

Patricia Wilkinson Garamendi Oral History Interview
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Biographical Note

Patricia (Patti) Wilkinson Garamendi served as a Peace Corps volunteer in Ethiopia from June 1966 to July 1968 as an English teacher.

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Oral History Interview

with

Patricia Wilkinson Garamendi

September 26, 2016
Washington, D.C.

By Patricia Wand

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

WAND: [00:00:07] Today is September 26th, 2016. This is Patricia Wand, and I am interviewing Patti Garamendi, who along with her husband, Congressman John Garamendi, served as a Peace Corps volunteer in Ethiopia from 1966 to 1968 in a middle school teachers program. First, Patti, thank you so much for agreeing to be interviewed for this important project and for meeting with me today. Our focus will be on your experience as a Peace Corps volunteer in Ethiopia, the events that led you to the decision to serve in the Peace Corps, how you finally achieved your goal. And it will cover those years in Peace Corps and the ways in which it impacted your life. So to get us started, perhaps you can tell me a little bit about your background. Where did you grow up? What was your family life like? How many siblings did you have, etcetera? Why don't we just start there and you can talk?

GARAMENDI: [00:01:25] Well, I was one of three girls. I was the one in the middle, and I grew up in a small town called Watsonville in California. And it

was a different era for girls. And we, when I heard about the Peace Corps and the adventure and what you could do, there was no doubt in my mind that that's what I was going to do.

WAND: [00:01:54] And when did you first hear about that?

GARAMENDI: [00:01:56] Well, I had been in a ski accident. I was very athletic. And I had been wheeled up to the University of California, Berkeley, and was right up in the front row on the floor of the stadium, Memorial Stadium. And out of the tunnel came this amazing man. And the sun was hitting his hair. It had like a reddish tone to it, and he was walking with his hand on his back. And I can close my eyes and see it clearly at this moment as he walked by me and caught my eye, his beautiful blue eyes, and walked up on that podium and gave the call to service. And when he said those words, ask not what your country can do for you, but what you can do for your country. My heart was already primed to serve and I could see myself living in a tree in Africa and serving and working and teaching, and that became my dream.

WAND: [00:03:01] So let's just be clear, this man was?

GARAMENDI: [00:03:05] John F. Kennedy.

WAND: [00:03:08] And he was on the campaign trail?

GARAMENDI: [00:03:10] He was already president, but we first heard him when he spoke at the Coliseum, the Cow Palace in San Francisco when he was campaigning, and that was the first time he said those words. And so to be able to be there and to be that close to him and hear that invitation to go out and to do this work, it was just amazing. And before that, I had been very active as a student leader in my high school and always doing all of the nonprofit, the charitable things. But, you know, tons of energy. And I had planned to go to the university and, but remember that in that era, my father said to me, he said, well, why would you want to go to the university? You're so good at doing hair. I can set you up in a beauty salon and you don't even have to do the,

you know, the books, he said. You just hire somebody to do that. You can just do the artistic things. This was my father.

GARAMENDI: [00:04:12] So that's the thing that was really hard for women at that time, the vision. And so this was just a burst of hope and international and service and going around the world and helping people. And I was going to get that ticket. I did. No matter what. So I went on to University of California, Berkeley, graduated from there, and met John Garamendi along the way. And when he proposed our senior year, I was really caught off guard because I already had my plans made and he had been drafted by the Dallas Cowboys. He had a full ride for Harvard Business School. And you know, and I said, I'd love to marry you, but I'm going in the Peace Corps. He said, marry me, we will go together. And so we left the day after graduation and spent the next two years in a mud hut. What a great way to start a marriage.

WAND: [00:05:07] Really. Yeah. Before we leave your growing up years though, your family. Did you have brothers and sisters and did your family open up any interest in international things at home?

GARAMENDI: [00:05:19] No, nothing at all. And I, um, it was my father. My family, they had established Granite Construction Company, was very male dominated company. And I had an older sister and a younger sister. Wonderful mother. My mother, very hardworking. Very supportive. You know, really hard rock upbringing. She was kind of like out of the Oklahoma movement. And so she wanted just me to be happy. And she was very worried about me going into the Peace Corps as so many mothers were at that time and are today.

WAND: [00:05:59] Indeed. It's the parental concerns.

GARAMENDI: [00:06:02] Yes, yes.

WAND: [00:06:04] Now, so you married John. Did you apply for Peace Corps together during your engagement time or how did you? How was that?

GARAMENDI: [00:06:16] No, we applied right after we were married six weeks after he proposed and then the Peace Corps recruitment came to the campus and we filled out the forms one Saturday morning and were invited to go to Guatemala. And we looked at each other and said, that's too close to home. And so they sent us an invitation to Africa. We said, that's it. And off we went to Ethiopia.

WAND: [00:06:39] But before you got to Ethiopia, you had to do some training.

GARAMENDI: [00:06:42] Yes.

WAND: [00:06:43] Where was the training and how was that?

GARAMENDI: [00:06:45] Well, the training was also a big impact on my life. We were trained in Shiprock, New Mexico, on the Navajo reservation, and that was another entirely new experience that really touched my heart. Our students were, they were just the most wonderful students and to just live on the reservation where they had lived and were living, it was really eye-opening to us and we bonded there. We, you know, we learned to teach English as a second language, but that was a. And we studied the Ethiopian language and [speaks Amharic]. I mean, we really got the good, the good language training, and that was wonderful.

WAND: [00:07:36] And what language is that?

GARAMENDI: [00:07:37] That's Amharic. We were trained in Amharic. But then when we arrived in country, we were sent to the Illubabor where they spoke Oromo, which [speaks Oromo]. So it was, um, you know, we adapted.

WAND: [00:07:58] And so we're going forward a little bit here. But this is relevant, I think, in terms of a Peace Corps experience. You learn one language in training.

GARAMENDI: [00:08:08] Yes.

WAND: [00:08:08] When you got to your site, you discovered you had to learn another language.

GARAMENDI: [00:08:12] Yes.

