

**Alicia Crain Oral History Interview**  
Returned Peace Corps Volunteer Collection  
Administrative Information

**Creator:** Alicia Crain  
**Interviewer:** Evelyn Ganzglass  
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**Biographical Note**

Alicia Crain served as a Peace Corps volunteer in Mexico from 2012 to 2015 in an environmental education program, and from 2015 to 2016 as the first volunteer leader for diversity and inclusion.

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Oral History Interview

with

Alicia Crain

December 7, 2019

Washington, D.C.

By Evelyn Ganzglass

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

GANZGLASS: [00:00:00] This is Evelyn Ganzglass. I was a Peace Corps volunteer in Somalia from 1966 to 1968. Today is December 7th, 2019, and I'm interviewing Alicia Crain, who was a Peace Corps volunteer in Mexico as part of an environmental education program from 2012 to 2015. From 2015 to 2016, she was volunteer leader for diversity and inclusion in, as part of the Mexico program. And since then she has been working in the Office of Civil Rights and Diversity, um, in Washington, D.C., at headquarters. So a very interesting history, I am sure.

CRAIN: [00:00:51] Yes.

GANZGLASS: [00:00:52] Let me start by asking you, why did you join the Peace Corps?

CRAIN: [00:00:56] Um, to be perfectly honest, I joined the Peace Corps to strengthen my Spanish skills and to gain international experience. I had recently graduated from grad school in urban and regional planning, and during my grad school experience, I had an internship in China, which interested me in international work. And one of my professors in the urban and regional planning program at Portland State University was also a returned Peace Corps volunteer, and she talked to me about her experience because she went also after she got her master's in planning and, um. And it just opened that door for me. And so that's what I applied to do.

GANZGLASS: [00:01:36] So you applied.

CRAIN: [00:01:36] Yeah.

GANZGLASS: [00:01:36] So where did you grow up?

CRAIN: [00:01:38] I grew up in Springfield, Illinois.

GANZGLASS: [00:01:40] Did you have much orientation to the wider world, or was it all Illinois? Did you?

CRAIN: [00:01:47] Um, no, yeah, we had a pretty wide orientation. My grandfather, my mom was from Springfield, and so she and my dad moved back there when she got pregnant with my sister, and her family was there. So we were really close with her family. My grandfather was from Florida, and so we went to Florida frequently when I was a kid. And my grandmother was from Wisconsin, so we went to Wisconsin. I grew up showing horses. Um, my grandfather was a doctor, too, so my mom had a college education. She actually went to George W, um, George Washington, and, uh. So, yeah, I had a, I think in fourth grade, we had a student teacher who was a returned Peace Corps volunteer. And so I think that was the first time I heard about it.

GANZGLASS: [00:02:30] And you mentioned you went to grad school. Where did you go to grad school?

CRAIN: [00:02:35] Portland State University in Oregon.

GANZGLASS: [00:02:36] So how did you end up in Portland?

CRAIN: [00:02:38] I went to, I finished my undergrad degree at Oregon State University in Corvallis and then stayed there basically after college.

GANZGLASS: [00:02:47] Okay, great. So you applied while, were you still in grad school when you applied for Peace Corps?

CRAIN: [00:02:54] No, I was out of school. Actually what happened was my, I had a job, and the job, I was fired from the job, and I had a relationship that was a, I was in that ended the same week. And the first thing I thought to myself was that I could apply to the Peace Corps. And so I did.

GANZGLASS: [00:03:09] Okay.

CRAIN: [00:03:09] And that was in 2010.

GANZGLASS: [00:03:11] And how long did that take to get into the Peace Corps then?

CRAIN: [00:03:13] Almost two years.

GANZGLASS: [00:03:14] Two years. Talk a little bit about the process. What?

CRAIN: [00:03:18] Um, well, they still were mostly operating off of a paper application at the time, or it was a combination of paper and electronic, even in 2010. And so that just took a long time. I remember, I think I actually turned some forms into PDF fillable forms because they weren't fillable. Uh, and I thought that was weird. Um, and then, uh, because I, my relationship ended, you know, life changes. I was going to a therapist, and I included that in my application materials, the health review form, and it was flagged. And because of one word that my therapist wrote down that I was dealing

with ongoing family issues, the Peace Corps medical officers decided that I needed to be on a six month hold. Uh, even though the, my therapist wrote a letter saying that I was a, I was totally stable. I wasn't showing any signs of mental illness, that it was, you know, talk therapy.

GANZGLASS: [00:04:17] Yeah.

CRAIN: [00:04:18] Um, and she thought I'd make a great volunteer, all of these things, and, yeah, they still put me on a six month hold.

