues when I was there and, and. And how to bring that aspect of thinking to what I would do. But even there, what I found myself inclined to do and was engaged from time to time in responding to the legal concerns of settlers, um, boundary disputes with neighbors. There's a certain amount of precipitousness to this entire affair. People were brought in, they indicated 500 acres might be divided and, uh, and you'd have, you know, multiple plots there. And the government had clearly the mark of the boundaries of these individual plots and made some sketch of them.

DAVIDSON: [00:27:37] And people found themselves in need, sometimes in conflict, you know, resolving these matters. And my, and my own inclination, you know, and I'm sure many, many of my colleagues had the same, is not to try to deal with this in a Western way, but to find ways of engaging community elders and in traditional methods of resolving disputes so that. That the people whose disputes were being resolved had some feeling that it connected to their traditions and therefore were, you know, acceptable. And the traditions would often try to find some way in which there's not a clear winner and loser, but a resolution to disputes.

GANZGLASS: [00:28:38] So the disputes were mostly among Kenyans as opposed to settlers, I mean, the African Kenyans as opposed to the settlers?

DAVIDSON: [00:28:47] Well, that's right. I think, you know, the settlers had moved.

GANZGLASS: [00:28:50] They had moved on by then.

DAVIDSON: [00:28:51] They, they had moved on. I mean, there were certainly individuals, this is 1965 and 1966, um, who had very recently been in the forest as fighters. And there were individuals who themselves were working out the transition from rebellion to working in a world in which the farms were theirs. But they were also marketing to national cooperatives that may have been controlled, still controlled, by

expatriates. You know, many of them may have become citizens, but they came from the European society and the European economy.

DAVIDSON: [00:29:57] And then people had to figure out a relationship and both volunteers had to figure out a relationship and people had to figure out a relationship to them. You know, in the background of there had been a serious conflict. And it was important to understand that background at all times.

GANZGLASS: [00:30:24] Had there been a lot of violence at the beginning when the settlers were being moved out? The way you talk about it, it sounds like it was such a peaceful transition. My guess is.

DAVIDSON: [00:30:38] Well, the rebellion itself was extraordinarily violent.

GANZGLASS: [00:30:42] Violent, but after, after independence?

DAVIDSON: [00:30:47] I don't think so. Although, um. So I think the, you know, accurate historical answer might involve a bit of research about whether, you know.

GANZGLASS: [00:31:03] But you didn't feel it? You didn't encounter it?

DAVIDSON: [00:31:06] I didn't, I didn't encounter. And I can relate a narrative, you know, just a story. Sometime in the fall of, of 1965. One night, deep into the night. I don't know whether it was 1:00 or 2:00 in the morning. There was a rap on my door. And I had a pet, a dog. And, you know, I was realizing that the dog was, uh, you know, aware that there are people outside. And as I went to the door and there were, you know, two armed askari policeman. And I said hello. And they said that they had come to protect me. And I said, well, what's the, what's, what's the problem? And they referred to events in Rhodesia.

DAVIDSON: [00:32:17] What had happened was the Ian Smith government in the southern part of Rhodesia had declared a UDI, unilateral declaration of

independence. And Rhodesia was going to be a white holdout from the change that was occurring everywhere else. And, and soon this had emanated from somewhere in Nairobi. Police were sent out to protect people in the countryside. The Europeans, Peace Corps, and the like, or at least in some locations. And so I said fine and the policeman, who both had rifles, came in and spent the night.

DAVIDSON: [00:33:18] And the next morning, bid them goodbye and went out and I spoke to some neighbors, Kikuyu settlers. And I asked them about this. And people had radios and they'd been following events. And they said, oh, don't worry about that. We fought for ours and in Rhodesia people will fight for theirs. And we're not, we're not mixing the two.

GANZGLASS: [00:33:58] Interesting.

DAVIDSON: [00:33:59] The two events. But I tell that as, you know, some indication there was a mindfulness that there are old feelings and maybe something might have, you know, evoked something from that. So I was protected for one night.

GANZGLASS: [00:34:18] Well, you are also very young. I mean, now in retrospect, at the time, I guess we didn't think we were as young. But you were very young. Was that a factor in how people respected you or not? Because traditionally, it would be, as you said, the elders who have these roles of responsibility.