WAND: [00:08:12] Did you in the course of those two years continue working in both languages?

GARAMENDI: [00:08:17] Yes, we continued working in both languages because we were teaching English. The Amharas were very much the teachers and the government officials under Haile Selassie in the country. So Amharic was widely spoken throughout Illubabor province, but the students and the villagers all spoke Oromo.

WAND: [00:08:43] Yeah. So your entire training then was in New Mexico on the Navajo.

GARAMENDI: [00:08:50] It was, no. First we were at the University of Utah.

WAND: [00:08:55] Oh, OK. Yeah. All right. Is there anything? I know in your era a number of us were in training programs where deselection was a big deal.

GARAMENDI: [00:09:11] Big deal, big deal.

WAND: [00:09:13] How did it impact? What was your observation and how did it impact your group?

GARAMENDI: [00:09:18] It impacted it really hard. We had some people that we protected, frankly. There were a couple of people that we knew to be gay, and we, as married couples, kind of kept them within our group. We, because they were, there was so much discrimination at that time. There also, I mean, there was also a hard level for women too. I mean, I remember going and sitting with the quote psychiatrists and, you know, I had excelled in everything, absolutely everything in training. But then this psychiatrist said, well. You're sitting there as a couple. They said, well, you look more like the flower of California than a

Peace Corps volunteer. But since you're going with this big, strong man who is a football player, you will be just fine. That's the era. I had to bite my tongue so hard just to get through the process.

GARAMENDI: [00:10:17] My husband spoke up. He said, she's the reason we're here and she is tough as nails. So anyway, it's just, there were a lot of things that went on in deselection that a lot of people didn't weather, and that was really unfortunate. There was one woman who was a fantastic teacher, but she was in her sixties, so they discriminated against her on age, and she would have, she was heartbroken. She should have been, and she was healthy as can be. But they, I think they deselected about 60 percent of our class.

WAND: [00:10:49] Yes, that was the experience in a number of training groups then.

GARAMENDI: [00:10:52] But just Thursday night, the survivors, we all got together here at a Peace Corps conference, and we always reminisce on how wonderful the Peace Corps experience was. Once we got to our villages, it was perfect.

WAND: [00:11:06] Indeed. We've just finished the 55th anniversary celebrations.

GARAMENDI: [00:11:13] Yes.

WAND: [00:11:14] All over, shall we say. The 55th anniversary continues and the celebrations will continue for a long time, for another year at least, until we get to the next year. So we did lose some important and valuable talent during that deselection process. Anything? How about, OK, if you think of anything you'd like to add about the end of training or about that whole experience?

GARAMENDI: [00:11:43] I just thought it was the most wonderful cross-cultural training possible. And there were some things that the Peace Corps really did well, like the language training and really good health care and really setting us up. In later years when I had the chance to serve

in the Clinton administration and he asked me what I wanted to do. I said, you know, as a volunteer, we always all thought we could do much better than the administration was doing at the time. So let me have a chance at it. And so with a great deal of humor, I took that on. It was wonderful.

WAND: [00:12:18] Yeah, that's great. That's great. So then let's move from training to your first few days in the country. Did you have additional orientation there and what was your reaction when you arrived in Ethiopia? Was it what you expected to find at that time?

GARAMENDI: [00:12:39] Oh, it was very exciting and going back and seeing the places where we were when we first arrived, but it was also very. Very interesting, and as much as we had a person who, you're assigned somebody to take you shopping and to kind of give you the orientation, you know, to kind of be your big brother, big sister, when you first get there. And this one person, I mean, he literally made it sound like, you know, these are your groceries. This is all you're going to have to eat for a year and you're going to get in an airplane and they're going to drop you on site and we'll see you in a year. And you know, that's just about what happened. We bought our year supply of canned goods. We got on a C-47 the next morning. I mean, this is right after we got there. There was no in-country training.

GARAMENDI: [00:13:39] And we landed in a cow pasture and had just, you know, our two suitcases and there was a Land Rover that we hired to take us down the hill to our, down the mountain to our village. It was already rainy season and there was, it was impossible. You could hardly get through the roads. And we got down to the village and it was Meskel then, which is the big celebration. September 26th, I think it is this day. And oh my goodness, and here we are sitting here talking about that. And when we got there, everybody piled out of the taxi and they went running to the town square and there was a huge bonfire going on, huge bonfire, and all of the students were dressed in costumes and they were running from the villages and tossing burning spears into the fire. And everybody was dancing round and round the fire and we'd go like, oh my gosh. It was really something.

GARAMENDI: [00:14:45] And so we found a place to sleep in one of the little bars. And then the next morning started out to try to find a place to live and to try to find where the school was. And so we just made our way around and everybody helped us. The villagers were welcoming. They were. I was the first blue eyed person they had ever seen, and they just kept touching my hair and my skin. And the students were amazing and we just immediately we were at home. And that's why one of the books that I helped write was At Home in the World. And we were at home in our village, and that was our home for two years.

WAND: [00:15:30] Right. So just to clarify, do I assume correctly that when you landed in that village, there was no hotel for you to stay in?

GARAMENDI: [00:15:40] No hotel, nothing. We landed at the top of the mountain. We are in Illubabor. It was Gore. It's the highest point. And you go all the way down the mountain, many, many miles to our village, which was called Metu. And it's just rolling, rolling chicabits, you know, small mud and stick houses. But then they have the little bars, you know, with a, you know, where you can get something to eat and you can get some beer. And then sometimes they, for multiple reasons, they will have back rooms and that's where we stayed. One of those back rooms.

WAND: [00:16:25] So here you arrive, and you are a European white, if you will, American white. And had people in the village seen white people before?

GARAMENDI: [00:16:40] Well, there had been, um, there had been a previous volunteer, a Mr. Bello, who was very, very loved. And that was wonderful. But not a woman, yeah, in the village. No. But they were, oh, the Ethiopian people are just wonderful, open, just loving, generous, kind. They were excited to have us there. They knew we were the new teachers and they, uh. And we had to learn all about the new kinds of food and tried. I can remember going to the market that first day and just, you know, here I am a brand-new bride. I didn't know how to cook anyway and just going through, trying to see something in

the market that I could feed him. Like guava was a big deal and just potatoes, roots that they had grown.