GANZGLASS: [00:04:23] Well, that's a shorter hold than some other people.

CRAIN: [00:04:26] It's true. Yeah. It's true. Yeah.

GANZGLASS: [00:04:29] And what did you do while you were on hold? Did you have a job?

CRAIN: [00:04:32] Yeah, I was temping mostly.

GANZGLASS: [00:04:34] Okay. So then they said, all right, you can become a volunteer. Was Mexico the, did you select Mexico?

CRAIN: [00:04:41] I selected Latin America, the region, because I.

GANZGLASS: [00:04:44] You wanted to learn Spanish.

CRAIN: [00:04:45] Yeah. And I had a background in Spanish. I studied Spanish in high school and college. Um, and then I started, you know, because I had an initial interview and she said to strengthen the Spanish skills and I had to take a CLEP test to prove that I still had the skills because my last class had been so long before. I passed the test. And so I just started practicing Spanish just to strengthen those skills. And they offered me somewhere in Latin America, they didn't say where, and sub-Saharan Africa. And really tried to push me to the sub-Saharan Africa. But I'm queer and I was not interested in trying to be super closeted.

CRAIN: [00:05:23] I was 30 years old, and, um, and I'd been practicing Spanish and I passed the test, so I said, no, thank you. You can send me to somewhere in Latin America or I'm not going. I had also been an AmeriCorps VISTA volunteer, and so. I was committed to gaining the experience, but especially once I got there. But I was also, after almost two years by that point, and having a master's degree. I was like, I'm a very highly qualified candidate. If you don't want me, I'll find a job somewhere else. Thank you very much.

GANZGLASS: [00:05:55] So they then offered you Mexico?

CRAIN: [00:05:57] Yeah.

GANZGLASS: [00:05:58] Okay. And I guess by 2010, all of the training was in country, was, I should ask that. Was all of the country, all the training in country or?

CRAIN: [00:06:08] Yeah. Mm hmm.

GANZGLASS: [00:06:09] Okay. So talk a little bit about, um, the training you went through.

CRAIN: [00:06:17] Uh, it was, the training was in Queretaro, Mexico, at the um, office, Peace Corps. For the most part, it was classroom based. Um, so we were mostly working with relatively formalized eco clubs or youth groups, um, or trying to build what are called *ecotécnicas*, like wood burning stoves that direct the smoke out of the house or whatever. Um, I think Peace Corps Mexico is still feeling, figuring things out at that point. So we went up to the mountains for two weeks and spent a whole week building a cistern, learning how to build a cistern. I don't think any of us built a cistern during our service. It would have been much more useful to learn classroom management skills, um, which we never learned. Uh. But, you know, there's a lot of, 120 hours or 135 hours of Spanish classes. Um, learned a lot about the history and culture of Mexico. I felt very well

prepared to live and work in Mexican society, Mexican culture after those three months. Um.

CRAIN: [00:07:25] The like figuring out a ways of team building amongst the volunteers? Not so much. I don't, I'm not in contact with any of my, really, returned volunteers from my group. A couple, but really sporadically. Um. And part of that has to do with, um, the fact that I'm queer and had a very homophobic and humiliating experience during the sex ed portion when I asked for dental dams and the doctor just said no, you can make one out of Saran wrap. And then another volunteer echoed that. And then after that class was over, another volunteer came up to me and said that she could tell how upset I was and that she was an ally, which to me was like.

GANZGLASS: [00:08:07] So this all happened in training?

CRAIN: [00:08:08] Yeah, in training. And so I was like, well, if you were an ally, you would have said something and stood up for me, but thanks anyway. So that didn't really engender me to my, um, cohort.

GANZGLASS: [00:08:19] How big of a group was it?

CRAIN: [00:08:21] Twenty.

GANZGLASS: [00:08:22] Twenty of you. And what, what was the purpose of the eco program, of the environmental education program basically?

CRAIN: [00:08:31] Basically to increase the environmental understanding and awareness of the Mexican population.

GANZGLASS: [00:08:36] So this was geared to youth or adults or?

CRAIN: [00:08:40] It depended. Once we got to site, it really depended on each different site. Some people were working on like perma, perma farming, permaculture. Other people worked on like signage in a national forest, national park. A lot of different range of things.

GANZGLASS: [00:09:01] And had Mexico requested this program?

CRAIN: [00:09:04] Yeah. Yeah, we, um, the Peace Corps doesn't have a bilateral agreement with Mexico still. And so we only go to places where the Mexican government wants us to go, assigns volunteers. There's a collaborative process where they decide the sites together with Mexican agencies. So basically it's the Mexican EPA, SEMARNAT, and, uh, and like the Mexican Forest Service, all of those kinds of things. And then the National Science Foundation for the most, for the, um, technology transfer program that is now really teaching English for STEM.