DAVIDSON: [00:34:40] Well, that's what you call a good question. I don't, uh. I don't have a present recollection of thinking of age as an issue, partly because I was older than the other volunteers. I had spent three years in law school. But, um.

GANZGLASS: [00:35:03] So clearly it wasn't.

DAVIDSON: [00:35:04] You know, I was, I was aware that I didn't have agricultural experience, I didn't have veterinary experience, um, and I certainly

didn't, didn't want to convey knowledge that I had knowledge that I didn't.

GANZGLASS: [00:35:32] Mm hmm.

DAVIDSON: [00:35:32] And the challenges were to work with people to organize the provision of assistance. And even when I was serving as a settlement officer, I did see that the development of the role of the cooperative societies was the preeminent aspect of this. So that, that was to me the organization that could be picked up and continued on. And it had its challenges. Definitely had its challenges.

GANZGLASS: [00:36:07] How did you communicate with people, in English or was your?

DAVIDSON: [00:36:13] Basically Swahili.

GANZGLASS: [00:36:14] Your Swahili was good enough to be able to communicate?

DAVIDSON: [00:36:17] Yeah, it's sadly in the, in the graveyard of other languages in my head. But it, um, our training was very good. Fortunately Swahili, um, the language in which the sounds are very familiar sounds to an English speaking person. Kikuyu, on the other hand, the tone of language, and I didn't learn much Kikuyu, and it was far more challenging. But Swahili was a language that I was quite comfortable working in. In terms of dealing with other government administrators, and Settlement was an organization which was settlement officers and they were grouped together and there were regional officers and so forth. A good deal that could be in English, and English was a significant language of government at the time. But on the schemes it was Swahili.

GANZGLASS: [00:37:33] Great. So you've talked a lot about your, the job, and little bit about the preparation. Can you talk a little bit about just the personal relationships with, whether it was with Kenyans or other Peace Corps

volunteers? Do you still have friends from that time? Have you kept in touch? Or how did, you know, how did you live on a daily basis or with others?

DAVIDSON: [00:38:01] There were other Peace Corps volunteers in the Kinangop, but the closest may have been 20 to, 20 minutes to 30 minutes, you know, by motorcycle. Um. And we did get together and we had some interesting meetings as a group. Let me tell you about that as we go on. But daily life, um, I, I moved into a European farmhouse. There were very plush European farmhouses. This was a far more basic one, but nice. And I guess part of, you know, part of the dilemma was, in fact, did hire someone to help in the house and prepare meals.

DAVIDSON: [00:39:10] My days were long days. I'd get out in the morning and come back late in the day. And generally, except when I traveled, there was someone else who may have been within half an hour. Or we could get together and go on trips together with other, you know, other volunteers. Life was on the settlement scheme. Peace Corps supplied us with a footlocker of books. I had the pleasure, you know, of giving some number away. You know, kids would come by and ask for.

GANZGLASS: [00:40:00] Books?

DAVIDSON: [00:40:00] A book, you know, to spend a little time talking in English. And they'd ask, and I was happy to give them away. But then there were others that I, I would work, work through. You know, daily life, um, was not one with either other Peace Corps volunteers or with Europeans.

DAVIDSON: [00:40:29] I did some writing when I got back, and it exists in little chapters of things. And I think right now they're boxed just as a part of a question, you know, which is, uh, maybe you have a box like that at home? And, you know, I had ended up with a box of things and it included things that I had written. And, you know, my father was a great saver. So he saved letters home, uh, and I, I'd like to think I have

a fairly good memory, you know. But the reality is that I got to look at the letters just a couple of years ago and sit down and transcribe them. Before them, a lot of detail would be gone.

GANZGLASS: [00:41:28] You did a lot of other things in between.

DAVIDSON: [00:41:30] Well, I did a lot of things. And I guess a bunch of time has, um, has passed.

GANZGLASS: [00:41:40] If you think?

DAVIDSON: [00:41:42] It might be helpful for this.

GANZGLASS: [00:41:45] Sure. Read something. That would be wonderful.

DAVIDSON: [00:41:49] I put together a couple of pages for a 50th anniversary gathering of, at the Kenya Embassy, of Kenya projects, ours, two that had been 50 years, and then volunteers from other projects over, well, over time. And I. And I read to. So I took part in, you know, together with a colleague who lives here in Washington, in actually making a presentation. And I actually, although you can't see it from your sound device, I brought part of a stack of these.