GARAMENDI: [00:17:34] And then the meat was, you know, it was once a week they would butcher something in the town and then you would go cut off what you wanted. And the bread, every morning you could get bread that was made. And towards the end of the season, you'd have to spend a lot of time, you know, picking the flies out of it because, you know, it just would be worn by the end of the season. But what happens, because of the heavy rains and the lack of transportation at that time, you are. The roads shut down and so you are really isolated and the people are too. They don't have a way to get supplies in and out. So all of those supplies we bought in Addis Ababa when we went shopping, they did not arrive for six or seven months. But it was fine because we got to love the local food.

WAND: [00:18:29] So you had left all those canned goods back at the capital?

GARAMENDI: [00:18:34] Yeah, to be shipped and they never came. But it was fine. It was worked out for the best. And who cares? We had our two suitcases and we just made it. We just had a ball and we laughed and laughed. We really loved it. Yeah.

WAND: [00:18:47] So who taught you how to cook and how to prepare food? What kinds of utensils?

GARAMENDI: [00:18:55] My students. They started taking care of us. See, because, you know, that's what's so wonderful about Peace Corps. You live at the same level as the people. You speak their language. You unpack your bags and you stay and they adopt you. And our students, they taught me. They would bring us enough to get through each day. Then they would teach me how to cook. John's funny memory is coming back from being out. He had a horse where he rode all through the villages, helping with water and all. And so he came back to our hut one day and there I was in the backyard, you know, plucking a chicken, you know. I mean, this was like, this is like. He has this great

picture of me plucking a chicken with this look on my face. Who would have thought?

WAND: [00:19:52] And how did you learn to pluck a chicken?

GARAMENDI: [00:19:54] Well, you just have feathers, so you just are plucking. I got the little neighbor boy to chop the neck, but I had to cook something for, you know.

WAND: [00:20:04] You had to figure out how had to pluck and cut that chicken up.

GARAMENDI: [00:20:07] Yes, you did. Yes, you did.

WAND: [00:20:10] Right. That's great. So what were the staples for the villagers and what became your staples in terms of food?

GARAMENDI: [00:20:18] Well, the staple. It's a very healthy diet that the Ethiopians, they're really smart, beautiful, healthy people. Teff is the grain that they grow. And so they have the big injera pancakes.

WAND: [00:20:31] What is it called?

GARAMENDI: [00:20:32] Injera.

WAND: [00:20:33] Injera pancake, but what is the grain?

GARAMENDI: [00:20:35] Teff, T-E-F-F. Very nutritious. And it can be made out of bocolo, which is corn, but that's not as nutritious as the teff. So you always wanted the teff. And you could get that. The neighboring ladies would always, because they made it so well in the little cook. We had a little wood cook house that we all shared out back where we ended up living. We were in, you know, we had like a room in the middle and then we let the students that we adopted all stay in a big room on one side of our house. And then the other side was kind of a local brothel. And so it was really. And we all shared the same cook house out back. It was fun. It was just great. We just, we, you know, they were making

adaki, which was the local brew. And I was cooking dodo wat, which is the chicken with the stew. You got to know everybody.

WAND: [00:21:35] Did they have any vegetables in terms of what we think of as vegetables?

GARAMENDI: [00:21:39] Well, we, um. Of course, guava and sometimes some papaya. Mango. But the vegetables, that's one thing that we would always try to. We always had a vegetable garden and we always encouraged the vegetables. They had things that they were able to incorporate into their injeras. So they loved actually the cabbage or they loved the carrot, and they'd mix it in with the stew, depending seasonally when they could do that.

WAND: [00:22:09] So it would enhance the nutrition.

GARAMENDI: [00:22:11] Oh yes. And the beans, the lentils and the beans were very, very good.

WAND: [00:22:16] So you maintained your own garden?

GARAMENDI: [00:22:18] Yes. Oh yes.

WAND: [00:22:19] And where did you get the seeds?

GARAMENDI: [00:22:21] Well, we, our mothers sent them to us as a matter of fact. They did. Oh yes, they did. The mothers sent them to us.

WAND: [00:22:32] Yeah. So you had support from across the ocean.

GARAMENDI: [00:22:35] We did. We did. Wonderful support. I wrote a letter. I kept a very detailed journal and I wrote a letter, you know, every week to the parents. And then I made them into big book when I. But they saved everything we sent them. They were totally, totally supportive and so proud of us. Yeah, so proud.

WAND: [00:22:58] That is just great. So let's focus for a few minutes on the actual work, the teaching. How did you experience that? What was the school like? How many children in a classroom? What grade ranges were you involved with, you and John?

GARAMENDI: [00:23:18] Well, when we first were there, we were middle school teachers and I taught all of the seventh and eighth graders, you know, English and then he taught them science. And it was, I will talk about it later. But when we returned to Ethiopia, the one thing all of our former students remembered was all of Mr. Garamendi's science experiments. Because they literally could relive every second of every one of his things. Yeah. And I tried to set up a library, so families sent books. But it was like in going through the old school after 50 years, it was like a mausoleum. I mean, they were just thick with dust. They treasured them so much. And so that's how I ended up building a computer lab so that it was interactive so that students could all use it.

GARAMENDI: [00:24:12] But trying to get them the books and really teaching English as a second language so they could pass their exams and continue on. I also, I used music a lot in my teaching, and they loved that. I had taken my guitar all the way over and they could sing every verse of every song that I ever introduced to them. Whether it was Hang Down Your Head Tom Dooley, or, you know, When the Saints Go Marching In, they just loved verses and they would just sing out. And lots of times you'd have pouring rain on the tin roofs over the mud walls, and it would just be thundering. You couldn't even hear anything. And so I'd always get my guitar out and we'd all just sing and clap and dance and sing and clap and dance to get through all those times. So we had a wonderful relationship.

