

Joyce M. Bowden Oral History Interview
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Administrative Information

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Biographical Note

Joyce Bowden served as a Peace Corps volunteer in Bolivia from 1963 to 1966 on a health project (Bolivia VI).

Access

Open.

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Oral History Interview

with

Joyce M. Bowden

September 5, 2009
Boston, Massachusetts

By Phyllis Noble

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

NOBLE: [00:00:03] Today is September 5, 2009. This is Phyllis Noble, I am interviewing Joyce M. Bowden, who was a Peace Corps volunteer in Bolivia, 1963 to 1966 in a public health education project. Joyce, tell us what you were doing a year before you joined the Peace Corps.

BOWDEN: [00:00:28] That would be September 1962. And I would be a high school teacher of American history. Eleventh grade.

NOBLE: [00:00:41] Oh, you were a teacher?

BOWDEN: Yes.

NOBLE: And where where did you grow up?

BOWDEN: [00:00:48] I was born in Thomaston, Georgia, and I grew up in the south in various places. Georgia, South Carolina, North Carolina, Virginia.

NOBLE: [00:00:57] Did you have a big family?

BOWDEN: [00:00:58] No, I'm the oldest of three, my brother and sister.

NOBLE: [00:01:03] And what did your family do? What did your parents do?

BOWDEN: [00:01:06] My mother worked in a bank typically as a teller, and my father was a writer and editor, mostly freelance.

NOBLE: [00:01:16] As a family, did you travel?

BOWDEN: [00:01:18] Yes. My earliest recollections, in fact, are travel on the train during the Second World War because my father was too old to be drafted and with already two children. So he was a civilian involved with the production of armaments and he worked for Bill Farmer or Bill Aircraft and traveled from Bill Factory to build a factory up and down the East Coast. We got all the way to upstate New York, our family on the train. So my earliest recollections are of walking up and down the aisles of the train, chatting with the other children of the other families and the soldiers and so forth and so on.

NOBLE: [00:02:05] Happy memories yesterday and the international travel room?

BOWDEN: [00:02:10] As a family, no. And for myself, no. Before Peace Corps, I don't think except for trips to the Bahamas, maybe I had been outside the country.

NOBLE: [00:02:25] And so you went to school and you went you went to high school.

BOWDEN: [00:02:31] Went to high school in several different places in the south.

NOBLE: [00:02:35] Did you study a foreign language in high school?

BOWDEN: [00:02:39] No, I had two years of Latin.

NOBLE: [00:02:42] Uh huh. I guess that's a foreign language, but it's

BOWDEN: [00:02:45] Not one you speak.

NOBLE: [00:02:48] And did you get involved in extracurricular activities, volunteer work as a high school student?

BOWDEN: [00:02:57] I played basketball and we were state champs. Two years running. We had the state high score. Good two years running. Now, this is half court women thought to be weak and delicate during those days. We're not permitted in basketball to pay for court or so we played three on a side. Oh, and I'm short, as you can see. So I did not play on the side with the state high scorer. She played on the other side and I was on defense and I was an excellent pine sister.

NOBLE: [00:03:39] I don't know what kind system.

BOWDEN: [00:03:40] Well, there are pine brothers and sisters, meaning you come off the bench, Phyllis, you don't start.

NOBLE: [00:03:47] Oh, OK. Revealing something about myself. And then you went to college. Were you the first in your family to go?

BOWDEN: [00:04:04] Oh, no, no, no. I have two grandmothers who were college girls, both graduated and both attended and graduated in the nineteenth century. So my father was a college graduate and no, I was not the first college graduate, my friend.

NOBLE: [00:04:17] Oh, very exciting to come from a family with such a history and entering college. What did you envision as a career?

BOWDEN: [00:04:28] Oh, wow. I have no idea if I have any doubt.

NOBLE: [00:04:34] I had a yeah. Yeah. If anything,

BOWDEN: [00:04:36] I liked chemistry in high school and hoped to continue with chemistry, but did not have a good mathematics background in high school and couldn't eventually carry the computation aspects of chemistry very far. So I think I probably at that point decided maybe not to major in something. And then, of course, the powers that be caught up with me and said, well, you've got to pick something, and what did you pick? I think I probably picked social science, something as broad as as the system allowed.

NOBLE: [00:05:15] Yeah, yeah. Not a bad idea for an undergraduate degree. And did you study languages in college?

BOWDEN: No, no, no.

NOBLE: OK, so you left college speaking English very well.

BOWDEN: [00:05:31] Yes.

NOBLE: [00:05:32] What did you do in the summers as a college?

BOWDEN: [00:05:35] Always working, sometimes with one job, sometimes two jobs. And I think one summer I had three jobs. And the the logistics of that were quite daunting to be on time and get from one to the other, to the other to the other. I worked at a dry cleaners, I remember at the front with the heat of the dry cleaning machine on my back on the and then I talked swimming. I started out working in high school as a runner for the Chamber of Commerce, which was on the little square in the town where we where we lived. So from about the age of 14 on, I was working after school and just as a gopher, anything the Chamber of Commerce wanted, I would do it right. So I learned to do I learned to be very versatile and learn to do lots of things. So my and always worked during college as well,

working for one of the professors, doing research or or whatever needed doing.

NOBLE: [00:06:44] And where did you go to school?

BOWDEN: [00:06:46] Undergraduate at Florida State. And then my Masters at University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

NOBLE: [00:06:52] And that was before Peace Corps.

BOWDEN: [00:06:55] No undergraduate was before Peace Corps and graduate was post.

NOBLE: [00:06:59] Ok, so we're in Florida State now and somehow you hear about the Peace Corps. How did you become aware of Peace Corps?

BOWDEN: [00:07:12] I had while I was teaching in Fort Lauderdale, applied I had taken the foreign service exam and passed it. My interest originally was the Foreign Service and the Department of State. Yeah. And I went through a number of interviews and I lived in Fort Lauderdale and the interviews were in Miami with various Department of State personnel, and they were really not ready to for women to enter it even on the first rung of the ladder in the diplomatic service, which is what I was interested in. Yes. They finally offered me a job as an administrative assistant in the Department of State office there in Miami. And as an alternative, they offered me a job working for the NSA I and

NOBLE: [00:08:07] Then national security.

BOWDEN: [00:08:08] Yes, because I was not particularly inclined toward spying. And so I turned down the NSA and I turned down the administrative assistant job for the Department of State. I saw myself as, you know, being a diplomat and representing my country. And what they had me pigeonholed in was not attractive. So as an alternative, I applied to the Peace Corps

thinking this will be an opportunity for me to serve my country and go abroad.

NOBLE: [00:08:44] That's right. Exactly. And you did this right out of college?

BOWDEN: [00:08:47] Oh, no, no. Out of college. I got a job teaching high school American history in Fort Lauderdale, and that's what I was doing. And you asked me what I was doing a year before. Yeah, that's right. You did say that you do the same job, same job.

NOBLE: [00:09:03] How many years were you teaching?

BOWDEN: [00:09:04] I taught three and a half years.

NOBLE: [00:09:06] Three and a half years before you applied to the Peace Corps?

BOWDEN: [00:09:10] No, probably applying to the Peace Corps while I was a teacher. And going through the whole process of supplying the letters of recommendation, you were you needed ten in those days. And I was hard pressed to come up with ten. Yes. You could reliably be counted on to say something positive about me. And the toughest one was to ask my mother because she would be my my worst critic, my strongest. But she wrote a wonderful book, even though she had doubts about my going overseas. And so you would once you were accepted, then you would in those days get invitations to various programs. Yes. Yes. And. I would read the material and I wasn't, for whatever reason, all that interested in what they were laying in front of it, because I had

NOBLE: [00:10:13] What were some of the options?

BOWDEN: [00:10:16] They were, again, had me pigeonholed as a classroom teacher. And I had been a classroom teacher for three and a half years and I wanted to move on. I was ready for a change. Yeah, but all of these were basically classroom pretty traditional situations and even a television program. And in Colombia was still basically a classroom situation. So

when I was invited to a public health education program, I said, hey, I can use my teaching school, that I can put the classroom behind me. And that, in fact, is the way it worked out.