GANZGLASS: [00:09:40] Hmm. So you went through the training and it was, you said, a three months training program.

CRAIN: [00:09:47] Mm hmm.

GANZGLASS: [00:09:47] Three months of language and the environmental. Did you move to the community in which you were going to be working as part of this training, or was it all in this training center?

CRAIN: [00:09:58] It was mostly in the training center. I think we went to site for a week just to meet people. And if there was a volunteer currently there to interact with them, get sort of a transfer of knowledge. Meetings and things like that.

GANZGLASS: [00:10:13] So training past and where were you then assigned?

CRAIN: [00:10:16] I was assigned to the Bosque de la Primavera. Out, uh, right outside of Guadalajara. And to, well, to the management agency.

GANZGLASS: [00:10:27] What management agency?

CRAIN: [00:10:29] Of the Bosque de la Primavera. It's a natural protected area.

GANZGLASS: [00:10:33] Oh, I see. And what is, what, it's like a national park? Is that it?

CRAIN: [00:10:38] Um, more like a natural reserve. And the idea, they try to keep people out. And the idea is because it's delicate, has really delicate soils, a lot of endemic species that are found nowhere else that are probably going to be extinct soon. Guadalajara is growing around it. It's going to be a park. It's going to be like, yeah, soon.

GANZGLASS: [00:11:02] So what was your role or what was the intended role of you in that park?

CRAIN: [00:11:07] I worked with the local community that was at the main public entrance to the Bosque, the town of La Primavera, and I lived with a family there. And I mostly, for the first year, conducted a weekly eco club. And then I tried to work on various projects that the management agency was working on, because most Peace Corps volunteers develop, like live and work and don't leave their site a lot, where they live. And my situation was much different, where I had to leave where I lived every day and go into the, into the city and to the office. So I had like a 9:00 to 5:00 job for the most part. So, and I was trying to integrate into both. But, you know, you have to sleep sometime. And I was exhausted and just, it was a lot. I mean, it's an emotional toll. Um, so I just decided to integrate into the office because I was required to go there by my counterpart, um, every day. So.

GANZGLASS: [00:12:06] So, um, so I missed. So where were you actually living, in Guadalajara?

CRAIN: [00:12:11] In La Primavera. For the first year I lived in the town of La Primavera with a mom who had, her kid was in the eco club. And so the volunteer before me set that up. But after about a year in I started understanding Spanish more and understanding the town dynamics. I was living in a very contested place with people who had a long standing dispute, and it was really interfering with my ability to do anything in the town. So I moved into the city, into Guadalajara.

GANZGLASS: [00:12:43] What was the, what was the problem there?

CRAIN: [00:12:45] It was a, it was an inner familial conflict over the house. And I was in the middle of it, basically.

GANZGLASS: [00:12:51] So then you moved into an apartment by yourself or?

CRAIN: [00:12:55] Yeah, in the middle, in the central of Guadalajara. Yeah, it was a lot better.

GANZGLASS: [00:12:58] That was a lot better?

CRAIN: [00:12:59] It was a lot better. And, I mean, I had an hour commute to the office, but then I was seen much more as a neutral party in the town. And I continued to go to the town and to do my projects there. I started about, after about a year, I started organizing about six moms of the eco club kids. Those were the ones who showed up after all the public meetings. Um, a project to train them how to run a recycling collection center. So we did a, quite a long time, quite a long training program where we talked about reduce, reuse, recycling. I educated them about all of the traffic or trash gyres, the plastic islands in the oceans and things like that. And then we built a bodega to collect recyclable materials from the school. Kids would bring the materials to school and collect them at school, transfer them to the bodega, and then they would sell them, sell the materials once they had enough, to garner some money and just to fund small projects in the town, not really as an real income.

GANZGLASS: [00:14:02] So you set up that whole project.

CRAIN: [00:14:04] Yeah. And it was funded by a Mexican nonprofit.

GANZGLASS: [00:14:07] That's great.

CRAIN: [00:14:08] Yeah.

GANZGLASS: [00:14:08] What kind of materials were they?

CRAIN: [00:14:10] Plastic mostly. Beer cans, but mostly plastic bottles and milk bottles and things like that.

GANZGLASS: [00:14:18] So. Um, did. I know this is a big issue for later on as well. Did your sexuality play any role in your interactions in Mexico, or did people not care or not even pay attention or?