WAND: [00:25:04] Did the students teach you any of their songs?

GARAMENDI: [00:25:07] Oh yes, and their dance. [sings in Amharic or Oromo]. Or they could do.

WAND: [00:25:26] I wish this were in video so that listeners could see you.

GARAMENDI: [00:25:31] Oh, and they would dance about. [sings in Amharic or Oromo] I mean, they'd dance all around and we just had a ball together. We really had fun.

WAND: [00:25:43] Right. That sounds great.

GARAMENDI: [00:25:45] But they learned a lot. They were good students.

WAND: [00:25:48] Very serious. How many students in a classroom?

GARAMENDI: [00:25:51] Oh, they were jammed in there. We had probably, oh my goodness, 60 in a classroom easily. And they were, you know, three in each chair and each chair was, you know. They would walk, you know, eight miles to get to school. They would run. They had to have clean clothes on Monday morning, and it was very hard for them because some of them would come and their clothes weren't clean and I was supposed to, you know, scold them for not having clean clothes. And then finally they said, but Mrs. Garamendi, if we wash them, they will fall apart. Because some of them were just in shreds. And they didn't have shoes and they would come these long ways, and they'd have their safety pins to dig out the chiggers from their feet. And it just, I was always on their side. And so was Mr. Garamendi. They did their very, very best.

GARAMENDI: [00:26:50] And if they, and you know, it's interesting when I think of these students and what I just experienced returning was, you know, I had the Muslim and the Christian in my classrooms, and there was no difficulty. They all, during Ramadan, the Muslim kids are all, you know, everybody made room for them to sit near the window so they could spit, you know, and not swallow. And so that they could. And then when they celebrated at the end, everybody would celebrate and it was like so respectful of each other. And when I went back to build the computer library in the school additions, they all worked together as they always have. And during the Derg, when they had the, you know, Mengistu and the terrible killings on the street, they all had each other's back on everything, you know, taking food to the prisons, whatever they had to do. So it makes me very sad to see the kinds of things that

go on globally because I saw a microcosm of what could be, right there.

WAND: [00:27:59] In so many parts of the world.

GARAMENDI: [00:28:01] Oh, so many parts of the world. It's like, yeah, amazing.

WAND: [00:28:06] So we've sort of talked about the whole picture here. Let's think for just a minute here before we move to the post Peace Corps experience. Were there differences between your first year in the village and the second year? I'm assuming you stayed in the same village.

GARAMENDI: [00:28:26] Oh yes, we. It's so fun to talk about it. It was, um. Both of us are, we're farmers, you know. We are used to working, you know, 24 hours a day, seven days a week, and that is literally what we did and time just flew by. In addition to the full days of teaching or working, you know, out in the communities, I had Girl Scouts, I had sewing lessons and adult education for the women. I had a community center. I mean, my husband worked with them on raising chickens. He rode his white horse within a 50 mile radius of our village out there, you know, working with farmers individually. He literally physically went down in the bottom of wells and set up the pumping systems. It was just so full every single day.

GARAMENDI: [00:29:26] And it really, it started that way. I mean, we just hit the ground running. It wasn't like the first year was different from the second year. It was just a love fest from minute one, and we just felt like the clock was ticking and we were going to be gone too soon, because we had settled in. And they loved us. They brought us, you know, first year, the students, you know. First of all, I think you lead by example. So Mr. Garamendi would always be deliberately out there sweeping the porch or doing the laundry just to show the young men that men work too. You've got to help. It's all a team effort. And then I would do Head Start programs in the mud floor of our hut on the first days. The kids that were not allowed to go to school because they were too poor. And at noon time when they would go down to the

village, they, you know, they would share their bread and their tea with each other. But it was just full every single day.

GARAMENDI: [00:30:25] The, um, you know, we had black mambas and we had some scary things happen. We had hyenas when we were out camping. We went out and we did a lot of immunizations. We did like 3,000 immunizations going out on a mule and camping and going to all the different villages. And when we would find somebody deathly ill, we would bring them back. So it's like we just had everything, just was full and excited. We were up with the sun and since there wasn't any electricity in the town we were down at night and, you know, had the outhouse out back. For our first anniversary, my husband carved a heart shaped toilet seat, which was a big deal, you know. And somebody told me it is still hanging on the back door of the hut. But it's just, you know, everything was, you know, I would make fudge for the students. It was just. The kids. It's all fresh to me because when we returned recently, they remembered every single thing like it was yesterday.

WAND: [00:31:34] I'm eager to hear about that. Before we do that, though, I think it would be interesting to hear about a couple of the dangers, one or two of the dangerous situations that you found yourselves in while you were serving.

GARAMENDI: [00:31:46] Well, I just think that because we were not sheltered in our. We always felt safe out there. But physically from the elements were a different situation. When we would go out on our mule to, I was allowed to ride a mule. He was allowed to ride a horse. Women were not allowed to ride horses, so I have great pictures with me, my feet like dragging along the edge of the mule. But we would camp and there was a time that there was a green mamba that came into our tent, and they're really deadly.

WAND: [00:32:23] This is a snake?

GARAMENDI: [00:32:24] Snakes. Snakes, yes, snakes. And then there was.

WAND: [00:32:27] How big?

GARAMENDI: [00:32:28] Oh, they're long and skinny. Long, bright, bright green. And then the black mamba is even more dangerous. It's just like it's over before you even see it.

WAND: [00:32:39] So where, what did you do? How did you? What was that situation, when did you discover it?

GARAMENDI: [00:32:43] Well, you just, you get out of the way. Well, you just get out of the way as fast as you can. Yeah. And just be glad you didn't step directly on him too. But there were times when, you know, you'd hear that. You'd be camping out and then you'd hear the hyenas or you'd, um.

WAND: [00:33:02] And what's dangerous about a hyena?

GARAMENDI: [00:33:04] Oh, I know the most dangerous thing. Yes. This is the story. We were down in, before we left for the Peace Corps. You really want me to tell the really dangerous things?