NOBLE: [00:10:57] So you finally accepted the invitation to train for the

BOWDEN: [00:11:01] Public health education in Bolivia. I had to look up where Bolivia was. I didn't know where it was.

NOBLE: [00:11:06] So many of us had to do that. And what did you and your family, your mother, you said, was somewhat skeptical about your your decision to do this and other people in your family?

BOWDEN: [00:11:25] I think my mother was probably the most supportive in the end. I think my father, who had challenges as far as mental illness was concerned, was definitely not supportive. But no, I think my mother in the end was the most silently in my corner.

NOBLE: [00:11:47] Right. And then you said you had two siblings.

BOWDEN: [00:11:50] Yes, I did. And I have no idea what they thought. So my brother was willing to take care of my car while I was gone. That was fine with me.

NOBLE: [00:12:02] Yes, I can imagine that. Taking care of it means using it.

BOWDEN: [00:12:06] That's right.

NOBLE: [00:12:09] So then you go off to training and where where do you go?

BOWDEN: [00:12:12] University of Washington School of Public Health in Seattle and Seattle.

NOBLE: [00:12:17] Yes, quite a different part of the country from the south and southeast. And when did training start?

BOWDEN: [00:12:24] September 1963, '63.

NOBLE: [00:12:29] Now, were you the first group to train for Bolivia or had there been

BOWDEN: [00:12:32] This was Bolivia V.

NOBLE: [00:12:33] Bolivia V, one of the very early groups. Do you believe

BOWDEN: [00:12:39] This was the first public health education group for Bolivia. But certainly by no means not the first group.

NOBLE: [00:12:46] Not the first bunch of Peace Corps volunteers. Do you remember first reporting to training and in what you would call of showing up, meeting the other trainees?

BOWDEN: [00:12:59] That's that to me was the best part of Peace Corps service, was getting to meet people from other parts of the country who had different experiences, different kinds of growing up. And that process started right there in Seattle. So, yes, I don't remember all the bags around the room and everybody standing around, you know, wondering, you know, who everybody else in the group was and how this was going to go and and so forth.

NOBLE: [00:13:32] And so, yes, I do. Was it a large group or how many were involved?

BOWDEN: [00:13:38] Yeah, small. By the time we went to Bolivia, I think we were probably no more than twenty one or twenty two and maybe we started out at about twenty eight or nine. And Bolivia V and Bolivia VI were in tandem with the same training program, the same mission in country. One started in September of '63, the other one started in January '64.

NOBLE: [00:14:03] So they learn from whatever mistakes they made with you in training both men and women. Any married couples?

BOWDEN: [00:14:13] Yes. At least one, if not more than one in my group.

NOBLE: [00:14:24] And did some of these people have training already in public health or in any kind of health service?

BOWDEN: [00:14:30] Most of the people were medical professionals, health care professionals, hospital professionals, nurses, lab techs, medics. Hospital administrators.

NOBLE: [00:14:49] Sounds like these these are not young kids who

BOWDEN: [00:14:51] Are nurses for the most part. I was twenty four when I reported to Seattle in September 1963. And for the most part, everybody in the group like me had worked since graduating from college.

NOBLE: [00:15:09] Yes, yes. Yes. And you, of course, put your teaching skills right.

BOWDEN: [00:15:14] There were a few others like me who had been teachers teacher.

NOBLE: [00:15:21] And did you what was the scene like at the university there? Did you stay in college dormitories?

BOWDEN: [00:15:28] Yes, we stayed in college dormitories and work and walked to the various classes. So everything was right there on the campus and. You had the feeling from the very first day about the way the program was managed, the administrators, the teachers, the faculty, all from the School of Public Health at the University of Washington of competence. I mean, they were outstanding, wonderful, outstanding people.

NOBLE: [00:16:04] Yeah, yeah. And your classes then you took classes. Well, what sorts of academic classes did you have?

BOWDEN: [00:16:16] Well, they're looking at health care and disease from a public health perspective, which is a different perspective than the way most health care people are trained in the United States. So they spend a lot of time on demographics, on the transmission of disease. And, of course, in a Bolivian setting, nobody, nobody in our group had had any exposure to any of the diseases that were discussed.

NOBLE: [00:16:57] So it was all new learning about the diseases themselves?

BOWDEN: [00:17:04] Yeah, malaria. Yellow fever. Plague. Diphtheria. Oh yeah. These things happen. So from the beginning I was on level ground and all of the health care.

NOBLE: [00:17:17] Oh yes. Very good.

BOWDEN: [00:17:24] And so right away people you start thinking about. This is something I want to do. I mean, when they start talking about bubonic plague, those extra tension,

NOBLE: [00:17:38] Is there a vaccination against the plague in Bolivia?

BOWDEN: [00:17:43] Simply put the bodies up in the trees to try to get them off the ground because they believed that if they left, if they buried them, then somehow whatever it was that was causing disease wouldn't be transmitted through the water or the soil to the living. So they would put the cadavers up, not retreat.

NOBLE: [00:18:06] But I mean, in terms of your own protection, were you able to Peace Corps training usually involves more vaccinations than you'd ever want to get.

BOWDEN: [00:18:15] And one cannot imagine that or count or you don't even want to count.

NOBLE: [00:18:20] I counted twenty one sticks with a needle.

BOWDEN: [00:18:22] I can't remember there were so many. And of course, this is the early days of the Peace Corps. And I would go and they would vaccinate you on the chance that on the theory that you and lots of times they weren't sure about the outcomes of the vaccination issue. That's what they would give it to you anyway. Yeah. So I think we my yellow card, my WHL yellow card just went on and on and on, page after page after page.

NOBLE: [00:18:51] Yes. And as part of training, of course, that would have been Spanish.

BOWDEN: [00:18:56] Yes. Yes. Outstanding core of teachers of Spanish. Oh, I discovered I had a good ear and maybe that's because I had played the piano and been around people who were musicians and my father saying I am. And but I discovered I had a pretty good ear and all the teachers were excellent.

NOBLE: [00:19:21] And you had you you had your two years of Latin to help you, to get you started on the grammar.

BOWDEN: [00:19:30] But have happily they were not teaching those grammar or anything like that or teaching as they speak.

NOBLE: [00:19:35] So how many hours a day of language do

BOWDEN: [00:19:40] I believe we had six hours a day.

NOBLE: [00:19:43] Wow. That is intense.

BOWDEN: [00:19:44] It's very intense.

NOBLE: [00:19:46] Very intense and in small groups.

BOWDEN: [00:19:49] Very small groups. But you know, there was a there was there would be a large group for I forget what kind of presentation with maybe a

little more theory about language and then small groups, of course, is where it all happened, because from the very first day we walked in, we were asked to speak. Oh. And then we simply continue to speak. And the teachers were wonderful. We were going to an Indian country where the Spanish, for the most part, is uncorrupted. It might be described as the 18th century Spanish, early 19th century Spanish, because these are such isolated areas and beautifully spoken. And all of these teachers were from Indian Country. Ecuador, Peru, Colombia, all of the higher elevations of Venezuela, not very good. So they spoke exactly the same kind of Spanish that they were going to be expected to speak.

NOBLE: [00:20:57] Was there also instruction in indigenous languages?

BOWDEN: [00:20:59] I'm not in my group at all. Later groups, yes. Because they realize they learn more about millenia. And the need to have at least some kind of understanding and a few, you know, the the typical reliable twenty words and in another language. But we picked it up. Yeah. And in my area it was Quechua.

NOBLE: [00:21:23] Quechua. I'm thinking particularly among the women who would it be too. Would have had less experience in school

BOWDEN: [00:21:33] Among the women?

NOBLE: In Bolivia.

BOWDEN: In Bolivia.

NOBLE: [00:21:36] That the Bolivian women would not have been as educated as the men and therefore would not speak would speak less Spanish.

BOWDEN: [00:21:41] Of course, you know, in my part of the world where I ended up, you're not dealing with anybody who has any kind of education.

NOBLE: [00:21:47]. Oh, OK. So let's let's let's put this up because I want to get back to that can put education aside.