CRAIN: [00:14:34] Oh yeah, all the, people really didn't care. They really didn't pay attention. The signals are different in every culture. Um, so we think it's someone's really obvious here. They're not going to be obvious in another culture. Um, some of the moms were curious when I, you know, would sort of evade some of their questions. And, and then once I had relationships with them, and they were about my same age so I was honest with them, and they were more curious than anything. And I, you know, of course, I was on Facebook and I decided if I was going to be friends with people on Facebook, they were just going to find out because I wasn't going to edit myself. And, um, but I also just, I didn't talk about it a lot. I dated one person, um, maybe for about six months, but. Yeah, I didn't. We weren't that, it wasn't that great of a relationship. So it's not like it was going anywhere.

GANZGLASS: [00:15:26] Was there a big, was there a big community in?

CRAIN: [00:15:28] In Guadalajara. Yeah, Guadalajara is considered the San Francisco of Mexico. So yeah, there were a lot of gay people.

GANZGLASS: [00:15:35] So people chose.

CRAIN: [00:15:35] And it was, yeah.

GANZGLASS: [00:15:36] Nobody cared.

CRAIN: [00:15:36] Not really. I mean, people would stare at me on the street, but that's no different than here. So.

GANZGLASS: [00:15:42] So that was a good thing. Okay. So you did that, you did that same job for two years.

CRAIN: [00:15:47] Three. I extended for a third year to finish that project with the bodega. And then I did an organic gardening project, mostly with the same women, but then a few other people added. We ended up building 11 organic gardens. And there was no communal land, so we couldn't do a community garden. So we did individual gardens. And that was a SPA grant.

GANZGLASS: [00:16:13] SPA? What is SPA?

CRAIN: [00:16:15] Uh, it's funded by USAID.

GANZGLASS: [00:16:17] What does SPA stand for?

CRAIN: [00:16:19] Special Projects Assistance, I think. They're pretty small grants, I think less than \$10,000.

GANZGLASS: [00:16:27] So you, you had, um, you had applied for that?

CRAIN: [00:16:30] Yeah.

GANZGLASS: [00:16:35] So. So you said that what you did in Mexico had a lot to do with what you did later on. I know you, after this job, um, you became the diversity and inclusion person in Mexico. How did that all evolve.

CRAIN: [00:16:56] In two, well, I'm not exactly sure what year it was launched, but in 2014, um, Mexico hosted a same sex couple initiative training. It was a week long training for the Mexican staff, well, for post staff. So they did these trainings at several posts around the world to train the staff to be ready to receive a same sex couple once the Defense of Marriage Act was struck down and the Supreme Court passed gay marriage. I don't, however, that happened, because I was in Peace Corps, so I don't remember how that happened exactly. But, um. To create a pathway basically. And

so we had that training. And after a couple of those trainings, the staff that was giving that training realized that staff, post staff needed intercultural competence, diversity, and inclusion training writ large. And so they modified that. And that's a training they do now.

CRAIN: [00:17:51] But as part of the training in Mexico, all of the staff participated. And they had a panel of six volunteers who had been active and involved and vocal about things needed to be changing, changed, or were giving trainings on different things. And I had been the chair of the volunteer advisory committee and had done several other things, doing trainings on diversity sort of trainings, trying to improve how the Mexican staff were helping the volunteers come in and team build in order to support each other throughout their two years of service.

GANZGLASS: [00:18:23] Broader than sexual orientation.

CRAIN: [00:18:25] Yeah. Yeah. I, to start talking about identity and diversity, all of that generally. Um, and so, the six of us participated in the training the whole week. And then the last day we did action planning, the staff did action planning and we did planning. And we decided to create two different committees, a peer support network and a diversity and inclusion network. Peer support to do direct peer support, especially with incoming volunteers in their first three months of service, call and check in on them all the time. And then a diversity inclusion network to help with supporting incoming volunteers in navigating their differences in the Mexican culture, with each other, and also to help educate incoming volunteers more about the diversity of Mexico. And the way different, especially the way we think of our major identity aspects, how that plays out in Mexico.

GANZGLASS: [00:19:22] Where it's basically different tribes or indigenous people versus?

CRAIN: [00:19:27] Well, it's, actually it's very interesting. There's a pretty significant population that identifies as white. The majority identify as mestizo. Um, there are Afro descendant people, Afro Mexicanos, and

they were only included in a census in 2015. There's a lot of racism and colorism issues in Mexico. And then talking about the different religions, different immigrant populations. There's significant populations of Koreans, Japanese.

GANZGLASS: [00:19:56] Really?

CRAIN: [00:19:56] All sorts of different kinds of people, yeah, all throughout Mexico.