WAND: [00:33:17] Yes!

GARAMENDI: [00:33:17] Before we left for the Peace Corps, there was a story in the San Francisco Chronicle. This is really sad because there was a Peace Corps volunteer that was eaten by a crocodile and it was down near Gambela. And we had gone down to Gambela along the Baro River in Poquot. And when we were there, the crocodiles, they will snatch children off of the shore or women when they're washing. And this had happened. There was a very aggressive crocodile in the river. And so there was an old rusty gun in the village and they had the dugout canoes that went up and down the river. And so they handed the Peace Corps man this gun and said, would you please go try to kill this crocodile? Because it's killing our children. And so we together we get in this dugout canoe and they row, they canoe up to this big sand spit that's out in the middle of the Baro River. And you know, of course, the communication isn't great because it's another language there. It's

more the Anuak tribes. And so they let us off there and we were just sort of following directions and then they continued on up the river.

WAND: [00:34:36] This is just the two of you?

GARAMENDI: [00:34:37] Just the two of us, and it's dusk.

WAND: [00:34:39] And the congressman with a gun.

GARAMENDI: [00:34:42] Which you're not supposed to have as a Peace Corps volunteer.

WAND: [00:34:46] Right.

GARAMENDI: [00:34:46] At all. So we're standing back to back on the sand spit because it's getting dark and we're going like, what are we doing here? Are they coming back for us? Well, coming up onto that spit was the biggest crocodile you have ever seen in your life. I mean, we are talking, oh, I wish I had a picture of it here. Huge. And he came up and he was so shocked to see us there, just as we were shocked to see him. And he opened up, you know, up on his legs and John shot. We're not sure what happened, but then the gun jammed. And so we thought, this is it. And but then he was so startled by the shot that he spun around like a motorboat and went off across that water just. I can still see that tail flipping around as he went the other direction. And then we had to stand there waiting for the canoe to come back.

GARAMENDI: [00:35:45] And I told John at that time, I said, honey, if we can make it through this, we can make it through anything. We sort of have a code word, remember the crocodile? It's OK, we'll make it through this. So it was, uh, so that was a really life and death situation.

WAND: [00:36:04] Indeed.

GARAMENDI: [00:36:05] Yeah, it was really something.

WAND: [00:36:06] Yeah, indeed. Indeed.

GARAMENDI: [00:36:09] Especially with the story before we had left, you know, so it made it all so real. That's why we knew how we were in danger, but we didn't do that again. We learned. And I really enforced that no gun rule to the volunteers when I was, once I was in charge. I was like, oh my goodness.

WAND: [00:36:25] Just back. One other less dangerous situation, the hyenas. What might they have done if they had approached your campsite with just the two of you there?

GARAMENDI: [00:36:37] Well, it just depends on how hungry they are too or what's going on. They, you know, in Addis Ababa, they had the hyena man who used to feed the hyenas all the time and they would come and they would snap and they would grab the meat and everything. And then they grabbed him one time. So it wasn't, I don't really know what they would have done. I don't know how you frighten them away, but it just was an at-risk situation. Yeah, like you're sleeping out there and you're going like, what are we doing out here? Cause they come around. Of course now we have, you know, on our ranch, we have a lot of coyotes and mountain lions and things like that here in California. So we're not really so worried about that.

WAND: [00:37:17] Right. OK, let's think a little bit about the time that you are winding down the service, meaning the time is expiring. You've got, you know you're going to have to do a transition. What did you experience? Did you think then about possibly staying longer and what did you then decide to do in terms of after Peace Corps experience?

GARAMENDI: [00:37:42] Well, I definitely wanted to stay longer. In fact, it was probably the only, um. We made a deal before we went in the Peace Corps because he deferred his Harvard MBA program, and we were going to do this for two years and we were going to go back and do that. But then I got so involved, I just never wanted to leave Ethiopia. But what happened was something, circumstances happened where. It was one afternoon in April and my students, as I mentioned before, they would leave the classroom and they would all go as a group down

to the village. And they would, those that were too poor, everybody would share their bread in Mohammed's tea shop. His father was always taking care of all of the kids. It didn't matter if they were Christian or Muslim or what they were, and they would have their tea and they'd have their bread.

GARAMENDI: [00:38:42] And they had, there was shortwave radio in town, and that's where any news from the outside would come. And I'm there, you know, getting ready for the next class and I can hear the wailing coming from the village as they made their way up the hill. And they were wailing and wailing and wailing.

WAND: [00:38:59] What did that sound like? What did a wailing sound like?

GARAMENDI: [00:39:01] Oh, Ethiopians, they, when they grieve, it's like, it's just piercing. It's just piercing. And you can just hear it from miles around. And they, I can still remember them coming to the door. And Bufacato, who was the oldest of the students, he was standing at the door and he was the spokesperson. And he said to me, he said, why did you kill the father of all black men? And I said, what are you talking about, Bufacato? Because then they all just were crying and it was carrying on. He said, why did you kill the father of all black men? I said, please just tell me what you heard on the radio and tell me what is happening. And they told me about Martin Luther King's assassination. And so I started bawling and shared the grief with them and told them what a tragedy it was for our nation, how horrible it was for all of us. It was just awful.

GARAMENDI: [00:39:57] And so we, you know, we grieved. We carried on. And then in June, just a few weeks later, in June, I heard the same voices again. And this time, and they were all late getting there. And I said, now what has happened? And they said, don't worry, don't worry, it's going to be OK. And I say, what's going to be OK? They said that Robert Kennedy had been assassinated. They said, but don't worry, Mrs. Garamendi. We took time and we had a village meeting and we have come together and we are not going to let you go home because something bad could happen to you back in America. And we are all going to build

you your own chicabet and we're going to take care of your children and we're going to keep your garden green and you don't have to go back and have anything happen to you.

