

Mary Lou Weathers Oral History Interview
Returned Peace Corps Volunteer Collection
Administrative Information

Creator: Mary Lou Weathers
Interviewer: Evelyn Ganzglass
Date of Interview: September 20, 2018
Location of Interview: Washington, D.C.
Length: 30 pages

Biographical Note

Mary Lou Weathers served as a Peace Corps volunteer in Benin from 1980 to 1983 as an English teacher.

Access

Open.

Usage Restrictions

According to the deed of gift signed December 12, 2018, copyright of these materials has been assigned to the United States Government. This interview is in the public domain.

Copyright

The copyright law of the United States (Title 17, United States Code) governs the making of photocopies or other reproductions of copyrighted material. Under certain conditions specified in the law, libraries and archives are authorized to furnish a photocopy or other reproduction. One of these specified conditions is that the photocopy or reproduction is not to be "used for any purpose other than private study, scholarship, or research." If a user makes a request for, or later uses, a photocopy or reproduction for purposes in excesses of "fair use," that user may be liable for copyright infringement. This institution reserves the right to refuse to accept a copying order if, in its judgment, fulfillment of the order would involve violation of copyright law. The copyright law extends its protection to unpublished works from the moment of creation in a tangible form. Direct your questions concerning copyright to the reference staff.

Technical Note

This transcript was created by Sonix software from the MP3 audio recording of the interview. The resulting text file was lightly edited and reformatted according to a standard template.

Suggested Citation

Mary Lou Weathers, recorded interview by Evelyn Ganzglass, September 20, 2018, page #, Returned Peace Corps Volunteer Collection, John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum.

DISCLAIMER

This transcript was generated automatically by Sonix software from the audio recording. The accuracy of the transcript cannot be guaranteed. Only the original audio recording constitutes the official record of this interview and should be used along with the transcript. If researchers have any concerns about accuracy or would like to recommend corrections, they are encouraged to contact the library reference staff.

Oral History Interview

with

Mary Lou Weathers

September 20, 2018
Washington, D.C.

By Evelyn Ganzglass

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

GANZGLASS: [00:00:01] This is Evelyn Ganzglass. I was a Peace Corps volunteer in Somalia from 1966 to 1968. Today is September 20, 2018, and I am interviewing Mary Lou Weathers, who was a Peace Corps volunteer in Benin from 1980 to 1983, and she was a TEFL volunteer. Mary Lou, why did you join the Peace Corps?

WEATHERS: [00:00:31] Out of a desire to help individuals less fortunate than me in a French speaking country. And I had been learning French for a long time that I liked the idea of going and working with people that clearly had requested help. And I am teaching English as a foreign language was something that although I didn't have training in it, other than the training I received through Peace Corps, that I thought I could do. And I had become interested in Peace Corps and was influenced by the parents of my best friend in high school. They had been the Peace Corps staff in Saipan in the South Pacific. And I loved their stories. And

they were you know, I thought that that since I had been taking French for a very long time, that I would probably go to a French speaking country.

GANZGLASS: [00:01:55] Did you apply for French speaking country?

WEATHERS: [00:01:59] Yes. However, I also I also said initially that I was interested in doing work in the health field. And so the first post that was offered, kind of funny, was South Korea. They were there was a tuberculosis project going on there. And I said, no thank you. And then I know by virtue of the timing of this and when my final clearances came through in the summer of 1980, because Benin had a different academic calendar there, what we would consider to be our summer break. Benin is above the equator. And so it's, you know, the same seasons as us. But they had a planting component as part of their curriculum and so were in school during the summer basically. That changed. And so our training was going on in November, December, January of 1980 into 1981. And so when I was cleared for volunteer service in the summer. And that's why I went to Benin, the former French colony formerly called Dahomey. And the name had changed. And so, uh, and so we arrived there and.

GANZGLASS: [00:03:50] Let's back up. OK, so where did you grow up?

WEATHERS: [00:03:56] I grew up I was born in New York. I grew up in New Jersey. Suburban New Jersey mayor. And then but I was living in Massachusetts and I went to high school and college in Massachusetts. Sudbury, Massachusetts was where my parents were living. And I had. Actually I was working in an administrative capacity at MIT and had met a Peace Corps recruiter there.

GANZGLASS: [00:04:37] So you weren't straight out of college?

WEATHERS: [00:04:39] No, I wasn't. No, I was 26. Now, when I became a volunteer, I'd been working for about two years. I graduated from Regis College in

Weston, Massachusetts, with a political science and French major and studied in France. And I and then got this job at MIT. Yeah, nice people, but it wasn't really what I was interested in. And then I knew someone who was a volunteer had been a volunteer in Liberia. And I and the parents of my high school friend, they encouraged me to apply.

GANZGLASS: [00:05:25] And you said you met a recruiter as well?

WEATHERS: [00:05:29] Yes. The recruiter came to MIT, and so I went and interviewed up and applied. Then I don't remember anything about meeting with the recruiter or the up and so up. And then they found out during the summer that I thought I was going to be going to go to Benin. I went and looked up in the library to see because I didn't recognize that name. And so I started to get ready.

GANZGLASS: [00:06:06] And where did you meet up with the rest of the group?

WEATHERS: [00:06:11] In Philadelphia. We did about a week, I think, about a week just before we were set to go over, just before Thanksgiving in 1980. And so met in Philadelphia. Received brief orientation. I remember a lot of shots at the time. And I and then Ed's left Philadelphia.

GANZGLASS: [00:06:44] Was everybody in a TEFL group? Was the whole group TEFL?