GANZGLASS: [00:19:59] Which you don't hear about very much at all.

CRAIN: [00:20:02] No, not at all. Yeah. But it's, I mean, it's a huge country. So yeah, there are, people are, there's all sorts of different kinds of people there. I mean, Frida Kahlo's father was a Lebanese immigrant.

GANZGLASS: [00:20:12] I didn't know that.

CRAIN: [00:20:12] Lebanese or Australian. Not Australian, Austrian. Maybe he was Austrian.

GANZGLASS: [00:20:15] Really?

CRAIN: [00:20:16] Or Hungarian. Somewhere around there. Yes, Lebanese I think.

GANZGLASS: [00:20:21] So you, you and these other volunteers created this network and then you, did you manage that or how did that?

CRAIN: [00:20:28] Yeah, we, yeah, the volunteers manage it. Um, there's a staff liaison on each one and we work closely with the staff. It's not just some like rogue thing or off on its own. Get some funding from Peace Corps Mexico, especially the peer support network, to go and visit volunteers if they're struggling, um, or to, for both to go into the office for trainings or to go to regional volunteer meetings that would happen a couple times a year. Yeah. And I think they're still going

strong and seem to have done a world of wonder to help the incoming cohorts like become a tight knit group.

GANZGLASS: [00:21:11] Does this happen in other countries as well?

CRAIN: [00:21:13] It does in some, but it really depends on the leadership and the staff of each of those.

GANZGLASS: [00:21:20] So that's, that's still continuing. Did you get to travel around the country much?

CRAIN: [00:21:25] Oh, yeah. I traveled a lot. Um, Mexico has a fantastic intra city bus system, like nothing like Greyhound. Very, very, very nice busses. So I went all over the place there. We were restricted from traveling to a lot of places. But Mexico is such a huge country that I went to Chiapas, Oaxaca, the Yucatan Peninsula. Um, I lived pretty close to Puerto Vallarta, so I went there on.

GANZGLASS: [00:21:53] But you did this on your own or as part of the diversity?

CRAIN: [00:21:56] Oh, on my own. On my own traveling. Yeah. Yeah, because it was my final year, my third year, when we were getting it up and running. We were writing the bylaws and figuring out what we were going to do and all that kind of stuff. And then because of all of my work in that, the Director of Programing and Training created the volunteer leader for diversity inclusion position for me and offered it to me. And then that fourth year I was in the Peace Corps office. I moved to Queretaro. And through that I traveled a lot, but that was mostly to support the staff on their site visits.

GANZGLASS: [00:22:30] So you were a volunteer for three years and one year you were a staff there?

CRAIN: [00:22:35] Well, I was a volunteer leader, so I was still a volunteer but.

GANZGLASS: [00:22:38] Oh, you were still a fourth year.

CRAIN: [00:22:39] But I was working in the office.

GANZGLASS: [00:22:41] And you were being paid or no?

CRAIN: [00:22:42] No.

GANZGLASS: [00:22:49] So what did you learn from all of that?

CRAIN: [00:22:52] Oh, a lot. Um. Well, I learned that the diversity and inclusion sort of industry or topic area is, is my field, is my calling. And I've sort of come in and out of it my entire life, starting in kindergarten and. And have integrated it into all of the different things that I've done, including urban planning. And, and so I just sort of, just given up like, okay, this is what I'm supposed to do. So I found my path in life through all of this, um, that's for sure. I learned about myself, that I am very resilient and very persistent. Um. And, and from Mexican culture, I learned that above all else, the important thing is to love your friends and family and to have a good time. And not worry about.

GANZGLASS: [00:23:51] All the details?

CRAIN: [00:23:52] All the details, all the little things, all the, especially being on time.

GANZGLASS: [00:23:59] So, those are big lessons to learn. Um, what, what about the whole, you know, orientation to the three goals of Peace Corps? If you think about, about helping the country.

CRAIN: [00:24:15] Mm hmm.

GANZGLASS: [00:24:16] Um, I mean, you clearly provided training and set up some things so you could say.

CRAIN: [00:24:23] Yeah.

GANZGLASS: [00:24:24] Something there.

CRAIN: [00:24:24] Yeah, I think I transferred a lot of knowledge to the women and the children that I worked with, um, and the men I worked with too. And I helped them realize that they had it within themselves to do this project because the whole, especially the recycling project, the whole time we were working on it, the women referred to it as my project. It was my project, my project. And then it wasn't until the last month or two where they're like, oh, you really are leaving. Especially after I extended for the third year, like, oh, you're not leaving, you'll be here forever. Um, yeah. Oh, no, you're, you're really. This really is our project. Oh, okay. So, I mean, it took two years for them to get that, but I also appreciated that they didn't want me to leave, and they liked me so much that they really embraced me as part of the community. Um.