GARAMENDI: [00:40:52] And I told them, I said, I must go back. I must help. There is so much work to be done at home. And Mr. Garamendi must go back and help, more than ever. And so that was what we did. And so when we left, I went and worked in the Phillips Brooks School district in Boston when he was at Harvard, and I had 700 African American students and I taught them the sights and sounds of Africa. They had the burnings going on Blue Hill and Blue Hill Avenue there, and I took the children with me every weekend. So I continued my Peace Corps work and really never stopped serving. Nor have any of our children. And John, as he does, continues today. But we were motivated to be home.

WAND: [00:41:48] Yeah, yeah. So let's tell us a little about your family, your children, and, you know, when did you begin your family and how many children do you have and what are they doing just generally?

GARAMENDI: [00:42:05] Oh, they're all in service. Of course, it's required to be at our Sunday dinner tables because John cooks every Sunday and everybody sits around this gigantic table that he built. And everybody, all the grandchildren, everybody shares and they hold up their hands and the children do. And grandma always asked, what did you do with these hands this week to serve? And they go around and they will say, I wiped some tears or I helped my teacher, whatever. But they all have to speak up to what they are doing to help this world. But our oldest was, um, she was born. Her name is Gannet. She was named after my best friend in Ethiopia. And my best friend Gannet named her daughter Patti, except she pronounced it potty.

WAND: [00:43:00] Close enough.

GARAMENDI: [00:43:01] So that's, you know, and I think that is probably something you see with other returned volunteers. And then our son, he served in the Peace Corps in Paraguay with his wife, who's also a PhD in public

health. And the two of them served in Peace Corps. And then I have a daughter who served in Honduras, who's also a family practice physician. And I have another daughter who served in Ecuador, who runs a women's health clinic. So four of my children have served, actually served in Peace Corps. And then the others serve in other ways. Mainly as teachers and educators working with difficult situations.

WAND: [00:43:52] Right, right. So after you came back, you continued to do teaching in the Boston area.

GARAMENDI: [00:43:59] Yes, yes.

WAND: [00:44:00] And then your children?

GARAMENDI: [00:44:02] Yes. That school, Phillips Brooks School district, that was written up by Jonathan Kozol. That famous book. And I read that book when I was in my village and I requested that school and they were not going to give it to me. And I said, if you want me to teach, this is where I'm going to teach, and that's it, and I'm going to develop my own program. So it's a wonderful book.

WAND: [00:44:32] It is a wonderful book. I remember reading it myself when I was in teacher education.

GARAMENDI: [00:44:35] I just didn't know if I explained that.

WAND: [00:44:37] Yes. Yes. Right. So you taught when you came back?

GARAMENDI: [00:44:43] Yes.

WAND: [00:44:43] And you had, how many children do you have?

GARAMENDI: [00:44:46] We have six. We had the first four very rapidly. And then we had one five years later and one five years after that. So we have 12 grandchildren.

WAND: [00:44:59] Wonderful.

GARAMENDI: [00:45:00] Yeah, we really are blessed.

WAND: [00:45:02] Congratulations, you really are blessed.

GARAMENDI: [00:45:02] And we live on a big cooperative ranch. Everybody said, how do you keep your children so, you know, they're all so international and they travel, but they all have real roots right there on the ranch that you have put together. And I said, well, they all have built homes there and we all run everything together. So to sustain it, make it sustainable. They have, you know, grass fed beef and they have, you know, sustainable gardens and an orchard and people. It's just like people come and go constantly. We have one daughter who just took her family around the world woofing [Worldwide Opportunities on Organic Farms], and that's working on all these different farms.

WAND: [00:45:46] And that's what woofing means?

GARAMENDI: [00:45:47] That's what woofing means. It is the most wonderful program in the whole world.

WAND: [00:45:52] Is it W-O-O-F?

GARAMENDI: [00:45:52] Mm hmm. I-N-G. Woofing.

WAND: [00:45:56] And it means working on?

GARAMENDI: [00:45:57] Well, it's, um, you can google it up and you can connect with families all around the world that are offering their farms, that you can stay there and work on the farm with them for room and board. So they took an entire year with their children and did that. They did it really well. People were really lucky to have them because they're really good workers. They actually know how to farm and do these things. Yeah.

WAND: [00:46:24] That's great. So tell us now about you personally in your professional life. You raise your, I'm assuming you did continue some, shall we say, work for pay, if you will. Or I mean, or some professional volunteering as your children were growing up?

GARAMENDI: [00:46:45] Yes. And I to law school also, went to night law school. I had graduated from UC Berkeley, and it was always my dream to go to law school, and so I did that. And worked for many non-profits and really, you know, from things to save Lake Tahoe and keeping it blue to just constantly working. And as my little book that I wrote said, you always took us with you. We always took the children with us and we raised the children. I didn't raise the children, we raised the children, and they also raised each other because everybody worked together on everything. And then when my youngest one was, um. In the Year of the Woman in 1990, I ran for Congress and it was really an exciting year.

GARAMENDI: [00:47:41] There was a whole stage full of women and we were really breaking the glass ceiling and we all went on stage at the convention and we, um, some of us won. I lost by 652 votes and against a pretty, pretty difficult situation. But then, you know, wanted to continue serving. And the president called me and he said, Patti, you have to run again. And he said, I lost the first time I ran for office. You have to run again. I said, no. I said, I don't think I want to run again, but I do want to continue serving and so give me a cool job. And so he said, well, what would you like to do? And I said, well.

WAND: [00:48:26] And this was president?

GARAMENDI: [00:48:27] President Clinton, who actually called on the phone at our house and the first time he called our kids were teenagers. And, you know, our daughter, Autumn answered the phone and he said, hi, this is President Clinton. Could I speak to your mom, please? And she said, right, you know, and clicked off and hung up. So fortunately, he probably got that a lot. So he called back right away. And is that?
[noise in background]

WAND: [00:48:57] Is that?

GARAMENDI: [00:48:58] Oh, it's that, I see. And I said, well, I always. He said, what do you really, really want to do? I said, well, the love of my life was being a Peace Corps volunteer, I said, and I'd love to work with that organization. He said, it's yours. So I was his first appointee to the Peace Corps at that time. And I was appointed as associate director in charge of, you know, the placement and the recruitment of volunteers all around America. So it was really a wonderful time. So wonderful.