WEATHERS: [00:06:46] Most of it. There were 31 of us that were teachers. And then there were also four appropriate technology volunteers who were doing what were called Lorena Stoves development, L-O-R-E-N-A. So there were four of them and the other 31 were training to be teachers. And there was TEFL, physics, math and biology.

GANZGLASS: [00:07:23] And you were in TEFL?

WEATHERS: [00:07:24] I was in the TEFL group.

GANZGLASS: [00:07:28] So after a week in Philadelphia you all flew off?

WEATHERS: [00:07:32] We took off, took off for Paris and then flew down to and from Paris down to, well eventually to Cotonou, Benin.

GANZGLASS: [00:07:48] Is that, is that the capital?

WEATHERS: [00:07:50] No, that's the commercial center, the capital of Benin is Porto-Novo. And then, uh, we had yeah.

GANZGLASS: [00:08:03] You flew to Cote?

WEATHERS: [00:08:06] Cote d'Ivoire. We flew to Abidjan, we were supposed to stop in Ouagadougou. Oh gosh, I'm trying to remember every country of the to the north, not Mali. Burkina Faso. That's it. We were supposed to stop there but there had been a coup and so we did not stop there. And but it landed in Abidjan and got on local Air Afrique to fly to Cotonou, Benin. So it was we were all together and had gotten to know people over the week, you know, that we were in in Benin and then were in training in Benin for a couple of months.

GANZGLASS: [00:09:11] And where was the training?

WEATHERS: [00:09:12] That was in Cotonou, the, uh, that was that a place called Codiam. And that and that was a, you know, kind of an educational center now. But it also had rooms and everything, although there were other people living there. And I remember some Zairian students, that was back when it was called Zaire, being there. As we said, the interesting thing was we had a staff, contract staff basically, who were doing the training and some of them were Beninese. A lot of the trainees didn't speak French, the English teachers, as a matter of fact, spoke the best French in the group, and since they were to be, you know, teaching in French, this was kind of difficult for them. So they had Beninese teachers.

GANZGLASS: Teaching them French?

WEATHERS: [00:10:28] Teaching them French, but also doing the technical training. And were more Americans working under contract all the time. When we arrived in country, there were only four volunteers who were in country. And the reason that was such a small group was that there had been some political issues of the in the late '70s, there had been an attempted invasion. Benin is a very poor country and it was kind of improbable, I think, that that Americans or Americans backed armed forces were trying to invade Benin, but there were. It was a time when a government was Marxist-Leninist, at least on paper.

GANZGLASS: When you came?

WEATHERS: When I came, but they had asked for assistance. And so a lot of the that's why one of the reasons that there were only four volunteers in country, because there hadn't been a group that had gone over recently.

GANZGLASS: [00:11:51] Had they'd been kicked out before?

WEATHERS: [00:11:53] Yes. Yes. Yes.

GANZGLASS: [00:11:55] So then you well, you weren't the first group, you were the second group back.

WEATHERS: [00:12:00] Yeah. The Peace Corps had been in Benin since the '60s, but as I say, up in the mid '70s, it's due to this political due to this quote unquote, invasion, the Americans had been had been kicked out.

GANZGLASS: Because Benin accused the United States of backing?

WEATHERS: Backing the people that were invading. Not something that was really talked about very much, you know. So it was something that my recollection of it at this point is spotty.

GANZGLASS: [00:12:46] Did you feel anti-Americanism when you were there?

WEATHERS: [00:12:49] No, no. Once it was clear that we were. At one point, because I spoke French so well and because my accent was it was Parisian, they said, are you French? And they were hostile kind of towards the French. And although they were taking aid from the French, from France. And I said, no, that as an American. And that was fine. So it's no, I think a lot of people didn't know any Americans, you know, and the experiences that they had had no work that were favorable of this was kind of, um. So we had gone to the.

GANZGLASS: [00:13:43] So let's go back to the training. You clearly didn't need French, did you?

WEATHERS: [00:13:47] No, I didn't need French training. No.

GANZGLASS: [00:13:50] But other people went through French training?

WEATHERS: [00:13:53] Yes. And then technical training.

GANZGLASS: [00:13:55] Yeah. How was the TEFL training?

WEATHERS: [00:13:59] That was, I understand that it's well different from training here in the United States, you know, to teach English as a second language or as a foreign language. You know, some of my friends that I served with in Benin and had gone on to be Teaching English as a Second Language teachers. We learned, you know, basically through a practice of how to how to teach, you know, not doing a lot of translation, although I was capable of doing that. Most of the English teachers spoke pretty good French and I, uh, and not doing translations.

GANZGLASS: [00:14:55] But did you learn other local languages as well?

WEATHERS: [00:14:57] Well, I had difficulty learning a local language. Not in not in the training. Not in the initial training.

GANZGLASS: [00:15:04] The initial training was all in French?

WEATHERS: [00:15:07] Yes. It was a total immersion.

GANZGLASS: [00:15:10] And does everybody in Benin speak French or did everybody at that point?

WEATHERS: [00:15:14] No, there were at. It is the national language, but it is. There were forty local languages. They're not written down. They're tonal. I had difficulty picking up a local language and I did learn a little once I was at my post. But, uh, but there were some people that were better than others.

GANZGLASS: [00:15:43] Oh, did you have, did you do practice teaching?

WEATHERS: [00:15:46] Yes, yes. There was a school near Codiam where we did practice teaching and then so that went fine and then I felt comfortable with it though I'm not I'm not really a born teacher. I'll be honest. That was one of the reasons I didn't go into teaching when I got back. The some people really were gifted that at no, I did not fall into that category.