GANZGLASS: [00:25:19] Good.

CRAIN: [00:25:21] Yeah. And I heard from some of the participants that I changed their minds about U.S. Americans, that they had this idea of gringos. Well, they said gringos specifically, um, and that now they realize not all of us are like that, and they appreciated that. And of course, I appreciated that. And, um, because my mom had, she had gone to school in Mexico a couple summers to learn Spanish. So I had some knowledge of Mexico. I didn't, I really tried not to have preconceived notions, at least about Mexicans. I think I did about my fellow volunteers. Um. That. I just, I mean, everything that I know about Mexico I learned while I was there, so I can't say I, you know, anything was dashed or anything like that, but I just found Mexicans to be the most hospitable, warm, loving people that I have ever encountered. And it's just a shame that we can't get along, really, our countries. I mean, our, I think we can people-to-people but.

GANZGLASS: [00:26:25] Well, it's a unique time.

CRAIN: [00:26:27] Yeah.

GANZGLASS: [00:26:28] I hope unique time. Um, you've mentioned a couple of times you didn't get along with your fellow volunteers as much.

CRAIN: [00:26:36] Yeah.

GANZGLASS: [00:26:37] Do you think it all comes from that instance during training or were there other issues?

CRAIN: [00:26:42] Yeah, I think it does. And, yeah.

GANZGLASS: [00:26:48] And you weren't, were you stationed close to some of the other ones?

CRAIN: [00:26:53] There were, no, not. I mean, and there were a couple who were two hours away. Um, they're an older couple. They're baby boomers. So I got along with them and some others, I guess, while, while in country, you know.

GANZGLASS: [00:27:08] But you haven't kept up with anybody.

CRAIN: [00:27:09] Right. So I guess that's what makes me think like, oh, the bonds weren't that tight.

GANZGLASS: [00:27:13] Mm hmm. Yeah. So then you, you did this, this job for the fourth year, which is a long time to stay.

CRAIN: [00:27:21] Yeah.

GANZGLASS: [00:27:21] And how did that then translate into the job you now have in Washington?

CRAIN: [00:27:27] Um, well, I applied for the job in Washington and I think.

GANZGLASS: [00:27:31] So the job existed before you came?

CRAIN: [00:27:33] Yeah.

GANZGLASS: [00:27:34] Okay.

CRAIN: [00:27:34] Yeah. There had been two people, it had been filled twice, but so it was still relatively new because once I arrived, um, that hadn't been filled by anyone for more than a year. So I basically created, made it into what it is, and it's evolving even more now. But I supported employee resource group programs and, um, basically worked on making sure the workplace is not just diverse but inclusive, and to identify barriers to that and to propose solutions to eliminating the barriers. Um.

CRAIN: [00:28:16] And I, and the volunteer leader role was the first time I was, like, formally working in that capacity, and so it set me up for a, not really an entry level but sort of a mid, uh, level position, which is what my position is. Um. Because I, you know, I had ten or so years of professional experience generally, and then the more specialized in that particular realm qualified me for the job. I mean, I had to apply for it and go through all of that whole federal sector.

GANZGLASS: [00:28:56] And what are the issues you're facing in Peace Corps? Is Peace Corps, do you think, different than, as an organization, different than other organizations from a diversity point of view?

CRAIN: [00:29:09] No, I don't think so. I don't think the issues that we're facing are any different than any other organization faces, especially one that has often run, like, very lean and very much focused on supporting volunteers in the field and not so much on the workplace. Because we have a five year rule, there's a constant turnover. Um. The people come to the Peace Corps and go to other development agencies or federal agencies that come in and out and like there's this fluid, but there's kind of a cast of characters that is constantly coming in and out and is in charge really of the Peace Corps, runs the Peace Corps. Um, and then most of other people work there for five years and then go get a job somewhere else.

CRAIN: [00:29:59] Um, so that's one of the big problems is this constant turnover. And we don't have systems in place where the people, the

positions that are constantly turning over, the people who fill those can just plug in, just plug and play. There's a lot of coming in and relearning and reinventing the wheel and all this kind of stuff. Um. And I think we're also an, an organization that needs to catch up to the 21st century and to the changing demographics. Um, that is not 1961 anymore. In ten years, half of 18- to 24-year-olds, 18 to 24 will be people of color. And, um, right now there's a 50 year difference between volunteers and our leadership. And that generational divide is very, very, very, very obvious in the way that we communicate and the way that we see issues.