GANZGLASS: [00:42:44] Thin.

DAVIDSON: [00:42:44] Thin blue air grams. And I read a little from, from two of them. And the first that I read, these are two different letters. And this is to tell you the contrast. So we got to our settlement schemes sometime in January of 1964. And on February 22nd, I wrote a letter home which described the poor operations of a dip. A dip is a construct in which water is mixed with an insecticide and cows are led into the dip. So they're drenched in this application that will kill ticks.

GANZGLASS: [00:43:48] Yeah.



DAVIDSON: [00:43:48] A farmer loses, whether you're a European farmer and you lose a cow. If you're out, then you have many cows. You don't want to lose cows, and the Europeans used dips. Absolutely devastating if you're an African farmer and you have one cow and you're in debt to the government for, you know, the purchase of that, of that cow. And I began in this part of it, which tells my parents, at any rate, the dip hasn't been operating properly. I describe the dip. There's no permanent water system for the dip. The previous European owner had carted water by tractor. The settlement department had maintained the dip for a while, but then had stopped maintaining it without fully convincing the cooperative that it should maintain it and the level of the dip of the tank fell. The tank itself was in a state of disrepair and several cows were stricken with anaplasmosis, a tick-borne disease.

DAVIDSON: [00:44:53] But last week I think that I finally convinced enough people that the repair and maintenance of the dip was the affair of the cooperative society. And last Thursday and Friday we engaged in self-help projects. In Swahili, *harambee*. Repairing the dip, building a crash pen for a rinderpest inoculation campaign, and laying down pipe for a permanent water system. We haven't completed the piping yet. Hope to do so this week, but we fill the dip by hand so we can dip tomorrow. All in all, the progress on this one problem has been encouraging.

DAVIDSON: [00:45:37] And then at this gathering, I read from a letter two weeks after. And I said, I'm going through a period of serious consideration and reconsideration about the best approach to my job. I think that I said in an earlier letter that I had a feeling of optimism, albeit mild, about my job and the prospects for progress here. Things are not so clear anymore and I have to adjust myself to this reality. For example, I wrote to you that I had encouraged a self-help project installing a permanent water system to a cow dip. Well, that project remains as it was at that time I wrote to you, half completed. I could get a few men and go out and complete the project myself. However, that's not the idea.

GANZGLASS: [00:46:32] A lesson for life.

DAVIDSON: [00:46:35] That's right. You have projects completed and projects half.

GANZGLASS: [00:46:39] So did it ever get completed?

DAVIDSON: [00:46:44] Um, I looked for that. I like to think that.

GANZGLASS: [00:46:50] That it did.

DAVIDSON: [00:46:52] And maybe I'll imagine.

GANZGLASS: [00:46:56] Well, this is probably inappropriate for an interview, but I'll put in a plug for Peace Corps Writers.

DAVIDSON: [00:47:03] Mm hmm.

GANZGLASS: [00:47:03] There is a group of any Peace, former Peace Corps volunteer can publish through Peace Corps Writers. And if you've been writing things, you might think about that in your spare time, whether it's short stories or just a memoir or reminiscences. There's a lot of that.

DAVIDSON: [00:47:23] You have a distinguished Peace Corps writer in the family.

GANZGLASS: [00:47:24] I do. So we can talk about that offline. You talked about your parents, writing your parents. Did you have other contact with them or what was their reaction to what was going on overseas?

DAVIDSON: [00:47:42] Um.

GANZGLASS: [00:47:42] Or even your going in to start with?

DAVIDSON: [00:47:48] They, uh, they were very supportive. This is the time in the, in the Peace Corps in which very few parents traveled to where volunteers were. I was just with a filmmaker that's gathering here in Washington, her name is Alana DeJoseph, who's setting out to do a documentary about Peace Corps. And one of the things that Alana described is that as Peace Corps aged in time, more people had family travel there. So there were more videos of volunteers. And I think maybe there were a couple of family visits that basically just communicated by, by letter. Um.

DAVIDSON: [00:48:55] I had in the course of that correspondence only one unhappy exchange of my parents. I tried to be a pretty good letter writer, uh, better at the beginning than, than much later. That sometime in the course of the first year, through some combination of having traveled and whatever, having not turned to it. I think I'd let three weeks go by. And toward the end of that, Peace Corps doctor shows up and says your mother is concerned. You haven't written. So I got on my motorcycle and drove down to this little town which had the military base, that had got a the military base. Maybe it was the post office that had a phone. And sought to explain to my mother that relax, I'm in good shape.