BOWDEN: [00:21:57] All right. OK, now when one went to the city and almost anything could be defined as a city from from where I lived in Bolivia. Yeah. You would run into people with a few years of, let's say, elementary school or something like that or maybe even a few more years. And it was typical that the men would be more likely to speak Spanish.

NOBLE: [00:22:24] Yeah. Than the women. Yeah, but

BOWDEN: [00:22:26] Not where I lived.

NOBLE: [00:22:29] Oh. Was there physical training component?

BOWDEN: [00:22:33] Yes. Oh, yes, yes, they gave us over to a very pregnant faculty member in the physical Education Department at the University of Washington, and the fact that she was very pregnant didn't stop her at all. She ran us into the ground. I mean, here we were, young people and we had never been exposed to anything like that.

NOBLE: [00:23:09] And here you were, an athlete in your own right?

BOWDEN: [00:23:12] Yes, because I wouldn't have run had swimming and had my life safety certificate as a swimming instructor and had worked lots of times in the summer at college as a lifeguard. And she just can't seem to get around. Oh, my God. But you know what? It's not about the body. It's all about the mind and and how the mind can overcome. And that that's what she was working on, so she had us outside, she had us inside, and of course we had must understand how football was played from the perspective of playing it. So we played we were taught football and we play.

NOBLE: [00:23:58] When you say football, you're talking about the

BOWDEN: [00:24:01] Soccer, talking about soccer.

NOBLE: [00:24:03] But did anyone from a Peace Corps, Washington, come to your training?

BOWDEN: [00:24:10] Yes. Again, this was the early days of the Peace Corps and everything was very experimental. And there would be constantly VIPs from Washington coming through, looking at the training techniques used by the University of Washington and trying to determine, well, what's working, what's not working. And, of course, the psychologists and all of the that component, we met with them regularly, one on one and small group sessions. And of course, they were most interested in what the psychologists were reporting because they're still trying to find, well, what is the profile? What is the who is the person we're

NOBLE: [00:24:56] Looking at and is there a predictor of who will do well? And yes.

BOWDEN: [00:25:01] And I don't think they knew who would do well and who wouldn't. I mean, it was way too early.

NOBLE: [00:25:05] And so the psychologists came. And this kind of connects with the idea of the specter of deselection. How did that work in your group? Were people apprehensive, knowing that not everybody was going? Because they told you then?

BOWDEN: [00:25:28] Absolutely right from the beginning, you know, hello, we won't be saying goodbye to all of you when we send you to the next phase of training that some of you won't make it very up front. Very up front. So you were in like a fishbowl being observed in every respect, pretty much 24/7. Right. And I think we all felt that way.

NOBLE: [00:25:54] Did you have to do peer evaluations or ranking?

BOWDEN: [00:25:59] Boy, if we did, I don't remember that part.

NOBLE: [00:26:00] And were you pretty confident that you'd be among those to get to go?

BOWDEN: [00:26:07] I think so, yeah. Yeah, yeah, I think so.

NOBLE: [00:26:10] So somewhere towards the end of training, people began to did it.

BOWDEN: [00:26:15] No, no. I'm just looking over it. It's turning and

NOBLE: [00:26:18] It's turn it's turning somewhat towards the end of training people. Most of do they just disappear or did people have a chance to say goodbye? I'm speaking of those who were deselected.

BOWDEN: [00:26:29] Well, you see, the training wasn't completed and it wasn't to be completed at the University of Washington. Oh, we're going to go on to Puerto Rico for training. Oh. After Seattle. So unsure of how long we were in Seattle, I don't know. Let's say sixty days. Sixty five days, something like that. Yeah. And then on to Puerto Rico.

NOBLE: [00:26:59] And so did everybody go along to Puerto Rico. Didn't come down for deselected in Seattle.

BOWDEN: [00:27:03] Yeah, but my father had an episode of mental illness. So in Seattle I dropped out and returned home. Oh, my brother and I had to come up with some kind of solution for him. Yeah. So I left Bolivia five with an invitation to return if I can work everything out to return to Bolivia six, which began in January. Also, I spent probably forty five days at home. Thirty five or forty five days at home. Yeah brother and I just trying to work out some kind of solution for him.

NOBLE: [00:27:44] And meanwhile the rest of your group had gone down to Puerto Rico.

BOWDEN: [00:27:48] The rest of our group had gone on to Puerto Rico. So my brother and I were able to work out some sort of accommodation for him. Yeah. And I returned to Bolivia VI in January.

NOBLE: [00:27:58] Oh, my goodness. So then you had to repeat. Yeah. What was a different was the

BOWDEN: [00:28:04] As the same five and six were always envisioned as identical programs simply done in tandem rather than simultaneously. Yes. So that they could maintain the small group. That was one of the things that they wanted to do.

NOBLE: [00:28:20] It's expensive, but

BOWDEN: [00:28:21] Yeah, we wanted to keep the small group kind of experience one.

NOBLE: [00:28:24] So. And you didn't see any differences the second time around?

BOWDEN: [00:28:27] No. VI was the same as V as far as I was concerned.

NOBLE: [00:28:30] They had done a good job.

BOWDEN: [00:28:31] Same kind of people, same administration, same faculty. But then I had had all of that introduction. From Bolivia V, so I knew what to expect and I had a little bit of a leg up as far as the Spanish. That's what I was concerned. So that helped me with VI.

NOBLE: [00:28:52] And it was a refresher to reinforce some of these. Right.

BOWDEN: [00:28:57] And the and the pregnant and the pregnant teacher had had her baby, all right. And she was replaced by an equally vigorous man who likewise around us into the ground.

NOBLE: [00:29:14] Now, meanwhile, you must be making friendships, so you must have formed some friendships.

BOWDEN: [00:29:19] Sometimes when you see people in Bolivia V would already be in the country working and VI arrive right when you read the same kinds of projects. So when I arrived in Bolivia, I reconnected with my friends and family of V. And you see there was no difference because Bolivia VI people were added to projects where Bolivia V people were working. So again, they were considered part of the team.

NOBLE: [00:29:46] Yeah, yeah. This is very carefully planned.

BOWDEN: [00:29:49] Well, you know, you just had the feeling of competence from day one.

NOBLE: [00:29:54] And since these people knew what they were doing, how wonderful. Is there anything else you'd like to say about training?

BOWDEN: [00:30:04] I just thought it was excellent.

NOBLE: [00:30:06] Oh, wait, we haven't talked much about what went on in Puerto Rico.

BOWDEN: [00:30:09] No, she didn't ask me.

NOBLE: [00:30:11] Well, let me ask you. So you went back to Bolivia VI. You did the Seattle peace, and then you went on to Puerto Rico and what

BOWDEN: [00:30:23] Puerto Rico was even more intense language training and in some cases six, eight hours a day of language training by a different staff from the staff that we had had in Seattle. So these people were typically they spoke more lowland, Spanish and Spanish. They say I lost my laborers, which means they drop off the end of the word in the end of the

NOBLE: [00:30:48] Sentence so that you're not going to hear much up in the Andes.

BOWDEN: [00:30:51] No, no, no, no. But they were equally committed and equally demanding.

NOBLE: [00:30:57] But this is good because you're going to hear Spanish was different.

BOWDEN: [00:31:02] Exactly. So it's still training for the ear. That's right. And even more emphasis on physical conditioning in the at the camp, we were at a camp high up in the mountains in Puerto Rico, which had and we did rappelling down the side some of the local mountains and in very large swimming pool where we were. I can remember one of the things that you had to be able to do was swim to two lengths of the pool holding your breath. I did it.

NOBLE: [00:31:50] When you were in Puerto Rico, what kind of housing situation were you in?

BOWDEN: [00:31:55] Like being a, a primitive Girl Scout camp with a wooden platform raised with a tent over it,

NOBLE: [00:32:08] And you weren't staying with a family. Did you have contact with the Puerto Rican?

BOWDEN: [00:32:13] Only when we had a few hours off and could go to the beach, would hitch rides going north to the to to the beach on a day off, like a Sunday

NOBLE: [00:32:23] Or so it would be on

BOWDEN: [00:32:23] Your own. Oh, yeah. Right. Right, right.

NOBLE: [00:32:27] So then there was some kind of swearing in ceremony.