GANZGLASS: [00:16:15] And what kind of, were you trained to teach children or adults or what? What kind of TEFL did you do?

WEATHERS: [00:16:25] English was a required subject in their secondary school, so this would be middle school and high school. I did not. Taught at the middle school level. I would be equivalencies like the seventh grade, I think seventh and eighth grade and then 10th grade also because they

did not want an American and non-African or Beninese to teach the senior year because that was Nigerian literature and they wanted an African point of view for that. But I did teach at the 10th grade level or the equivalent to 10th grade level.

GANZGLASS: [00:17:14] So you just said it's Nigerian?

WEATHERS: [00:17:17] Nigerian authors basically.

GANZGLASS: So like the Nigerian authors?

WEATHERS: [00:17:23] Yeah. Yes. It was Nigerian authors that. Benin is right next to Nigeria. And so the senior year class read Chinua Achebe, Things Fall Apart. And other Nigerian authors like that.

GANZGLASS: [00:17:44] Ok, so that was all. You were teaching English as well as English literature, I guess?

WEATHERS: [00:17:50] Well, English, basically, to be honest, at the elementary school in Benin was taught in a in a local language, in the appropriate local language. And so when they got to their final year in elementary school and into middle school, time was when they were learning French. And so my French was actually better than theirs. And I'd been studying it for 20 years or 20 plus years at that point. So it was kind of odd. So class size was 60, you know, 60 to 120. Tremendous classes, mostly male students. Very, very few girls. You had to pay up to go to school there.

GANZGLASS: [00:18:47] So where did you end up teaching? You were trained in the training facility and then where?

WEATHERS: [00:18:53] And then I went into my post up in Parakou, Benin. Up in the north, with two other, two other volunteers, one of whom left not long after arriving up there. But Ed David was teaching biology at one of the high schools and Parakou was a large city.

GANZGLASS: [00:19:20] How big of a city is that?

WEATHERS: [00:19:22] Oh, probably about 20 or 30 thousand. Oh, I'm thinking yeah, it was a good sized city. Yes, it was the principal city up in the north of there, about halfway up the country at the end of the train line.

GANZGLASS: [00:19:43] And so you took so after training, you took the train up?

WEATHERS: [00:19:47] Yes, the train. I took the train up.

GANZGLASS: [00:19:49] You and David and the other person?

WEATHERS: [00:19:51] Yes. Yes.

GANZGLASS: [00:19:53] And where did you end up living?

WEATHERS: [00:19:56] Initially, there was an apartment that David had because he was teaching at the *lycée*, the high school, that they had apartments for French volunteers were there and German volunteers that were there working up there, but I eventually found a house near the Peace Corps, as you know, arranged for up with officials in Paris who opted for a separate house. It's luckily for me and part of a compound, though, I was the only person living there, basically. So I did not live with a family. I understand now that in training that people live with families. This is something that since Peace Corps presence and the number of volunteers in country was so small, that really wasn't an opportunity to go out and find places, you know, for people to live. We did our, we did a live-in that we would have normally done with someone that volunteered in Benin, over in Togo, as a matter of fact, because there were teachers over there.

GANZGLASS: [00:21:23] So that was before you were assigned?

WEATHERS: [00:21:25] Yes, exactly. That that was part of my training that we went over to Togo, living in Togo.

GANZGLASS: [00:21:33] And how long was that?

WEATHERS: [00:21:35] Oh, I think a week or two. Just a very short period of time that I stayed with volunteer who was an English TEFL volunteer.

GANZGLASS: [00:21:46] Oh, so you lived with a Peace Corps volunteer?

WEATHERS: [00:21:50] Yes, yes. Yes.

GANZGLASS: [00:21:54] Was that useful?

WEATHERS: [00:21:55] Yes, because I hadn't seen, you know, someone really teaching and she was teaching in school at that time that even though the students in Benin were still on the winter break because they were on, in Togo, they were on a traditional September to June schedule, academic schedule. And so would. But we went back to Benin and went out to our posts and I was sworn-in in February of 1981.

GANZGLASS: [00:22:34] Ok, so. So you ended up there. And what school did you teach at?

WEATHERS: [00:22:40] I taught at a CEMG, C-E-M-G.

GANZGLASS: [00:22:47] So we can talk about that.

WEATHERS: [00:22:50] Yeah. You know that this is something that it was like.

GANZGLASS: C-E-M-G.

WEATHERS: Yeah. School. Like the combination of the American middle school and high school basically.

GANZGLASS: [00:23:05] So you were saying it was mostly boys and paid.

WEATHERS: Yes. Mm hmm.

GANZGLASS: Were you the only female teacher?

WEATHERS: [00:23:14] No. No, I wasn't there. I remember a couple of a couple of women teachers, not a lot, but it was, um. A lot of people in Benin had gone and done training in France, you know, teachers and staff. And there was a college in Benin, but a lot of the teachers and other professionals had gone for training in Benin, I'm sorry, in France. Talk about a brain drain of where they took people from West Africa and set them for training in France. And then people wouldn't want to come back. And I, and so they kind of, they didn't do that as much. And that was much more difficult to go for training for the teachers to go for training.

GANZGLASS: [00:24:22] By the time you were there?

WEATHERS: [00:24:23] By the time I was there.

GANZGLASS: [00:24:25] But the older ones had come back.

WEATHERS: Yes, yes. Yes.

GANZGLASS: Did you become friends with those teachers?