GANZGLASS: [00:50:21] You called her up?

DAVIDSON: [00:50:21] Yeah.

GANZGLASS: [00:50:22] How did she contact Peace Corps?

DAVIDSON: [00:50:26] She, my mother was uninhibited. I'm sure she.

GANZGLASS: [00:50:31] She found a way.

DAVIDSON: [00:50:32] She found a way.

GANZGLASS: [00:50:35] So before we started the interview, you talked about travel before, after, during. Talk a little bit about travel in Kenya or neighboring countries.

DAVIDSON: [00:50:48] Sure. Uh, we. Sort of close, oh, maybe it was eight or nine months into our time in-country, we did gather volunteers, some number of volunteers together, climbed Mount Kenya, and then spend some time on the coast. The climb up Mount Kenya was from the Kenyan side. Most people, at least at that time, would climb from the Tanzanian side. The Kenya side was a bit more rustic going, going up.

DAVIDSON: [00:51:40] And one of the things that I recounted about that trip, one of the absolutely strongest memories is, first we got to to a hut at 15,000 feet. We'd stayed in a cave going up for two nights and in caves because it was more rustic on the, on the Kenya side. Then you get to a point where there was a corrugated metal shed, and it's probably a little plusher now than it was then, where people would stay waiting for midnight or 1:00 in the morning when the scree would be frozen. Otherwise.

GANZGLASS: [00:52:28] What is the scree?

DAVIDSON: [00:52:29] Scree is gravel, broken gravel. And it's harder during the day. But when it's loose, it's a little bit like a treadmill. And then climb it. I didn't get to the room at, uh, at dawn. The night going up was maybe one of the worst nights that I've ever spent, the altitude and wooziness and so forth. And then get to the room and look at the sunrise and inhabit. The very strongest memory of this is coming back down and experiencing. I probably have been overdramatic in describing this. The creation of life. You start and there's no life at 19,000 feet, and then you see a little bit of moss and then maybe a little tuft of grass. And then there's an insect and, uh, and then there's a little rodent moving around. And then there's an elephant. Yes, you go from the very littlest of life to.

GANZGLASS: [00:53:54] That's wonderful.

DAVIDSON: [00:53:55] Yeah. I did that. Um. Had a wonderful trip with a, two Peace Corps volunteers and a friend who was teaching in, not a Peace Corps program but another program, into northern Uganda in which we spent, among other things, nights at missions along the way. And I was actually, I was fascinated by the mission experience. The missionaries who lived and translated the Bible into some dialect that it had not yet been translated into.

DAVIDSON: [00:54:49] And I told, just at a Peace Corps gathering, I told the story about being out there with these couple of friends, and our Land Rover broke down and we didn't know what to do. And we were way out. Then over the horizon comes this figure and it approaches and you get to make it out. A tall, lanky guy and he's got a blanket and is carrying a spear. And is closer and closer and finally comes. And maybe we had a few words in Swahili, and then he broke out into English. It turned out that he had served in the British Army as a mechanic. Crawls under.

GANZGLASS: [00:56:02] This was a Kikuyu man?

DAVIDSON: [00:56:03] Well, it wasn't Kikuyu in this area.

GANZGLASS: [00:56:07] But he was a Kenyan, a native?

DAVIDSON: [00:56:10] He was living in.

GANZGLASS: [00:56:11] Oh, Uganda, I'm sorry.

DAVIDSON: [00:56:13] But he was living in Uganda and we'll call it a Maasai related tribe, it probably wasn't Maasai, but in that family of people. And with whatever he had, I don't know, the tip of his spear or some tool that we had, fixed our Land Rover. And of course, we thank him profusely. And then he heads off and he's gone over the horizon and we were saved. And I told that story.

GANZGLASS: [00:56:51] Nice story.

DAVIDSON: [00:56:51] That type of sharing of cross-cultural experiences. You just don't know who it is that you're going to meet.

GANZGLASS: [00:56:58] That's right.

DAVIDSON: [00:56:59] What experiences that individual might have, might have had. And it was very true.

GANZGLASS: [00:57:05] That's a lovely story. Yeah. And then you went to Ethiopia on vacation once, is that it?