GANZGLASS: [00:31:07] And why is that? And the reason I'm asking that is, you know, I've interviewed lots of people and they say that, you know, Peace Corps opened up their, their minds and their, to, to, you know, to the world and how different people are and they think so differently about people. And, you know, lots of people say how warm and friendly their host families or their host countries or towns or whatever were. And then yet in the workplace, all these people who say that, it, it. From what you're saying, it doesn't translate to the workplace. And why is that?

CRAIN: [00:31:50] Um, I don't know exactly why, but it's very easy to forget that just because we're all U.S. Americans, or that we all work for the Peace Corps, that we're all different. We all have different backgrounds. We all have different experiences. We all have different experiences as volunteers and. That. And people seem to forget the history of this country and, um, and maybe never learned the history, maybe don't know the facts about civil rights and things like this and that. We had laws where women had no rights, like all of these kinds of things. And it's. Time marches on and progress keeps going. I think it is true that the arc of history is long, but it bends towards justice, absolutely, like Dr. King said.

CRAIN: [00:32:40] And I also think that at the Peace Corps where we get into this mindset, oh, well, I served abroad. I lived in this other place. So I know how it is. These other people, I get diversity and inclusion, but it's different here. And they don't know it. And so I think we can't get

out of our own way, in some ways. And to be open and curious again and not say, oh well, that doesn't matter. You just leave all of your ask yourself at the door. And that's the generational difference. I think older generations were raised and socialized to leave that at the door. And I'm 39, so I'm an elder millennial. I was not raised to leave that at the door. Well, maybe I was raised to leave that at the door and I rebelled against that.

GANZGLASS: [00:33:27] But you're not.

CRAIN: [00:33:28] Yeah, I definitely rebelled against that. So. And the ones coming behind me even less so. And, and so I, from where I sit, what I see is the Peace Corps needs to change or it will not be relevant in ten years.

GANZGLASS: [00:33:44] And, and what do you think the problems are with, just recruiting people of color?

CRAIN: [00:33:52] There's no problem recruiting. It's in the selection.

GANZGLASS: [00:33:55] Okay, talk a little bit about that.

CRAIN: [00:33:58] Um. People apply. People apply and people are qualified. We have diverse groups of qualified folks for jobs and volunteer service. And then the, when it comes down to choosing people for the jobs, they're not getting chosen.

GANZGLASS: [00:34:14] And is that because of bias?

CRAIN: [00:34:18] Could be. We don't know. We're just starting to look into it.

GANZGLASS: [00:34:25] Huh. Because I had always heard it was the application process that was the problem, or that people, you know, don't have the orientation or the money to be able to afford to take something really low paying for a couple of years.

CRAIN: [00:34:41] Yeah. And that, that, I would say that's probably, especially for volunteer service, that's definitely part of it, the socioeconomics of it. I went into debt applying to the Peace Corps because it was before Obamacare and I didn't have insurance. Um. But we haven't, I mean, we're not a self reflective agency.

GANZGLASS: [00:35:01] Hmm.

CRAIN: [00:35:04] Um, and I don't want to talk too much about it because it's, I'm not a spokesperson for the agency, but, um. We're just starting to list, just starting to look into it, to look from a systemic and institutional way. There have been initiatives and training programs and things like that. But that doesn't work, especially somewhere that has constant turnover. And so we're trying to identify the barriers and then come up with a plan to recommend solutions for those barriers, taking into account the fact that we will turn over every three years.

GANZGLASS: [00:35:46] And maybe turnover isn't all that it's, was expected to do.

CRAIN: [00:35:51] Right. Yeah, yeah. Because the idea is, oh well, well, the volunteer corps will diversify and then the employees will too. And that is not happening. The volunteer groups have diversified and they're, and it's not translating.

GANZGLASS: [00:36:06] To, to staff.

CRAIN: [00:36:07] No.

GANZGLASS: [00:36:09] So the volunteers have diversified even.

CRAIN: [00:36:13] I mean, there's still, there's still improvements to be made. But yeah, for the last five years it's been at 30 percent underrepresented groups.

GANZGLASS: [00:36:21] And that's both, um, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, across the board?

CRAIN: [00:36:27] Yeah. I think we only track race, ethnicity, and gender. Well, sex, male and female really.

GANZGLASS: [00:36:34] Oh, so.

CRAIN: [00:36:35] We, they asked questions about whether or not you're transgender in the application, on the health history form, but that's just for medical purposes. We don't track that in terms of demographics.

GANZGLASS: [00:36:47] And of course, if it's considered not welcoming, then people don't come. They're so self-perpetuating.