WEATHERS: [00:24:31] Yes. Yes. Not so much in Parakou because I changed posts after a year there. I changed posts then and I made more friends at my second posting.

GANZGLASS: [00:24:43] Ok, let's talk a little bit about the first post. So what, what did you, how many classes did you teach?

WEATHERS: Oh, four or five.

GANZGLASS: So you were busy?

WEATHERS: [00:24:54] I was quite busy, a lot of you know that I remember writing on the board and the students didn't have books there. Very few people had books that I did a lot of writing on the board. And then they would write up their case in their notebooks as well. And we would practice, you know, what's very oral. And then I, uh, I think the students got to know the kind of American kind of pronunciation.

GANZGLASS: [00:25:45] Oh, so you did that. What did you do in your spare time?

WEATHERS: [00:25:50] And it's not a whole lot of the, uh, the it's been a lot of time correcting, you know, reviewing papers and a lot of testing. A lot of testing. Yes.

GANZGLASS: [00:26:05] That was your idea?

WEATHERS: [00:26:07] No, that was that was required. Yeah. No, that was required.

GANZGLASS: [00:26:11] So did they have the French curriculum at that point?

WEATHERS: [00:26:17] Yes. No, it was, well it was Beninese, but it was heavily influenced by the French curriculum.

GANZGLASS: [00:26:28] So you live by yourself. Were you lonely or did you make some good of it? You said there was another Peace Corps volunteer there.

WEATHERS: [00:26:39] Yes. And so I used to, uh, get in there with David, at the time lived together for at least a couple of months before I found the place of my own place, basically. The other thing is that I was sick fairly frequently, unfortunately, this was something that and so would get on the train to go down to see the Peace Corps nurse and the Peace Corps doctor in Togo, in Lomé, Togo now. But there was a

nurse in Benin in Cotonou. You know, and so it seemed almost every month, probably because I wasn't being careful about what I was eating and that this was kind of. That was one of the reasons that I decided that I wanted to move further south is so I wouldn't be away from the post as much, and so the opportunity came up.

GANZGLASS: [00:28:03] Did you do cooking on your own or how did you keep getting sick?

WEATHERS: [00:28:07] So I would go out and eat on the street basically. Yes, I did the cooking, but not not a lot.

GANZGLASS: [00:28:18] So you ate on the street and got sick?

WEATHERS: [00:28:18] Yes, yes. Yes. And so the bathroom facilities weren't very advanced either.

GANZGLASS: [00:28:40] You have an outhouse kind of?

WEATEHRS: Yes, yes.

GANZGLASS: Do you have running water in your house?

WEATHERS: [00:28:45] No, no, no. And I did have electricity. I had a cistern and then as I say did have electricity. But it did not have running water. No. Although Parakou was developed, you know, a developed city, but not, not in the homes pretty much though. David did have running water and everything, but the lycee apartments were this was where, as I say, people who were doing volunteer work from Germany and France would come to live and work with some of the living facilities were very nice. So we go and hang out there.

GANZGLASS: [00:29:39] So why did you move out?

WEATHERS: [00:29:41] Oh, it's because I wasn't teaching at the lycee, I was teaching at another high school. And so I had to move out, that wasn't that wasn't an option for me to stay there, basically.

GANZGLASS: [00:29:56] And you moved close to the lycee?

WEATHERS: [00:29:58] Yeah, I moved closer to the CEMG job. I was bicycling, you know, back and forth to school. I would go to school in the morning and then at lunchtime at noon, go home and have lunch and then go back at three because of the heat, you know, in the middle of the day. So it was kind of.

GANZGLASS: [00:30:22] Yeah. Did you travel during, before you went to your second year?

WEATHERS: [00:30:25] Yeah.

GANZGLASS: Where did you go?

WEATHERS: [00:30:28] Yes. Well in November of 1981 I was up and I was traveling around visiting other volunteers in the north. And I also did, I proctored exams, you know, traveled in November at another school, basically not where I taught, but at another school. One thing that I remember, of course, is the going and meeting the headmaster of the school on Monday morning before going into proctor an exam. And he, in order to be hospitable, he pulled out his bottle of gin and colonaut. The colonaut was the traditional way to be hospitable. But basically it's heavy and caffeine and the bottle of gin at nine a.m. and five

GANZGLASS: It's a little early.

WEATHERS: No, a little early, yeah. Oh that that came. Didn't drink very much. Yeah. No, but that was their way of being a welcoming hospitable and I did that and then up and then in late November, I guess it was around Thanksgiving, I was traveling to visit a friend and other volunteer in

Natitingou, another northern city in Benin and was found there in Natitingou by the Peace Corps chauffeur whose name was Osene. And the reason that he had come to, uh, to pick me up was because the Peace Corps had gotten word that my father was in the hospital on intensive care and was very ill. That so had come up to get me and I went home. But it was during that time of, actually this was in December, it wasn't. But I heard the story about at Thanksgiving meal, which we had celebrated the previous year with embassy staff, basically because there weren't other people around. And then in 1981 there an embassy contractor who had gotten drunk and had driven on to the military base where the president of Benin at the time had been staying and was shot.

GANZGLASS: A Peace Corps contractor?

WEATHERS: No, this was actually the embassy contractor, a contractor working for the embassy, was shot and was jailed. And things were very uncomfortable at Benin. And the Peace Corps was making plans to evacuate the volunteers because it was a very tense time. This was then, as I say, right after Thanksgiving and this man was drunk, had been onto the military base and things became very, very complicated. And where they were, as I said, I learned in my drive down with Osene in December about all of this because we up north hadn't even heard about, you know, what had happened. And Peace Corps was making plans to evacuate.