DAVIDSON: [00:57:11] Yeah. Yeah. You know, again, a, uh, this was with a Peace Corps buddy. We went up. We flew to Addis and then continued, continued north, ended up very close to the front lines with Eritrea at the time. Went to a place called Keren.

GANZGLASS: [00:57:44] Mm hmm.

DAVIDSON: [00:57:46] My wife is Karen, K-A-R-E-N.

GANZGLASS: [00:57:47] K-E-R-E-N.

DAVIDSON: [00:57:49] That's right, K-E. And pop, pop artillery in the distance. So that was 1966 and it was the front line.

GANZGLASS: [00:58:04] Way before Eritrean independence.

DAVIDSON: [00:58:07] Mm hmm.

GANZGLASS: [00:58:07] Thirty years of war there as well. So thinking back about, well, you talked, I guess, about coming back. Um. You closed out your experience in Kenya and then how was the transition back, back

home? Did you travel in Europe on the way back or come straight back? What did you do?

DAVIDSON: [00:58:33] But I think the second year.

GANZGLASS: [00:58:35] Oh, that's right.

DAVIDSON: [00:58:36] We'll leave that for another year.

GANZGLASS: [00:58:38] Another interview.

DAVIDSON: [00:58:39] Another interview. Um. Traveled to South Africa. First went down to Dar es Salaam by train and then got on a plane to then, uh, then it was Salisbury. And I spent some time in Rhodesia and into Johannesburg, where I hooked up with a Peace Corps friend who flew down from Kenya. And that's another absolutely vivid recollection, Johannesburg in 1966. Um. Kind of downtown Johannesburg. And there, you know, there I see the four signs, white women, white men, African women, African men for restrooms and, you know, four different, four different sides. Um.

DAVIDSON: [00:59:57] We spent some, some time. I had hoped, actually, to get on a freighter going up from Cape Town up the west coast, um, but didn't make those connections. So went back to Johannesburg and flew to, uh, Lagos. We arrived late at night. And I look out on the tarmac there as the plane is landing. There are soldiers all over the place. And it was the start of the civil war with Biafra. And I'm getting off the plane. Hadn't made no plans at all. You just, just arrive. And look out at the airport. And there was someone I knew, who was then the Peace Corps doctor in, um, in Nigeria. And we had worked together at a summer camp in New York State.

GANZGLASS: [01:01:20] That's amazing.

DAVIDSON: [01:01:21] And so he took me off to a safe house as this civil war began. My travels in Nigeria were then limited. Since then having gone over, our deputy administrator in Kenya had been an original Peace Corps volunteer in Ghana and was now the country director. And then I think at some point I did pick up a, uh, a letter which indicated that my draft board wanted to see me on some date in November and that accelerated.

GANZGLASS: [01:02:08] Trip home.

DAVIDSON: [01:02:13] Trip home, yeah. The draft board ultimately decided it wasn't interested in me and.

GANZGLASS: [01:02:17] You were too old at that point. Or maybe not?

DAVIDSON: [01:02:21] Well, I.

GANZGLASS: [01:02:24] 26 was the magic year.

DAVIDSON: [01:02:27] Oh, I was, uh, I was just past 26. But gave, actually gave some further thought to going in as a JAG officer. And thinking about all that and, um, someone I shared with a couple of law students an apartment with in Chicago was then at the NAACP Legal Defense Fund. And so I went up, had lunch, met people, and within weeks I was a civil rights lawyer.

GANZGLASS: [01:03:00] Wow. So just looking back at, at your experience, uh, you know, three goals of Peace Corps. To provide assistance as requested, to promote better understanding of the U.S., and to promote better understanding of the world by Americans. How do you think your Peace Corps experience or your life since then has, has met those, those three goals?

DAVIDSON: [01:03:31] What's it, one is providing?



GANZGLASS: [01:03:33] The first one is helping the country. The second one is helping people in the other, in the country understand the U.S. And the third is bringing the message of Peace Corps in the world back to the U.S. Do you have any thoughts about your experience and, and how, you know, how your experience met those three goals?

DAVIDSON: [01:04:02] Well, there's always the risk of wishfulness in thinking about that. I understand the questions. Uh.

GANZGLASS: [01:04:13] It's okay to say no.