BOWDEN: [00:32:34] No, not for me, no. One day all the meals were in a very large tent when this was mosquito netting all the way around. And we were sitting at dinner one evening and a two men came in and asked the person in charge to see two of us, myself and a man in in training with me and was over at the side. They explained that there was a special situation that had developed in Bolivia that they would like to know if we were interested in and would this be an assignment we would accept. And they told us about a national hospital, which was part of the Ministry of Health in Bolivia, which was a leprosarium. Oh, and they needed some additional staff. And here's the reason why a political flap had developed with volunteers in Bolivia V, including nurses and a hospital administrator, and the inability of those people to adapt to the supervision of the Bolivian doctor and to adapt to the treatment methods, the leprosarium. And this was this particular hospital was a political favorite of the United States ambassador to Bolivia. His name was Douglas Henderson. And the doctor in charge, Dr. Siles Lopez, was a personal friend of the ambassadors. And as far as the United States government, Bolivia was concerned there was absolutely nothing that the volunteers were going to screw up any further at that project.

NOBLE: [00:34:52] They saw volunteers screwing this up because they had a conflict in conflict with the doctor.

BOWDEN: [00:34:59] And here's the rub, because these all these people had been trained in U.S. hospital settings. And that's what they expected. And that's what they could work with. And the treatment of leprosy worldwide is no treatment. You put all these people into the remote, far away reaches of whatever country.

NOBLE: [00:35:24] They're segregated.

BOWDEN: [00:35:25] And you hope you never see them again and you don't. Yeah, and malaria is no different. So they simply were at loggerheads with the

medical director, Dr. Siles, and she wasn't going to stand for it and there was no reason she should have stood for it.

NOBLE: [00:35:48] Oh, so you're saying that's.

BOWDEN: [00:35:51] Oh, absolutely. The only way to see it. And Ambassador Anderson backed her up 100 percent.

NOBLE: [00:35:59] This is the kind of thing that the people in training could never have foreseen. Of course not.

BOWDEN: [00:36:03] And so these people were from the Department of State who visited the Peace Corps, working in Puerto Rico. And they're trying to solve a political problem caused by these intransigent Peace Corps volunteers.

NOBLE: [00:36:20] Well intentioned.

BOWDEN: [00:36:22] Well intentioned. But, you know, good intentions aren't enough. Yeah. And the other person in training with me was Ed Lipski. He was from Minneapolis and he was not a health care professional and neither was I. And we were perceived as open minded and flexible, being able to see both sides. Not threatened by conflict, able to handle conflict, we had consistently been rated very high on language skills. Oh yeah, and in cultural understanding and we were perceived as maybe a middle ground between the two sides. We're at war with each other at the project. Yeah. So I don't know how you say no to this fellow. So I said yes and to and when we left that night for the United States, the main one I'm talking about

NOBLE: [00:37:21] Yeah, to say goodbye.

BOWDEN: [00:37:25] No, for further training. At the US Public Health Service Hospital in Carville, Louisiana, the only leprosarium in the United States. We had three more weeks of training.

NOBLE: [00:37:38] And with just the two of you?

BOWDEN: Yeah. Yeah.

NOBLE: And what does that mean.

BOWDEN: [00:37:41] The the leprosarium is right outside of Baton Rouge, Louisiana. And it was wonderful. And I mean we were both so scared. I mean, what is leprosy? We had no idea what leprosy. Right. And these two, a department state types except yourself, couldn't tell us anymore about how to proceed and they could fly. So we just had to keep our fingers crossed. The staff there. Fantastic. Fantastic. They just took us under their wing. Understood how scared we were.

NOBLE: [00:38:18] And just when you say you were scared, scared of contacting leprosy. Scared of coming down.

BOWDEN: [00:38:27] Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah. And as it turns out, you know, you know Michael microbes mycobacterium Lepra is so weak, so puny it hardly is capable of communicating anything. But we didn't know that.

NOBLE: [00:38:42] And you had healthy bodies.

BOWDEN: [00:38:44] And healthy babies. Well, we were taken under the wing of the staff at Carvell and just taught everything that they could teach us. And in about two and a half, three weeks.

NOBLE: [00:38:54] So they were teaching you also what they do in the leprosarium.

BOWDEN: [00:38:59] What is a leprosarium. Yes. How it works. This is leprosy. This is how it's transmitted. This is what we know of the disease. This is what we know of not you don't cure leprosy, but you can arrest it.

NOBLE: [00:39:14] Ok, so there would be treatment to arrest the progress of the disease and perhaps something to make people feel more comfortable.

BOWDEN: [00:39:25] Help them rejoin their families and rejoin their lives. We were introduced on from day one to leprosy patients who were in some cases outpatients who came for their sulfa therapy from cities and towns around that room and maybe in other parts of the south.

NOBLE: [00:39:47] This is assuming that the families would receive these people.

BOWDEN: [00:39:49] But see, there's a huge, huge, huge education component.

NOBLE: [00:39:54] Yeah. And there you are.

BOWDEN: [00:39:55] To the leprosy treatment. Yeah.

NOBLE: [00:39:56] Yeah. Before we get to Bolivia now, I want to get out of here. I want to bring in precisely this discussion. But but let's let's close up Louisiana here. You were there for

BOWDEN: [00:40:10] Two and a half, three weeks.

NOBLE: [00:40:11] Two weeks. And then did you have a chance to go back to your family and say goodbye?

BOWDEN: [00:40:16] No, no. We were sent, we went we flew from the Baton Rouge Airport to New Orleans and from New Orleans to New York. And we joined our group in New York just as it was flying to Bolivia.

NOBLE: [00:40:33] So no time to go shopping, pack up, say goodbye.

BOWDEN: [00:40:36] No time to have any second thoughts either! Our fellow volunteers in training, when we greeted them, they weren't even sure they want to shake our hands.

NOBLE: [00:40:50] Because you had spent three weeks in a leprosarium.

BOWDEN: [00:40:54] Correct. So that that was our introduction. US. Yeah. And like people to this day when I, I don't talk about my Peace Corps experience very much because it's so alien, so very alien to people's lives today, that it takes a long time to make the connections. But then when I get to the part where I spent two and a half years in the leprosarium, people today don't want to shake my hand.

NOBLE: [00:41:26] There's a need for education up here too. So you rejoin Bolivia VI in New York, right. And you fly to

BOWDEN: [00:41:37] We had a great party.

NOBLE: [00:41:38] Oh, good. Oh, very good. So they put you up for the night.

BOWDEN: [00:41:44] Up for the night, but not much sleep that night. We go on a plane to La Paz.

NOBLE: [00:41:49] So you flew into La Paz and then from so did you spend some time in La Paz in country orientation,

BOWDEN: [00:41:59] Probably being sick. Oh, altitudes.

NOBLE: [00:42:03] Altitude sickness. Yeah, well, New Orleans is sea level and you're going

BOWDEN: [00:42:08] Up to leprosarium was right on the Mississippi River. So very close to if not even slightly below.

NOBLE: [00:42:15] Yeah. And and then you're going two miles up

BOWDEN: [00:42:18] To La Paz. But just for a few days because this leprosarium was down at about sixty five hundred feet, further east of Cochabamba.

And Cochabamba is the principal Bolivian city at about seventy five, at a manageable altitude.

NOBLE: [00:42:39] Yeah. Yeah. And then you were east of that.

BOWDEN: [00:42:42] And so as you go further you're going Bolivia, you're going down in altitude.

NOBLE: [00:42:47] Yeah, right. How far down were you when you finally got to your place?

BOWDEN: [00:42:51] About sixty five hundred.

NOBLE: [00:42:52] Sixty five hundred. Yeah. That's not so bad. No. And what's the name of the place?

BOWDEN: [00:43:03] Los Negros.

NOBLE: [00:43:04] Los Negros, was the name of the is it a village or.

BOWDEN: [00:43:08] There was a village on the other side of this was a seasonal creek. So leprosarium the colony, La Colonia is on one side of the seasonal creek and the little tiny village of Los Negros is on the other side of the creek. So it would be commonly referred to as La Colonia de Los Negros.