GANZGLASS: [00:34:47] But you were going home anyway?

WEATHERS: [00:34:48] But I was going home anyway because of my father. And so it was this was mid-December that I was and that got word that the father was very ill. And fortunately, he recovered, but was in intensive care for quite a long time. And so they evacuated me.

GANZGLASS: [00:35:13] Did they evacuate everybody else?

WEATHERS: [00:35:16] No, no.

GANZGLASS: [00:35:18] They were just thinking about it.

WEATHERS: [00:35:18] Yes, they were thinking about it. They were making preparations that basically. I believe this was at a time when, you know, volunteers had their own passports and everything. But there were some new volunteers that are new trainees who were just, you know, come in and their passports were with the Beninese government for their visa. So it was quite tense up. But fortunately, things deescalated and as I say, mid-December, I arrived home just before Christmas.

GANZGLASS: [00:36:07] And then how long did you go back?

WEATHERS: [00:36:11] Into January basically that I had planned. We had been planning, my parents and I and my sister had been planning to go on and photograph a safari in Kenya. And then my parents were going to come back with me to Benin. But of course, they didn't do that but since Daddy, and since this was going to be in January of 1982 and since my father was doing better, my sister and I actually went off on a photo safari.

GANZGLASS: [00:36:48] But this was after Peace Corps then or this was during the break?

WEATHERS: [00:36:51] Well, this was right during the break, basically during the break, basically. And that I went through rather than rather than flying from Cotonou to Kenya, I flew from Boston, because my parents were living outside of Boston, and to Kenya and then came back to Benin.

GANZGLASS: [00:37:13] Did she come with you to Benin?

WEATHERS: [00:37:15] Oh, no, no. Unfortunately, none of my family have been to have been there.

GANZGLASS: [00:37:23] So that was a great vacation?

WEATHERS: [00:37:25] Yes, yes. It was a nice vacation. It was nice being home at Christmas time of the year. And then fortunately, as I say, my father got better. And so they decided that my sister and I would stay, you know. Oh, but it was something that. They thought when they sent me home that, as I say, in intensive care, in critical condition, that we think he was mugged and suffered severe hypothermia and he was in intensive care, but was conscious about the time I got home, but was in intensive care for about two months. You know. Peace Corps was wonderful, you know, that this was something that I appreciated, them doing that. In the fall I had been talking with the TEFL coordinator, Peace Corps TEFL coordinator, who was a Beninese gentleman about changing posts. And so happened when I came back, I went to my new post in Allada, which was much closer to Cotonou and about oh, 30, 40 miles, and, you know, that they needed an English teacher and I and so I went back to Allada and changed posts basically there.

GANZGLASS: [00:39:28] Did you teach in high school as well?

WEATHERS: [00:39:29] Yes, it was the same kind of set up at the CEMG. And the friends I made basically, you know, we're in a much smaller town, maybe one or two thousand people, you know, in an agricultural area off of the right on the, it was called the paved road heading north. And there was another volunteer in the town also. So he had a nice house and everything that the town and arranged for him are there, but I stayed there for a little while and then got my own place also. They also had electricity at night and I had a cistern again, and got hired a young man at the high school because the cistern would sometimes run dry up and that the rainy season wouldn't last for very long basically. And so they did have a water pump in the town, you know, a kind of, uh, faucet arrangement. And this young man would help me with the, you know, with that and do other things. This was this was so I could pay him enough so that he could go to school, basically, that

this was something that. So this was in January then of 1982 that I arrived in Allada and then exactly the school year changed. We heard rumors that it was, the French promised more aid. Beninese currency is the CFA, the Communauté française d'Afrique. The CFA was backed by the French franc and the French promised more aid to Benin that if they change the school year, basically. Yeah, that's what we heard. And so they decided that they were going to change it in the fall of 1982. And so that meant that exactly the volunteers that I had come over with, 1980, they were their service was going to be ending in August rather than staying another year and half, but I really liked it and had the friends and teachers and everything and so I asked to extend up as a volunteer. So I extended an extra year basically. And when I extended, and that was when I had the opportunity to get into doing training. They had someone who was working under contract to doing training, arranging training, no peer counseling, training.

GANZGLASS: Training of teachers?

WEATHERS: Training of trainers and so that was another reason why I decided that I wanted to stay. I had also become involved with the Beninese teacher at the time and so was interested in in staying. So in August, September, because I was extending for a third year, the Peace Corps sent me home for six weeks, basically in between. I came back to the States, saw this friend who was a volunteer in Jamaica. Saw the tremendous difference between Peace Corps posts.

GANZGLASS: [00:44:44] And went to Jamaica?

WEATHERS: [00:44:46] Yes. That I had a friend who was a Peace Corps volunteer rent a car and a nice house and everything and electricity. It was quite, it's quite a difference to Jamaica. Visited him then also went to and then was traveling around with my family in the States and went back to Benin in October.

GANZGLASS: [00:45:15] So you said you made friends in the school?

WEATHERS: Yes.

GANZGLASS: What was the difference? Just the people?

WEATHERS: [00:45:23] People were friendly. A lot of people wanted to wanted to speak English. No, I wanted to practice my French and speak English. That was a Ghanaian teacher there. Yeah.

GANZGLASS: [00:45:45] How did you meet your boyfriend?

WEATHERS: [00:45:47] He was a teacher.

GANZGLASS: Oh, he was a teacher there.

WEATHERS: Yes, he was a fellow teacher.