CRAIN: [00:36:55] Yeah, yeah. And people talk to each other. Volunteers have friends who are not volunteers, who are maybe considering it. And if they have a great experience, they'll translate that. If they don't have a great experience, they'll translate that.

GANZGLASS: [00:37:07] Sure. So.

CRAIN: [00:37:09] And right now, I mean, they just started this refer-a-friend program, and I would not refer a friend to the Peace Corps right now, personally.

GANZGLASS: [00:37:18] Hmm. Even though you had a good experience. Do you think you had a good experience?

CRAIN: [00:37:22] I think all told, yeah. The days were long but the months went by fast. Um, and I learned a lot and it got me here. And the last three years have been really hard. Coming back was really, really difficult, I mean.

GANZGLASS: [00:37:36] What was hard about coming back?

CRAIN: [00:37:37] Well, it came, um. Before the Peace Corps, I lived in Oregon for 12 years, so that's a much different culture. And then I lived in Mexico for four years, much different culture. So then I moved

back for this job. So West Coast Mexican culture clashing with East Coast culture. Um, the job was really difficult, the election, and then an understaffed, under-resourced office for the last few years. And personal stuff. Um. But it also made me realize the importance of dealing with all of that stuff and coming out the other side. I see once again how resilient I am and how important it is to take care of myself and for others to take care of themselves and, and to just, you know, treat each other with love and kindness and try to see that we're all doing the best we can.

GANZGLASS: [00:38:35] So you found your niche, though, whether it's at Peace Corps or not, you'll be involved in diversity.

CRAIN: [00:38:40] Yes.

GANZGLASS: [00:38:41] Training and, and other issues. How long have you been at Peace Corps now?

CRAIN: [00:38:45] Three years.

GANZGLASS: [00:38:46] Three years. So you have two more to go. Are you going to, what do you think you'll do afterwards?

CRAIN: [00:38:52] I'm not really sure. Um, I think probably another federal agency, at least for a little while, just to see what it's like.

GANZGLASS: [00:38:59] So, so D.C. isn't as bad as it as you thought it was?

CRAIN: [00:39:03] It's growing on me now. Now that I'm, like, less traumatized, I think. Um, yeah, it's, it's getting better. It's growing on me, I think. And I think job prospects are pretty good here probably.

GANZGLASS: [00:39:19] Well, and there are federal agencies all over the country as well.

CRAIN: [00:39:22] Yeah. Yeah.

GANZGLASS: [00:39:23] So. Great.

CRAIN: [00:39:25] Yeah.

GANZGLASS: [00:39:25] So are there any questions I didn't ask you that you or something you want to say that, um, that I didn't ask you about? This is really your interview.

CRAIN: [00:39:37] Um. Well, I guess I did say that I didn't get along with volunteers a number of times. But I do want to clarify that that was, I mean, there were, of course, people that I, I got along with. I would just say there were cohorts after me in Mexico that were super tight, and they all got along. And I got to see that because I was there for so long. And so I'm just a little jealous of that. But I definitely had some friends from other, especially from other groups who I am still in contact with and I see on a regular basis.

GANZGLASS: [00:40:10] It's the luck of the draw, who you end up with.

CRAIN: [00:40:13] Exactly. Yeah. Yeah. Especially since Mexico is in a transition in the program and all that kind of stuff. So we were all sort of.

GANZGLASS: [00:40:22] Mexico was in a transition as a program? In what respect?

CRAIN: [00:40:27] Uh, well, because it's so new, I think they've been figuring out.

GANZGLASS: [00:40:29] When did it actually start?

CRAIN: [00:40:31] In 2006.

GANZGLASS: [00:40:32] Oh, so just a short time.

CRAIN: [00:40:34] Yeah.

GANZGLASS: [00:40:34] And how many volunteers are there now, do you know?

CRAIN: [00:40:38] I think at a time they have about 65 to 80.

GANZGLASS: [00:40:42] So it's a pretty small program.

CRAIN: [00:40:44] Yeah. Yeah, they were starting to expand more, but the sites where it's safe to send folks are so far away from the office that it's hard for staff to get there in a timely manner, because they have to. Peace Corps changed some of the rules, and they have rules now about how many times staff have to visit volunteers. And so they're like constantly traveling to fulfill those requirements.

GANZGLASS: [00:41:11] Okay.

CRAIN: [00:41:11] Yeah.

GANZGLASS: [00:41:12] So thank you for the interview.

CRAIN: [00:41:14] Yeah. Thank you. This was great.

GANZGLASS: [00:41:16] Thank you very much.

CRAIN: [00:41:16] Mm hmm.

[END OF INTERVIEW]