NOBLE: [00:43:32] Ok, OK. Because La Colonia was the leprosarium. All right. That's what they called it. Yeah. Colony, the colony, a colony of leopards.

BOWDEN: [00:43:40] You know, if you've ever read any of the story of the Catholic priest, Father Damien. Yes. In Hawaii now, you know, they're all the same. They're all the same. You just everybody holds well. We won't see these people again if we're lucky.

NOBLE: [00:43:58] So you arrive in Los Negros somehow. How did you get there from La Paz?

BOWDEN: [00:44:02] By bus.

NOBLE: [00:44:03] By bus. So you go down to Cochabamba first.

BOWDEN: [00:44:05] First from La Paz to Cochabamba, which is a decent in about 12 hours of four thousand feet. I mean, you just, you know. All right, there's just no perspective I can give you on riding the bus on Bolivianos, the loss of life and the danger

NOBLE: [00:44:35] With crosses on the side of the road.

BOWDEN: [00:44:37] Oh man, crosses everywhere on the side of the road. Oh, and people throwing up the Indians or throwing up all over the bus and some refuse to get inside. Some right on top. And I quickly discovered that riding on top was far better.

NOBLE: [00:44:50] Was the better thing. Well, if people are throwing up inside

BOWDEN: [00:44:58] We arrived by bus. Yeah.

NOBLE: [00:44:59] And Cochabamba

BOWDEN: [00:45:01] To Cochabamba. And then you get another bus to Santa Cruz.

NOBLE: [00:45:06] And you get to spend the night in Cochabamba and rest.

BOWDEN: [00:45:10] I cannot recall. It's a good question. Our only answer to it because another bus from Cochabamba to Santa Cruz and the colony there was an old colony is quite close to the main road from Cochabamba to Santa Cruz. So there was somebody there at the little I mean, there's no pot or anything, but everybody knows where the bus stops. So so the hospital administrator was right there

NOBLE: [00:45:39] In Santa Cruz. No, no. You're talking about neighbors. Yeah. OK, so there's a bus from Cochabamba to Santa Cruz and then from Santa Cruz to you

BOWDEN: [00:45:47] Can ride it should you wish to suffer that much all the way from La Paz to Santa Cruz, because these are long distance. These are what we would consider Greyhound's. In fact, it wasn't it was the Greyhound painted on the side of the bus. They were Gallego busses, which is Greyhound. And so you can go the long distance all the way from the past to Santa Cruz, should you wish. So we went from La Paz to Los Negros.

NOBLE: [00:46:14] Yeah. And so now you're right, you're right, you are still with Ed, the two of you?

BOWDEN: [00:46:20] All you said and I are you know, we're bosom buddies by now, huh?

NOBLE: [00:46:23] And you get to Los Negros and somebody.

BOWDEN: [00:46:29] The hospital administrator. Not Dr. Siles, she's the hospital director. The person who met us was the Peace Corps volunteer who was a hospital administrator.

NOBLE: [00:46:38] A Peace Corps volunteer was the

BOWDEN: Michael J. O'Sullivan.

NOBLE: He was in Bolivia V?

BOWDEN: Correct.

NOBLE: So you already knew him?

BOWDEN: Yes.

NOBLE: And he was the hospital administrator, not the leprosarium administrator.

BOWDEN: [00:46:52] Well, the hospital is one long building cinder block with, you know, some kind of metal roof and like a hospital ward with rooms off of that and which everything takes place. So when you think of when I when I talk about the hospital, I'm really talking about the colony. But the fact of the matter is that there was a leprosy patient who was the overseer for the lands that the colony owned because this little enterprise was entirely self-sufficient. They raised their own animals. They had they cultivated their own land. They irrigated their own crops. They provided for themselves because nobody else is going to do it. The Ministry of Public Health said bye bye. So.

NOBLE: [00:47:52] Ha ha. So out of necessity. Absolutely. And because of that necessity, they have a function.

BOWDEN: [00:48:00] Exactly. So everybody worked. Yeah. Even the sickest patients had something.

NOBLE: [00:48:08] So Michael J. O'Sullivan who you already knew, greets you at the bus stop, at the bus stop.

BOWDEN: [00:48:14] And then you drive us in the jeep to doctor introduce us to Dr. Siles. Doctor Siles receives us in her office.

NOBLE: [00:48:22] How do you spell Siles?

BOWDEN: [00:48:23] S-I-L-E-S. She is Nora Siles Lopez. A very prominent Bolivian family, politically, very well connected, Dr. Ambassador Henderson is not going to fool around with Dr. Siles, he's going to treat her with the respect she deserves.

NOBLE: [00:48:45] And her title is the hospital director?

BOWDEN: [00:48:47] Assume she is the medical director of the colony, the hospital director, everything. She's in charge, she reports to the minister of public health.

NOBLE: [00:48:56] And it was with her that there had been other Peace Corps volunteers there.

BOWDEN: [00:49:00] They were still there.

NOBLE: [00:49:01] Oh, they were still there. I thought they had disappeared by the time. Oh, no, no, I'm still there.

BOWDEN: [00:49:08] Oh, my God. She received us with open arms. I'm very glad to see us. Very glad to hear us speak Spanish and to understand that she didn't have to fall back on her excellent English to explain things to the two Peace Corps nurses who were the intransigent types.

NOBLE: [00:49:30] So there were two. So there were three people from Bolivia V already there?

BOWDEN: [00:49:40] A medtech, two nurses and Michael. And others would come after us.

NOBLE: And all four of them were locking heads?

BOWDEN: Oh no, Irene the medtech was very definitely Four-Square in Dr. Siles's Corner. Michael J was trying to keep the peace, and the two nurses were on the opposite side to Dr. Siles. So you introduce to new people who are ostensibly like the med tech sort of sort of in Dr. Siles corner or in the middle. Change the chemistry.

NOBLE: [00:50:14] Yeah, yeah, this seems like a new hat for brand new Peace Corps volunteers.

BOWDEN: [00:50:21] Talking about making it up as we went along.

NOBLE: [00:50:22] I guess. Where did you when you first got there, what sort of housing was provided?

BOWDEN: [00:50:31] You know, the the Doctor Siles lived there at Los Negros and all of the volunteers lived there in the house as well. And that's where they put us up for a while. But I really didn't want to live 24/7 with Peace Corps volunteers. So I rented a room in the tiniest village imaginable about two kilometers away. I rode my bicycle back and forth.

NOBLE: [00:51:00] Oh, good for you. And what was the name of that village?

BOWDEN: Pampagrande.

NOBLE: Pampagrande. But not so grande, no?

BOWDEN: You got it.

NOBLE: And so you lived in the house of your own or did you?

BOWDEN: No, I just rented a room.

NOBLE: You rented a room.

BOWDEN: With a family.

NOBLE: With a family. So, you ate with them?

BOWDEN: [00:51:27] No, I took pencion a couple of blocks over in the tiny village of Pampagrande.

NOBLE: [00:51:34] And pencion means

BOWDEN: [00:51:36] Means to have my meals.

NOBLE: [00:51:39] But you were eating Bolivian food cooked by Bolivians?

BOWDEN: [00:51:42] Yes, yes. Yes.

NOBLE: [00:51:44] And how was your health?

BOWDEN: [00:51:47] My health was fine. It's good for you. I lost weight, but no, my health was fine. I had no, um, none of the things that they were so concerned that we would get to were a problem for me. I had fellow volunteers at the hospital who had typhoid fever. But look, this is. Not me. You didn't, not it either.

NOBLE: [00:52:19] Yeah, but because you weren't town, you had a chance to speak Spanish, too. Yes, I got to make friends to make people in the village.

BOWDEN: [00:52:29] Got to where people knew best for the schoolteacher and his wife.

NOBLE: [00:52:33] Oh, so you would be at their house sometime.

BOWDEN: [00:52:36] Yes. And they would come in and pick me up at my little room and take me to various places to show me things and and in the little village. So I got to learn about a life in Bolivia outside of the hospital.

NOBLE: [00:52:51] Yeah, terrific. And all this while you're using your Spanish?