GANZGLASS: [00:45:52] So that was good that you stayed.

WEATHERS: [00:45:55] Yeah, yes, yes. This was something that he was another was he an English teacher.

GANZGLASS: [00:45:59] Was it culturally different in the north, in the south or was it because it was a big city?

WEATHERS: [00:46:05] Just to think it's probably the small-town nature. I was the only *yovo*, the white, *yovo* was their word for white stranger. I was the only *yovo* woman there and the other volunteer, Tom, was a physics teacher as a matter of fact. He's a doctor now. So a different kind of atmosphere, though. It was also one of the interesting things I know of. This was where I had seen for the first time of the, oh, corporal punishment at the school, you know, of beating students, um, which came as quite a quite a shock. I never seen anything like that in the United States. Of course, I had never been to a Third World country before. I had traveled in Europe when I was, you know, growing up.

But I mean, it was my first world kind of experience and so was not used to seeing that. Also, of course, my fancy shortwave radio was stolen at one point and I had gone to report it to the police and saw things in the jail. Certainly don't want to, would not want to see again.

GANZGLASS: [00:48:06] So this was all basically all a shock to you?

WEATHERS: Yes, quite a shock.

GANZGLASS: Could you talk to anybody about that while you were there?

WEATHERS: [00:48:20] No, well, other volunteers, basically, that was something, but no, there really wasn't the support. They had done the peer to peer counseling and training, and there were volunteers who had been trained. And I remember speaking to at least one of them, you know, about what I had seen. But it was something that happened that now.

GANZGLASS: [00:48:49] So, so what was this peer to peer training?

WEATHERS: [00:48:55] At this peer to peer counseling kind of thing, I can't remember out of something specific about it was something about sitting down and talking to people that, you know, that someone came to, you know, OK, someone that I came to. If you would want to talk about something that had happened, I didn't ever really have the experience. No one really came to me to talk about things. But this was this was something that I had that the to do the words of one of the interesting things was one of the peer counseling trainees is one. And another English teacher at a different post, Mark, had an incredible year and learned to speak in several different local languages. The local language up in Parakou was different from the language down in down in Allada. And so I tried to learn a little bit, but it wasn't easy. As I said, nothing was written. It was a tonal language, there wasn't anything in writing about, you know, doing a kind of French translation of stuff. So, uh, so it was but it was interesting, you know, going for this kind of training of and then the training of trainers. And that's one of the

reasons I was very interested in training then. I was the TEFL coordinator for the training during my last summer in 1983. Then I had been serving for a year or, you know, in Allada and then in summer of 1983, I was chosen to be the TEFL coordinator for the new incoming volunteers. And, I knew that that was one of the reasons that I was interested in extending for a third year, that I knew that there was going to be this opportunity, that I was the most experienced TEFL teacher at that point. And I was excited about that. And that was one of the reasons that I kind of went into personnel. Because I was interested in training, although my personal career in the States was quite different. But I was interested in training. That this was something that I, that I got into. And this was what is was.

GANZGLASS: [00:52:02] What did you do? So you did the training at the end and finished your third year and then what, what happened?

WEATHERS: [00:52:11] Oh I left Benin in October of 1983. Traveled with my sister in Greece, toured for a while. Came home. My sister was living in Arlington at the time and my parents were moving down from New Hampshire at that point. And so started looking for a job. I had run my noncompetitive eligibility job that I wanted to try and use. I wanted to settle in the D.C. area, that I knew people who were in that area, people who had but volunteers with me, who had come home at the end of their two years or earlier, you know, than me. And it's out also there. So it made sense. The other thing is that I couldn't face the New England winter, having been home in December of '81 and '82. Yeah, the average temperature in Benin was about eighty. Sixty was really cold as it was just day, you know. Did some substitute teaching for a while in the Arlington school, then decided that, no, this wasn't. I was teaching French and decided that this wasn't really for me. That as I say there were some people who were born teachers that I was not one of them. Really. And so used my competitive eligibility to get a job initially with a job with the Department of Agriculture or Agricultural Marketing Service doing classification work. Uh, not training. I realized when I got home that even though I enjoyed the training, that in

comparison to a lot of people living in this area who had very strong background in training, that I really wasn't very competitive in that area, that some of my Peace Corps friends went on and did, you know, training stages in other locations and things like that and stayed over in West Africa, that unit that I was not interested in starting at that point.

GANZGLASS: [00:54:48] So then you started your career here?

WEATHERS: [00:54:50] And so I started my career here are basically, you know, working for Agriculture then the Department of Labor, where I picked up a job at learning staffing, basically, then went back to Foreign Agricultural Service. And then in 1989, I saw a job advertised at the Peace Corps, knew I was a GS-12 at the time and the job was going to have a kind of promotion potential going up to the equivalent of the GS-13. I was excited about going to work for Peace Corps, even though it was the time limited appointment and the fact that they do two and a half year appointments and attend. And that was so what an incredible experience. I worked in the human resources office for a period of time. I was one of the few returned volunteers working there that they liked having returned volunteers on staff. So I was working with some of the regions that were, you know, hiring staff to work overseas and stuff, as well as in the United States. And I got opportunities like when President Soglo of Benin and his wife came to visit and I was part of the Peace Corps contingent who got to meet him. And not at the White House, but at Blair House, and stuff that was exciting.

GANZGLASS: [00:56:45] And that's because you were a part of Peace Corps staff?

WEATHERS: [00:56:47] Because I was part of the Peace Corps staff, basically, that it was that country desk unit that I had been interacting with and everything. And it was very exciting. To be involved in that. It's something that I'll always remember. And, uh, because I also worked during the furlough time, there were about 20 people on the Peace Corps staff who were considered to be essential during the furlough.