WAND: [00:49:33] So was that in 1992?

GARAMENDI: [00:49:35] He was sworn in in June [January] of '93 and so I was his first appointee that summer, early summer. Yes. It takes a while to get the process.

WAND: [00:49:48] Absolutely, right.

GARAMENDI: [00:49:48] But we did. Another fun story. There was a story I wrote. It's called From Mud Hut to White House, where I was, um. John had worked very hard with Hillary on health care reform and we had both chaired Clinton's campaign in California for president. And so he, you know, Hillary called John like right after they were sworn in, and she said, John, I really need to talk to you about health care and what you've done in California. She said, could you and Patti just come and spend the night? And so I was already back here working on a project. And he calls me and he said, so Hillary wants us to meet with her tomorrow and wants us to spend the night. And I said, OK, I'll grab my stuff, you know. And I thought that, you know, we were just going to be going down the street to a hotel or something.

GARAMENDI: [00:50:44] I still am a Peace Corps volunteer. I still grab paper bags and stuff things in them and, you know, dress casually, just get there. And so we had a little rental car. We pull up at the White House at the gate and expect them to go, OK. Oh, good. She'll be expecting you tomorrow. So this is where you're supposed to go and stay. Instead, the gates opened and so we pull in that big portico, you know that you

see? And our little bitty car and the ushers come out and they take my little bag, my shabby baggage and take it on in and go up the stairs and put our things in the Lincoln bedroom. And I'm going like, oh my gosh, you didn't tell me this! He said, I didn't know.

GARAMENDI: [00:51:24] And so we were there and, you know, I said, OK, so here we are in the White House. What's the first thing we have to? I've got to call my mother. So I go and I pick up the phone and it says, White House operator. And I go, can I call my mother? And so give her the phone number. And then I see Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation desk. I said, OK, you need to sit down there, honey, you have to write a letter on White House stationery to each one of our six children. And then a little while later, Hillary came down the hall and she had just, face all scrubbed and shiny and her hair just back and in her slacks and her casual sweater and just as gracious and as homey. Because they were excited too, it was their second night in the White House. And it was like, oh my gosh, we've got friends here. Let's go explore. And so come on down. You know, Bill's a little bit late, but I brought a bottle of sherry from Little Rock. We can have a little that, and I really have some things I want to talk to you about also Patti.

GARAMENDI: [00:52:25] And so we sit down, there's a little sitting room like this at the other end, and she said, you know kids? So she's balancing all of these important things. But what her real concern was Chelsea, who was starting school, and Chelsea was invited for a slumber party. And she said, Patti, I don't know what to do. I'm nervous about her going to another house for a slumber party. Do you think it's OK if she just has the kids come over here? And I go, oh, I think that's fine. That's going to be just fine. No problem. But the humbleness of it, like you know, wanting to do the right thing and just being a really good mother. And then her, um, and she said, I hope you don't mind but my parents just arrived. They're going to spend the night too, and we're going to have dinner in the little dining room. And pretty soon her mom and dad, who have both passed now, they came in and we all sat down at the family dining room table. And the president was right here and.

WAND: [00:53:24] To your right?

GARAMENDI: [00:53:24] To my right and John is on the other side. And he, and I just remember at the beginning of dinner, he put head beautiful hands. He put his hands on the table and it was like, I've held that hand before. I have had the pleasure of shaking his hand before, but now it's the President of the United States' hands as of 24 hours ago. Can we hold hands and say the blessing or what do we do? And so it was that kind of thing. And then right after dinner it was, let's explore the White House, and we haven't been down to the movie theater yet. Let's take the elevator. So we went down and there are the four big chairs in the front row and the four of us sat down and he turns to me. He said, do you think we could get some popcorn? You know, because we'd chosen to watch the movie Lorenzo's Oil, which is a really important movie. And within moments, this big silver bowl of warm, buttered popcorn arrives. And so it was just, that's what, it was so wonderful.

GARAMENDI: [00:54:24] And Hillary loved the Peace Corps. There wasn't a moment that she traveled, that she didn't go and swear-in volunteers or pay attention to the volunteers. And every time I saw the president, every single time during his entire tenure in office, he always said, do you still, you still having fun at the Peace Corps? And I said, yes, I absolutely love it. That's true.

WAND: [00:54:49] That is a wonderful story. Spending a night at the White House.

GARAMENDI: [00:54:53] It was like from mud hut. It hasn't been such a bad ride, I told my husband. It's OK. From our first night in Metu, Ethiopia, to Lincoln's bedroom, it's OK. We can stick it, we can stick it out a little longer, with the crocodile in the middle. I think we got it together.

WAND: [00:55:14] You've got some bookends there.

GARAMENDI: [00:55:15] Yeah, that's true.

WAND: [00:55:16] That's amazing. That's amazing. Well, there's so many stories to tell.

GARAMENDI: [00:55:25] Those are the best.

WAND: [00:55:26] Yeah, those are great stories. Those are great.

GARAMENDI: [00:55:30] Really fun.

WAND: [00:55:30] Um, I think that we can kind of bring our conversation to a close. And as we do that, maybe you would like to reflect a little about the importance of that Peace Corps experience. Considering your personal background and your education, your opportunities in California, then that Peace Corps experience. And how did that impact your thinking and about the other choices you made?

GARAMENDI: [00:56:11] Well, it's the core of all choices that I've made in life, and I think most all Peace Corps volunteers feel that way. I remember Paul Tsongas towards the end of his life, you know, and he did some amazing things and they, uh. Mary Matalin on her show, said, well, so what was the most important thing you did in your life, you know? He said, be a Peace Corps volunteer. And we feel that way. All of us. Just the unpacking your bag, living, you know, learning another language, living with the people, you know, I mean, it just breaks down all barriers. And always I think about Nelson Mandela and how he always said, you know, you speak to somebody in English, you speak to their head, you speak to them in their language, you speak to their heart.