BOWDEN: [00:52:57] Oh, yeah. And learning to use Spanish at the hospital as well, which was good. One of the rubs with Dr. Siles says these nurses. Never really applied themselves to the line, into the language while they were in training, U.S. Peace Corps is on the horns of a dilemma. If they if the volunteer has the technical skills, but in subpar language, I mean, what are you going to do?

NOBLE: [00:53:23] Yeah, in this case, you need those technical skills. Right. But in this case, you need them both.

BOWDEN: [00:53:30] That's right. Yeah, that's right. Yeah. And they couldn't always find some of the best volunteers in Bolivia V and VI or

NOBLE: [00:53:40] People who had both. Yeah. And there were few and far between. And you didn't have both when you went into training you acquired has been acquired.

BOWDEN: [00:53:48] And what I ended up you might you have asked me what I ended up doing at the hospital and what Ed ended up doing at the hospital. I and the medtech, Dr. Siles, was very interested in interviewing the patients. Many would arrive just out of the blue, no warning because they had been thrown out of their villages and thrown out of their families.

NOBLE: [00:54:15] And somebody had made the diagnosis then?

BOWDEN: [00:54:17] And and they somebody had told them, well, there's a place that you could go to get treatment.

NOBLE: [00:54:21] Treatment?

BOWDEN: [00:54:25] Treatment, to get help. Yeah. And she was very interested that those patients be interviewed and that some sort of record be established because she's trained as a graduate of the Harvard Medical School. Oh. So she understands communicable disease very well and she's interested in the demographics and creating a record. It's going on of the demographics of leprosy in Bolivia. And that may have been her real interest in taking this post to to begin with is instead of dealing with all of the rumors and mysticism and fear of leprosy, let's find out what the facts are.

NOBLE: [00:55:05] I have to interrupt you for a second. There's a little red light that Bob said should be on and it's not on. Let me just check to see if this is

working. All right, good. We were talking about the interview that Dr. Siles wanted to do.

BOWDEN: [00:55:21] Right. She's looking for where what part of the country the patients come from. Yeah. What kind of place is it? Now, what was their family situation? How the disease first manifest itself. What was the patient's experience between when the disease first showed up and when the patient arrived on her doorstep? But as important as this document and record was, she wanted to go the next step, which was to send a team from the leprosarium to the place where the patient came from to find the whatever medical personnel were there. You know, if they were a midwife, if they were a whatever a dentist or whatever. And to meet with those people, bring them literature about leprosy, do as possible a demonstration for the entire health care personnel of that place. So Irene, who was the medtech and me or her team to go out to these places and find where these people had come from and address the medical personnel if they would see us and in many cases they would not see us, they couldn't care less. Less because they too are not educated about the disease, but they know they don't want to be educated and they don't want to have anything to do with it. Yeah, and Irene prepared these beautiful slides and we had a wonderful presentation. And I still have one of our slides. Mycobacterium outbreak. Oh, looks just like the tubercle bacillus. So the minute if you can get somebody to listen to even one sentence of explanation which ties the leprosy bacillus to the tubercle bacillus, then people will begin to make the connection that you're never cured of tuberculosis. But tuberculosis can be rest. But few people would even let us get them before. So we would have our two slides, the tuberculosis and the mycobacterium leprosy side by side. You cannot make with the naked eye.

NOBLE: [00:58:07] You cannot tell the difference. Isn't that interesting? Right. And so you and Irene, the other Peace Corps

BOWDEN: [00:58:14] She was the medtech.

NOBLE: [00:58:17] She was from Bolivia V.

BOWDEN: Yep, Philadelphia.

NOBLE: The two of you would go to outlying areas.

BOWDEN: [00:58:23] Wherever the patients came from.

NOBLE: [00:58:24] So what kinds of things?

BOWDEN: [00:58:26] We were back tracking the patients pathway to the hospital.

NOBLE: [00:58:29] So tell me about some of the places you would have had to go. How would you get there and how far awa?.

BOWDEN: [00:58:34] We had Peace Corps to the hospital. OK, we had a big international, enormous international truck with a winch on the front so we could travel anywhere. We didn't even need a road.

NOBLE: [00:58:55] The winch on the front would be for,

BOWDEN: [00:58:57] Oh, you do. You weighed you weighed. The truck would be on the side of the creek. You would take the take on loosen the chain from on. Oh. And wait across the creek and hook the chain to a tree on the other side and you would put your side across the stream was too deep for your truck.

NOBLE: [00:59:20] That's how you got the truck across. So that's what you get yourself a foot.

BOWDEN: [00:59:24] Oh yeah. Yeah. Huh. So it's enormous. International Harvester truck, four wheel drive. But even the four wheel drive was not good enough for us all. But we all do. We all learned how Dr. Siles's drove it. We all we all learned how to handle all of this equipment. Yeah. And and worked with the the farming aspect and with the patient over Londo, who

was the supervisor of all of the grounds and the agricultural operation. And with Eddie and everybody's help to scrounge replacement parts for some of the farm equipment to be able to bring in used farm equipment. And Dr. Siles took the same approach with the hospital. Typically, pharmaceutical companies send out of date medicines to leprosarium around the world. This still happen today. That still happens today. Yeah. All right. These things are perfectly good to us. OK, do not be concerned. Dr. Siles, use them to save many lives. Yeah, yeah. But this is typically what we would get. Yes. Was she would dispense with everything from birth control pills to sulfur therapy for the leprosy patients. And she never turned down anything. So the people in the village across the creek conquered their fear of leprosy in order to get treatment from Dr. Siles, and it was the women, not the men,

NOBLE: [01:01:00] Ok, did this. So she was treating not just leprosy, but whatever people needed was the only game in town.

BOWDEN: [01:01:05] Yeah, yeah. So you can quickly over to overcome your fear. Leprosy. Your child is dying of diphtheria. Yes. Yes. Or if you have had eight pregnancies in nine years. So doctors who is very quietly on a birth control clinic out of the leprosarium, which

NOBLE: [01:01:25] I imagine the men in town didn't quite know about.

BOWDEN: [01:01:29] No. And if they did, they turned their backs.

NOBLE: [01:01:33] Ok, I'd like to get back to you. And I mean, OK, going out and doing your International Harvester Monster truck or in a jeep, how far would you have to go? What was the furthest distance to it?

BOWDEN: [01:01:48] Well, it depended on where it depends entirely on where the patient came from. Most of these patients came from this transition cultural and altitude area between the highest part of Bolivia and the lowest part of Columbia. And this is, after all, where the good the leprosarium is located anywhere we're in this transition zone where it is

not one hundred percent Spanish speaking. Neither is it is it one hundred percent casual speak. So the people who live there speak both.

NOBLE: [01:02:24] So it's transitional, both in geography

BOWDEN: [01:02:26] And in culture and language and as well as an altitude. OK, so most of the people came from and these are the eastern foothills of the Andes. So most of the people came from this area. So we would end up driving. Sometimes we would have to stay overnight, but typically it would be a place that we could go out and then

NOBLE: [01:02:46] Come back on a day. If you had to stay overnight, would you be put up in the family's home or you just crash there somehow

BOWDEN: [01:02:53] Or find a local currency on that because of pensión can also offer rooms as well as food.

NOBLE: [01:03:03] So you and Irene would go out and you would try to get the attention of the medical personnel, correct? Did you also try to meet the families? I meet with the families of the people who had showed up and talk to them about,

BOWDEN: [01:03:18] You know, they would

NOBLE: [01:03:19] Let us know if they would let you because they were you were kind of scary.

BOWDEN: [01:03:23] And they had already, in many instances, closed the door on young or. I just see the families of the patients and the answer is yes, so you the shooting is educational. Yeah, it's not treatment, but and we would try to see the families and try to educate them about how leprosy is a disease of the mucous membranes and the peripheral nerves, peripheral nerves and mucous membranes. If it can be undignified early enough in the process, the progress of leprosy can be stopped in its tracks. So I mean, stop.

NOBLE: [01:04:13] So this is what the family of the sick person really urgently needs to know. They have been exposed and they need to know how to identify the early signs and do something correct.

BOWDEN: [01:04:25] But if caught early enough, the disease can be arrested. If the person will stick to the soil for treatment for the rest of their lives and practice good hygiene and have good health. And all of this is a very problematical in a millennium. It's there's no reason that that person can't live a long life. And I can tell you that there were many long live people at the colony. And I'm talking 70s and 80s. And the typical life expectancy of a Bolivian is forty five years.