I'm not sure when exactly that was. And this was with President Clinton and Newt Gingrich precipitated this. And it was just a terrible time that they were making plans to shut the program and bring all the volunteers home. It was awful. They needed, there were two of us who were in the personnel office, who were needed for furlough letters and things like that.

GANZGLASS: [00:57:50] And so all the volunteers were threatened by that?

WEATHERS: [00:57:53] Yes. Yes. As it went on, they were starting to make plans, you know, to bring all of the volunteers home. It was terrible.

GANZGLASS: But it never happened?

WEATHERS: No, in the end, they worked something out. And so it was but it was a very bad time. I was working, not being paid, you know, the quite a job. And then also at that time, one of the problems with Peace Corps with these time limited deployments is that you had people who would come and work and perhaps be promoted and get pay increases because we're on the foreign service pay scale. But it was a lot of turnover in the personnel office and so in 1995 and into 1996, for a significant period of time, I was the acting personnel deputy director of the office and then acting personnel office or the director of HRM for a period of about nine months when they were in between, um, you know, permanent well, "permanent," you know, hired staff basically. And so interacted with the Peace Corps director, Mark Gearan, at the time.

GANZGLASS: [00:59:43] So how long were you there?

WEATHERS: [00:59:45] I was there almost seven years until I was also extended by the, to go beyond five years, you have to be extended by the Peace Corps director. And so that happened a couple of times. And they were very pleased with the work I was doing and everything and wanted the continuity. And so that was really good.

GANZGLASS: [01:00:11] You've had two lives. One is a volunteer and one of the staff. Do you think differently about Peace Corps having been both?

WEATHERS: [01:00:20] Well, you know, Peace Corps is a bureaucracy. Hearing about some of the things. It was after I left the Peace Corps that we heard about of, you know, a volunteer who was killed in Benin. And it was something that the Peace Corps director in Benin had inadvertently. This volunteer, not someone that I knew, someone who had uncovered something at her at her high school. And the teacher that was sexually harassing students, female students, and so she complained about it to the Peace Corps director in country. And unfortunately, her identity became known to someone else working in the Peace Corps office who had some kind of link, I don't think was a relative, but had some kind of link to the teacher back in the school. And her name was not kept confidential basically, it was something that, and was killed.

GANZGLASS: By the Peace Corps?

WEATHERS: No, by the teacher. Yeah. The Peace Corps volunteer was killed by the teacher basically. So you had things like this that I didn't hear anything about.

GANZGLASS: [01:02:22] So this was because the staff person told the teacher?

WEATHERS: [01:02:23] Yeah, I think that that was some kind of a written record or something. And perhaps the Peace Corps staffer had seen the volunteer's name. And it had not been kept confidential. And it was like, oh, this was very bad. I understand there have been sexual assaults also over there that you didn't learn about these things until after, in the time that I was not on the staff, but it was the kind of thing that. Someone interviewed me once when I was working at NIH, interviewed me about my Peace Corps experience and they asked about, you know, had you received any training in kind of sexual

assaults and things like this. And there had been nothing, nothing that I remembered and stuff. So it when I was working there, I wasn't really hearing about stuff, you know, but it was certainly things going on that I don't think started after I left in February of 1997, was when I started working at the National Cancer Institute.

GANZGLASS: [01:04:02] So you left in?

WEATHERS: [01:04:03] So I left in February of '97.

GANZGLASS: [01:04:07] So this incident was after you had left?

WEATHERS: [01:04:10] Yeah, it was after I had left.

GANZGLASS: [01:04:12] So did you encounter any of those kinds of problems when you were?

WEATHERS: [01:04:15] No, no, no. But, uh, you know, I know training has gotten, it's gotten better, but it was something that I've always stayed kind of interested in, you know, in what was going on Peace Corps and being familiar with the organization and how it was organized and everything. It was something that I think there were changes that were made basically in terms of training of staff as well as for volunteers since then, but yeah. So it was the thing I didn't have a problem with. You know, the local staff were wonderful. And this was really it was a pleasure working with them. There were some people and as I say on the Peace Corps staff. When I first arrived, I was doing staffing work for the volunteer recruitment and selection, the Peace Corps staff basically, and I and the current deputy director of their personnel had issues with them. And so was a lot of record keeping. It was like, so what did they give you and what was the condition of the information that they gave you and what did you have to send back to them? And all of this that was kind of it was real hostility, you know, between the woman I was working for in personnel and the staff in volunteer recruitment and selection, it was kind of uncomfortable. But fortunately,

things seemed to kind of moved along and and things got better over time. One of the interesting things was that it was unfortunately, my father passed away in 1990 when I was working in the Peace Corps and a lot of the volunteer recruitment and selection staff were very kind of, you know, when I was when I came back and so things and because I had realized at that point that some of the staff that I was working with in personnel that there were some issues and so tried to forge my own way. Yeah, it's going my own way, basically.

GANZGLASS: [01:07:23] When you said there were issues, what kind of issues?

WEATHERS: [01:07:25] I think they felt. I don't remember a lot of it at the time, but it was something that it was there was that, as I said, based on the kind of recordkeeping they were asking me to keep, which they would use as kind of weapons, you know, that they would hold over the staff. It's likely the, um, that the HR staff people I think had previous history with, you know, with some of the staff in volunteer recruitment and selection, although the associate director for volunteer recruitment and selection, because it's a political appointee, basically, that when the top people and so were, is it possible that they just didn't get along with, you know, the kind of caught in an era where it kind of caught in the middle of that, all of that? I think it dated back before my time.