DAVIDSON: [01:04:15] No, no, I understand the questions. I'd like to think that this was helpful. You know, my personal experience, the experiences of our group, a very talented group of, uh, of colleagues in this program. I think that one has to think about these things, not in terms of providing some immediate path for, for people. Um. Maybe, maybe like the story that I told about, about the day you work on something, doesn't quite work out. You hope that it does, it does work out. Maybe. Maybe there's some help provided in somehow shortening the experience of self-learning so that people work on solutions and move a little more quickly to solutions because someone's been there by their side trying to encourage them to do that.

DAVIDSON: [01:05:44] In the long run, people figure these things out, you know, for themselves. I kind of like to think that, uh, and this is particularly with schoolchildren. I was not in an education program, but I did spend a lot of time with kids who'd sort of float in and out and, um, by the lawn and they'd bring their soccer ball and there and. Something resonated with, with them. Everything, you know, whether you're in an education program or not, some interaction with, you know, with young people.

DAVIDSON: [01:06:29] On coming back I quickly got involved in a set of domestic issues, but, um. And this is something that I've recently been describing to people. One of the early matters that I worked on at the Legal Defense Fund was in 1967. So I came back from the Peace

Corps in late 1966. And by December, I was at the NAACP Legal Defense Fund. And in the summer of 1967, American cities erupted. Um. And the major disturbance in Newark, New Jersey, and others. A significant one in Detroit, but also around, around the country.

DAVIDSON: [01:07:42] One of the focal points of the Newark conflict concerned the location of the plans to locate a sprawling medical campus in the heart of the central ward of Newark, displacing thousands upon thousands of people. And the state had had plans for a suburban campus. And they just were going to take the suburban design and spacious low density spread out and put it in the middle of Newark. And there were no plans for the replacement of people and no plans to integrate or coordinate a medical facility. And good medical facilities are needed in the life of the community in terms of the medical services provided and the employment at the medical center.

DAVIDSON: [01:08:46] The Legal Defense Fund was asked to represent community groups with respect to that state plan, which would have a big component of federal assistance, and that, uh, that became my responsibility. And we, uh, decided that going to court as the first thing was not a good plan, wasn't a good plan legally. And we needed to have various efforts to try and resolve the matter of representing people in the administrative proceedings with federal agencies and with the state before thinking about litigation. And this got us to file an administrative complaint, an administrative complaint rather than a court complaint. And the administrative complaint led to a series of negotiations with the state. And on the side of these negotiations, the federal government and the city of Newark.

DAVIDSON: [01:10:04] Now the Peace Corps connection to this was, um. NAACP Legal Defense Fund, the best legal office in the country, truly. The Brown against Board of Education litigation campaign was a brilliant court-based campaign. But we were also now at a point where community groups, and this was an urban setting in the north, wanted legal assistance, wanted to keep the focus on the community speaking

and being at the forefront in resolving its problems. And so you develop the relationship with these community groups of being a legal advisor and being with people as I developed their approach to negotiations and, you know.

GANZGLASS: [01:11:12] Sounds familiar.

DAVIDSON: [01:11:13] Being at negotiations to, you know, to deal with legal issues as a variable but to keep the focus on the community. And generally at the time and since I've thought of that in connection with my Peace Corps experience.

GANZGLASS: [01:11:33] So Peace Corps trained you to, to do that.

DAVIDSON: [01:11:38] I think it helped develop that, yes.

GANZGLASS: [01:11:40] It helped develop that. That's really a nice story. So I think we're going to close it out. One last question. Have you stayed, it sounds like you've stayed involved with a Kenya group of volunteers? Have you been active in that?

DAVIDSON: [01:11:57] Uh, not in a formal way. We've gotten together a couple of times and. And a couple of dear friends are, you know, from that, you know, from that experience. And we had a small group together a couple of weeks ago to talk with the filmmaker I mentioned, Alana DeJoseph, who's got a project that anyone listening to this tape should, should know is a great project, to do a documentary history of it. But anyway, it was an occasion to talk about our experiences.

GANZGLASS: [01:12:47] Great. So thank you. This was a really interesting experience. I've known you for many years but didn't know all of this background, so I'm so glad we did this.

DAVIDSON: [01:12:57] Oh, the things neighbors keep from each other.

GANZGLASS: [01:12:59] Exactly. Exactly. So thank you.

DAVIDSON: [01:13:02] You're welcome. Thank you.

[END OF INTERVIEW]