NOBLE: [01:04:55] Oh, oh. Isn't that right? So what? So how did it seem to you in terms of your ability to get people to listen to you so that you could do the education that you wanted to do?

BOWDEN: [01:05:09] Was it challenging the fear? I mean, everybody goes through word of mouth and those people who could read and read the Bible and the Bible, stories of leprosy and just just terror just know terror and and the and with leprosy, the opposite is true because it is not very communicable. You have to have direct skin to skin, skin to skin contact with a leprosy patient for a prolonged period of time in order to yourself come down.

NOBLE: [01:05:48] So it's not phlegm from coughing like TB. Oh, I know. I know I.

BOWDEN: [01:05:57] So typically in a Bolivian household, the small children, the toddlers would sleep together. So that's a way to communicate to

NOBLE: [01:06:09] The husband to wife, correct.

BOWDEN: [01:06:13] But it will not show up in some cases four years later. So people can have been they can they will have contracted leprosy years ago. Then all of a sudden they're teenagers or they're adults. And the first symptoms of.

NOBLE: [01:06:35] Do looking back, do you feel that there were moments of did you have some moments of success that felt like successes for you? Would you like to talk about a couple of

BOWDEN: [01:06:47] Like the whole thing was a success from from day one, from the worry Dr. Siles received us. And from the way that we were treated and certainly the patients. Holy cow. You couldn't ask for a more terrific cash if you could bear to look up, because in many cases, the poor, the progress of the disease had ravaged them to such an extent that they were I mean, she was very skilled in surgery in terms of repairing fingers and repairing toes and repairing ears, because this is the disease of the peripheral nerves. You can touch something that's hot and not rely so frequently. The patient before he arrived, he or she arrives at the hospital will have developed anesthesia in the in the fingers and in the toes and either cut themselves or get themselves burned. And then the problem is not leprosy. The problem is the infection that develops. So she was very skilled with a knife in terms of treating disfigurement. But there was only so much you can do.

NOBLE: [01:08:25] And did you have a sense that there were some successes, too, in those families and outlying medical people who would come around and be willing to listen to

BOWDEN: [01:08:39] Such a long process and what Dr. Siles hoped was to attract Bolivian medical personnel to work at the hospital?

NOBLE: [01:08:50] Yes, of course, that would be the ultimate

BOWDEN: [01:08:52] Life long goal, because that's not something that happens overnight

NOBLE: [01:08:58] And it needs to happen also in the medical schools. That would be correct. And people need to be educated on so many levels. Did you ever get a break from vacation?

BOWDEN: [01:09:15] Yeah, yes. I went to Brazil on vacation, went to Rio, went to some zone and Paraguay, Buenos Aires in Argentina. Cusco and Machu Picchu in Peru.

NOBLE: [01:09:32] Oh, wonderful. What a great way to do it.

BOWDEN: [01:09:35] And saved money on my fifty dollars a month Peace Corps.

NOBLE: [01:09:39] So yes, of course. Yes, yes, yes. And did did Peace Corps ever come to observe you or to visit you? Did you have visits from Peace Corps staff?

BOWDEN: [01:09:48] Yes. You see, our public health director in Bolivia was with us in Washington. He was on the staff of the School of Public Health at the University of Washington, Mike McCluskey's. So he and his wife lived in Bolivia with us. We come to Los Negros and so would Ambassador Henderson come to. Oh, I still believe I have a group picture of all of us with patients, with Ambassador Anderson, Mrs. Henderson, Dr. Siles, all of our all the volunteers, everybody. That most negative, nothing on the ground, so that's terrific.

NOBLE: [01:10:33] Would you ever consider donating that photo to the Kennedy Library for their archives? It's quite a unique situation. Yeah. You know, there can't be

BOWDEN: [01:10:44] Many Peace Corps volunteer experiences like. No, that was very

NOBLE: [01:10:48] Is truly unique. So all this you're there for two

BOWDEN: [01:10:56] Years, you know, you have to wait until you're replaced on a project like this, there's no such thing as a tour of duty. They're waiting for the right person to come along. And I say willing to see the same thing with Irene because normally a medtech is not trained in education. But

everyone was a natural. She was just outgoing. She had the most enthusiasm about speaking Spanish and her accent was awful.

NOBLE: [01:11:28] Oh, she's spoken enthusiastically.

BOWDEN: [01:11:32] And she and she developed quite a facility with vocabulary and could connect with the medical personnel. We went out on our visit. She always wore a lab coat.

NOBLE: [01:11:44] And all things are important.

BOWDEN: [01:11:47] I believe it. Yeah. Yeah. So you wait for the right person to come along. So I wasn't replaced until about two and a half years. OK, so that's why I didn't end up coming back to 1966. I see.

NOBLE: [01:12:00] And there were two nurses who had been in conflict

BOWDEN: [01:12:06] With the doctor,

NOBLE: [01:12:07] With the doctor about her procedures or something. But it's less important what the conflict was than how it was resolved. Did they remain there for their entire two years.

BOWDEN: [01:12:17] Oh, he's never eased out very, very tactfully. Lots of face saving on everybody's part and move to a hospital setting where they were more comfortable. And meanwhile, Peace Corps was getting more adept in terms of identifying nurses who could not only survive in this kind of atmosphere, but thrive. OK, so the next batch of nurses who arrived were terrific gals. I mean, talk about being able to cope, you know, just bring it on. Whatever you got. Just let me at it.

NOBLE: [01:12:52] Isn't it good to find

BOWDEN: [01:12:53] Out what's so flexible, outgoing and able to connect with Doctor Siles, is always very respectful.

NOBLE: [01:13:00] I would think that would be built in tension. If you were trained in the medical profession in the United States and had a certain way of doing things that was the right way. And then to go to another country where it's done differently and you think incorrectly how to. It seems like it's a tricky balancing act, is to know where to try to change it and where to work within the parameters that are set by the local country, even if they're less than ideal.

BOWDEN: [01:13:33] They thought they were awful.

NOBLE: [01:13:34] Yeah.

BOWDEN: [01:13:35] And you know, by what they knew, it was totally substandard. Yeah. But it doesn't make any difference. It is what it is.

NOBLE: [01:13:45] It's all we've got. Yes. Yes. And people have worked hard to establish their right. When we were in training for Peace Corps, there was a lot of talk about culture shock and we were told that somewhere after the second or third month we have perhaps a dip in our enthusiasm or feel homesick. Did that ever happen to you?

BOWDEN: [01:14:09] I suppose, but I don't remember it. I don't remember being particularly homesick or I suppose a little bit of maybe depression set in after. This this job site, let's face it, that I had I mean, it was depressing from the beginning of the day to the end of the day, if you looked at it that way, then if you turn the coin over. Culture shock, I mean, the whole thing is a shock, Carville Louisiana was a shock. Oh, God, I haven't even left the country, you know. And so the culture shock started in the United States

NOBLE: [01:15:07] During all this time. You had a mother and a father. Your father was needing special care at home. Your mother was home. You had two sisters. Were you communicating with them? Were you sending letters?

BOWDEN: [01:15:20] Letters? My brother came to visit me every day. Yes. Yes, he came to visit me.

NOBLE: [01:15:24] Oh, my. That's a student in Bolivia.

BOWDEN: [01:15:28] We went to Peru together. I photographed us in Machu Picchu together.

NOBLE: [01:15:32] How fun. What did he think of Los Negros?

BOWDEN: [01:15:37] I don't think he ever made it Los Negros. You know. Yeah. If you make it to La Paz, you got a long way.

NOBLE: [01:15:49] True. And there's plenty there's so much you want to do. And he's got a short time. I could I could understand that. And of course, I'm imagining that where you lived in your room in that gross granted. That's right. It was two miles away from Los Negros. You probably. Did you have electricity there?

BOWDEN: [01:16:13] No, I had my Oil-Field lamp. Yes, my mosquito netting for my bed. I bought a guitar in the village large village to the south of Pampagrande, which was called Vallegrande. And I taught myself to play the guitar. And one of a volunteer who arrived after me at a project nearby played the banjo. And we would get together. He would come over and we would play. And he would bring me and he would bring a guitar scoring, you know, tablature guitar, and we would teach each other folk songs.