GARAMENDI: [00:57:04] And I think Peace Corps volunteers literally have been to the edge of the world where it's burning, literally where it's burning, and they return home and everything looks different and they approach everything differently. You know, as we always say, you know, Peace Corps volunteer, they learn peace, they live peace, and then they labor for peace from the beginning of their service to the end of their lives. I like to think that every job I have held, I have labored for peace. Because you cannot have peace in a community unless there is education. You cannot have peace in a community unless there are jobs and economic things happening and giving people opportunities. So it all is like, it tells the whole story. The Peace Corps does.

WAND: [00:57:56] I think we'll end at that very insightful observation. Thank you so much for your time and for your stories and for the contributions you and your husband have made and continue to make every day.

GARAMENDI: [00:58:11] Thank you. Thank you.

WAND: [00:58:16] This is Patricia Wand speaking with Patti Garamendi on September 26, 2016, and we are looking at a photograph of her and her husband, John, Congressman John Garamendi, entering the village where they served as Peace Corps volunteers from 1966 to 1968. Patti, tell us about the background and the context of this photograph.

GARAMENDI: [00:58:47] This is probably one of the happiest days of my life. We had, um, it was the 50th anniversary of Peace Corps and we decided we were going to go back. Very difficult to get there, but to go back to our village and the word went out that we were going to be coming. But we got to the river, the Sor River, and the community leaders, after two days of travel, the community leaders were there to have a coffee ceremony and greet us. And I thought, oh, isn't that nice and very special? And then the mayor, who was about the age of one of my children said, would you like to go back to your original school, St. Gabriel School? And I said, oh, is it still standing? And he said, oh yes, it is still standing. And so we started walking up the hill.

GARAMENDI: [00:59:39] And as we got to the bottom of the hill lining the streets were students in their blue uniforms and, you know, thousands of them. And coming down the hill were our students who were now the teachers in the school. And they were holding the hands of their own grandchildren as they brought us flowers. And they welcomed us back to the school and they'd been preparing for weeks. They had the costuming, they had the dancing. They, it was like it was yesterday that we left. And about halfway through the ceremony, they said, would you like to see your original classroom? And I'd say, oh yes. They said, do you remember where it is? I said, of course I do. So I walked right there.

GARAMENDI: [01:00:30] And when I walked in the classroom, my students that were still alive were sitting in the exact seats where I had left them. And there were only three girls in the class at that time, and those three women were sitting in the front row still where I had placed them. And you look at this picture and it is half girls and half boys now. So that's progress. And they, um, when we sat and talked to them in the, you know, we asked them, how did you survive the wars, the famine? Because we went back and worked in the famine in the north and all. How did you all survive that? And our students who were, you know, adults, the grandparents themselves, they said, well, we did what you told us to. And we thought, we looked at each other. We were, what were we 20 years old? What could we have told them that would have survived, helped them survive all of that? And they said, well, don't you remember? And I go, like, help us remember.

GARAMENDI: [01:01:27] They said that first day when you both came to the classroom, to the school, and we welcomed you. We were all sitting on our chair. And Mr. Garamendi came in and he said, we are going to go down to the river, and we're going to build a bridge so that nobody has to walk to school in bare feet through the polluted water. And we are going to build a bridge and we are going to do that together. We can do anything together. And they said, Mrs. Garamendi, it is still standing, that bridge. We think of you every day when we walk over it. And if things like that that you just, you don't know how you're going to touch people, what it's going to do, what the ripple effect is going to be into the future. But that is a very special moment in my life. Very, very happy.

GARAMENDI: [01:02:19] When we earlier, when we had gone back during the famine in the '80s, when Ethiopia was in such terrible famine and we just wanted to go back and help them. Because we spoke the language, we could talk our way in through and we flew up to the north and we walked into the village. And it was the famine camp in Alamata and people were just, you know, dying everywhere just before our eyes and there was triage. And John and I, we always work as a team. When I walked in, the first thing I saw was, you know, I've got to get these babies milk. I've got to get things organized here. We've got to get the

triage going. And he looks at the same situation and he'll say she's not going to get anybody anything unless I get that water line fixed, you know, because it had been blown out by the war. And so he went into the village and everybody said, oh, you can't go in there, you'll get shot. There's guns everywhere.

GARAMENDI: [01:03:18] Peace Corps volunteers have this. We can go anywhere because we know people. And so he went in and he addressed the mayor in Amharic and said, you know, we need to fix this water line because they can't get any water to the famine camp. And the mayor sent all of his guards away, and he said, John. In perfect English he said, I was taught by Peace Corps. Come with me, we will go fix the water line. And so together they gathered everybody up. They went up into the mountains, they got the water running. I was able to get the camp going. But then eventually it came time to leave and we knew on a certain day this little plane was going to come back. And John hadn't come back. He was still out doing all these things, and I'm going. He said, If I'm not there, just go get on that plane because it was a war and difficult thing going on there. And so I get on the airplane and everybody says, it doesn't look like he's coming.

GARAMENDI: [01:04:15] And then pretty soon over this, it's almost like sand dunes, there was such a drought, came a military jeep with all of these guns and everything flying. And they thought, oh my God, we're under attack, we're under attack. I said, no, no, no, it's my husband. He had commandeered all of these young soldiers to get him to the airplane. And so he got on the airplane and we took off. But that's because he was Peace Corps. And those lives were saved because there had been a Peace Corps volunteer in that village that won the trust of the man that was in charge. Isn't that wonderful?

WAND: [01:04:48] That is wonderful. And I must say, Patti, that you have made me cry and laugh.

GARAMENDI: [01:04:55] Well.

WAND: [01:04:57] The life of the Peace Corps.

GARAMENDI: [01:04:57] Thank you. It was so fun.

WAND: [01:04:59] Thank you so much.

GARAMENDI: [01:04:59] It's Peace Corps. It's our life.

WAND: [01:05:01] It is our lives.

GARAMENDI: [01:05:02] Our core values.

[END OF INTERVIEW]