GANZGLASS: [01:08:46] And you talked about turnover. Do you think that hurts Peace Corps or unbalances it? Does it help or hurt it?

WEATHERS: [01:08:58] It helps in some portions of the organization, for example, with the different regions, you know, having people who have served in that region and having new people come in because this is where they were hiring a lot of recently returned volunteers, that the turnover can help with that. In the administrative area, in the HR finances, you know, administrative areas, more continuity would have been a help that this is something I understand now that there are some positions that are more permanent. I don't know anyone who works at Peace Corps now, however, and so I don't have access to their internal kind of regulations

and stuff, and it's not public, it's not on their website, basically. It sounds like they have done away with the five year rule for some occupations, not jobs that I see advertised or, you know, that I've seen advertised. But, yeah, one of the people I worked with was a woman named Barbara Bush who had come to join the Peace Corps staff in the '60s and because of her grade level at the time, was allowed to, was given an unlimited appointment, basically. There were very few people by the time I got there that there were people who were unlimited, but Barbara was one of them, that she was working in the Finance and Budget Office. And so there were definite advantages to having someone with her kind of institutional memory. So it was something and I think also one of the reasons that people could be extended beyond the five years of it was for continuity, basically. And that's something that is, you know, in some as in some positions that there can be a definite advantage so.

WEATHERS: [01:11:31] But then, you know, I had been extended basically that it was going to be difficult for me to be extended again and, you know, in 1996. But I was lucky enough to be able to go of using the money that they had saved, because while I had been both the personnel director and deputy for a while, it authorized me to go and do training over in Central Asia, go over to the staff, which was fascinating. That was the only time that I was able to travel overseas for Peace Corps. And so fascinating. That was fun, that I had developed procedures for dealing with when staff had to be medevaced, you worked with the State Department. And this was something that I was very involved with in D.C. and then had a follow up procedures and basically did training, you know.

GANZGLASS: That was for staff but not volunteers?

WEATHERS: [01:12:48] No, not for volunteers. No, no. That was handled differently basically. And so I had been applying for jobs knowing that my time is coming up. And I fortunately was hired by the National Cancer

Institute. And as it started working for them In February of '97. And retired from there. Yeah, I think that was good.

GANZGLASS: [01:13:25] So when you think back on your volunteer and your staff roles, what's been the impact of Peace Corps in your life?

WEATHERS: [01:13:36] Well, I've tried to do more kind of volunteer work that I think I credited with going into the job, you know, public service, basically, that this was something that is doing, you know, the third goal going out and after I returned from Benin and went out and talked to schools and all that stuff about, about being in the doing volunteer work and I stayed in touch with the people that I served with, basically that there are a group of us who served in Benin around the same time in this area. Stay in touch with them.

GANZGLASS: [01:14:35] Do you think there's been an impact on what how do you think about impact in Benin?

WEATHERS: [01:14:43] Not so much. Yeah, basically, I've although recently I've heard from in the last year, heard from my boyfriend over there, the English teacher who moved up in the educational ministry and got married, has children and stuff, that he's been here to the States for training and stuff. So we're still in touch, if not regularly. But it's something. I haven't been back. I would like to go back at some point, but not right now. And it would be fun to go back as a group, you know. So I feel good that I was able to help. And, you know, this student, I didn't pay him enough basically, I mean, and certainly was overpaid, but I wanted to help and this was the way to do it. You know that I did things like, oh, ironing my laundry. All you had to watch out for flies and stuff like that. Getting water because the system was dry up and I also was able to get money, although I don't think in the end of it, it was enough. I was able to arrange for money from the ambassador's self-help fund to build a library in Allada. There was an architect who was part of a later group than me who came in, who designed it and everything. I'm not sure really what happened yet, but it's my

understanding from a volunteer who lived in Allada that the library was not, corruption, unfortunately, was a big problem over there. And so I'm not sure if that's what was involved. But, uh, anyway.

GANZGLASS: [01:17:04] Do you have any thoughts about impact in the United States? Has there been any?

WEATHERS: [01:17:11] Not a tremendous amount of you know, it's funny. People often aren't really interested in what's going on in, you know, an obscure country. I mean, we don't have any real strategic interests over there. I have talked to new incoming volunteers or people that are going over to Benin for training. But, uh, it's something that it's not. Yeah, I don't see a tremendous amount of impact. My group has also contributed to Ed partnership projects that Peace Corps has over there. You know, so that that helps. It's something that I don't see a lot of interest in, although someone that I worked with, an African-American woman, has recently discovered that some of her ancestors came from Benin and Togo. And so she's very interested. I had shown my slides of where I was working and she was very interested in learning more about this. So I'll be happy to do that. So that's kind of neat. I'm excited about that. I have a, no, unfortunately, I'm not sure that, you know, the impact is really the end in this. But I feel good about, you know, that what I did. That this was something that I had 35 years in government service, including Peace Corps time. And that feels good to have done that. Anyway.

GANZGLASS: [01:19:38] So I think that's probably a good way to end.

WEATHERS: [01:19:41] Yes, I think so.

GANZGLASS: Great, thank you.

WEATHERS: Thank you, Evelyn. And it's been really interesting talking with you. Do you know if anyone else from Benin who has?

GANZGLASS: [01:19:57] Who has been interviewed? We'll talk about that off line, OK?

WEATHERS: [01:19:59] OK, sure.

[END OF INTERVIEW]