NOBLE: [01:16:57] How well do we go with some of those folk songs? Who are the most gracious?

BOWDEN: [01:17:01] Just the standard kind of, you know, Woody Guthrie, American folk songs from Appalachian.

NOBLE: [01:17:08] Yeah. And so forth. Yeah.

BOWDEN: [01:17:10] Oh, wonder. But we also from the patient there were I the the musicians among the patients were so delighted to see me take up the guitar. Oh. That they would take time there. Bolivian guitars are smaller than ours, six strings nevertheless. And they would teach me the Bolivian rhythm

NOBLE: [01:17:32] Name for the guitar. It's smaller guitar, you know. Slightly smaller. Yeah. Yeah. Acoustic guitar, slightly smaller. And they just joined with

BOWDEN: [01:17:42] Me because I'm not a big person anyway. But they would teach me the Bolivian rhythms and Bolivian songs. And of course, way back in Seattle, we were taught Bolivian songs. We were taught Bolivian dances to dances. In the evenings we would only dance Bolivian dance one. And they were delighted that it and I could manage a few steps and some traditional Bolivian dance and we would get together and sing and play.

NOBLE: [01:18:14] Did you ever put on Bolivian clothes?

BOWDEN: [01:18:19] No, no, no. And I never wore a hospital clothes either. I just always wore my normal clothes.

NOBLE: [01:18:26] Yeah. And so forth and so on. I'm thinking women there didn't wear pants, but you

BOWDEN: [01:18:31] Start to see lyrics for the cheap pants. Yes. And I wore pants sometimes. Irene also wore pants, but these were hospital whites.

NOBLE: [01:18:41] Oh yes.

BOWDEN: [01:18:43] And oh no. I maybe on my own time I would, I would wear some pants but I think I pretty much because of the visibility of the project. Yeah. You know, you kind of want to tow the line in terms of what the expectations show you and skirt was the expectation, right. But I do want to tell you, starting with music for a minute in Cochabamba, where we can

get to by bus in about a half a day. There were wonderful folk clubs where you could go and for, you know, the equivalent of a nickel buy a glass of chicha, which is their fermented corn drink and listen to folk music for an entire night. And we would do that. And it was just fantastic because we would strum the guitar this way down.

NOBLE: [01:19:42] Yeah.

BOWDEN: [01:19:43] On on the strong beat of the measure. It's a downbeat for us.

NOBLE: [01:19:48] Yes.

BOWDEN: [01:19:48] On the strong beats of the measure. It's an upbeat for them and for them. Yes, it's an upbeat for them. And that was so everything to the western ear is disjointed.

NOBLE: [01:20:00] It's not the time

BOWDEN: [01:20:02] And ours is da da dah dah. So it was wonderful. Yeah. It was just wonderful that I just came away with such an appreciation for their music and dance.

NOBLE: [01:20:14] And even in the leprosarium people there were musicians there, mostly bad musicians.

BOWDEN: [01:20:19] Singers. Yeah, it's an instrument. Yeah. Yes. I mean it was a cross-section of of that part of Bolivia.

NOBLE: [01:20:25] So there was a social world going on there too within the people who lived in, you know, children. Does that mean there were no children with leprosy or they won't

BOWDEN: [01:20:37] Go there, just that the children never made it to the colony? For the most part they would there would be turned out of their homes. There would be so young they would probably die along the way or get lost or

never make it. So the youngest, I would say, would probably be maybe 10 or 11, but not.

NOBLE: [01:21:01] You know nothing over the last 10 or 11 with the expectation that the rest of their life was going to be there.

BOWDEN: [01:21:07] You bet you that there was no in Bolivia at that time. And probably the same is true today. There was no concept of those people returning to their normal life. Yes.

NOBLE: [01:21:20] Dr. Siles did a heroic thing with her life dedicated to that particular community. Second, you was there. Was there any difference between

BOWDEN: [01:21:34] We kept getting more better trained volunteers, OK, more volunteers who knew what to expect and were trained specifically for that project as opposed to me and Ed who were just plucked off a tree.

NOBLE: [01:21:46] Last minute, yeah. I'm coming to the end of your tour. Was there when you saw that you'd be going home in a few months when you knew that. Did you have any special things you hope to accomplish in the last month or two?

BOWDEN: [01:22:04] You know, it's not like a typical Peace Corps experience where, you know, you have your own you have set a goal for yourself and you're trying to reach that goal. These were Dr. Siles's goals that we were trying to reach. So I felt satisfied and meeting any of any any of her expectations.

NOBLE: [01:22:29] And you would be off also doing these interviews,

BOWDEN: [01:22:34] Every interview, the patients, when they arrived at the hospital and even doing such things as there was no record system. So I had to set up all the references. I had been no no diseases in the in the way that disease history to take in the way that we would do it today.

NOBLE: [01:22:58] So it seems like you had kind of a dual role. One was interviewing the patients upon their arrival and keeping organizing a system for record keeping and then also leaving La Colonia to go out to the places where these people came from to talk to their families into whatever local medical personnel leave some literature. Right. For education.

BOWDEN: [01:23:24] So I was not trained to write in Spanish, but I taught myself. Oh, yeah, in Spanish. For purposes of work,

NOBLE: [01:23:30] It's easier than teaching yourself to write English now.

BOWDEN: [01:23:37] So, no, I won't say I ever got the the real knack of where to put the modifiers in the sentence because I tend to write back.

NOBLE: [01:23:45] But yeah, it was that it's intelligible and then it's good that you're communicating. Your idea clearly is much more important than getting a grammar.

BOWDEN: [01:23:58] Yeah, I had, I had, I had the right vocabulary. Yeah. I like the sentence structure. Probably left a lot to me.

NOBLE: [01:24:05] So you come to the end of your time, your replacement is has been found and you're anticipating going home. What plans did you have for yourself?

BOWDEN: [01:24:15] I had applied to graduate school at the University of North Carolina and had been accepted, but that would be in the fall.

NOBLE: [01:24:23] And this was now when?

BOWDEN: [01:24:27] '66 March, April. So the the public health school in Seattle was still training volunteers, so they had an opening and a training program. And so for me, I worked in that training program. And then and then in the

summer I went to Santa Fe and worked in another training program and then went on to graduate school.

NOBLE: [01:24:58] And the graduate school was used it in Chapel Hill, North Chapel Hill. And what were you studying?

BOWDEN: [01:25:06] Well, I had applied for a doctoral program in Latin American history. And I spent two years and I got a MA and I decided I did not want to be a college teacher.

NOBLE: [01:25:19] So you were content with the MA?

BOWDEN: Yes.

NOBLE: And it was an MA in?

BOWDEN: [01:25:24] Latin American history. And I think I managed to finagle a minor in computer science.

NOBLE: [01:25:32] Uh huh.

BOWDEN: [01:25:33] Just doing it on my own. Not not not because they worked together or anything.

NOBLE: [01:25:37] Those very early days of computers. And, um, when you got back from Bolivia, did you come straight home from La Paz or did you travel a bit?

BOWDEN: [01:25:51] On my way home? No, the flights were La Paz, Lima, Lima, Miami, and then from Miami, you would make a connection to wherever you were going,

NOBLE: [01:26:05] But you didn't take vacation time on the way back. You were anxious to get home?

BOWDEN: [01:26:09] I was headed to Seattle, Washington for a job. I did stop in at home to see my father visit my brother, visit my sister.

NOBLE: [01:26:20] And your mother was still there?

BOWDEN: [01:26:22] My mother had passed away.

NOBLE: While you were in Bolivia?

BOWDEN: Right before I started training.

NOBLE: [01:26:27] Oh, I'm sorry. Right before that, she had been so supportive. Yes. All right. All right. I'm sorry she couldn't have heard your story, but everything. Absolutely. And what what was your reaction to the US when you got home?

BOWDEN: [01:26:48] I, I couldn't believe it. Sitting in the Miami airport, I remember I was by myself, traveling alone, and waiting for my flight and have a long layover. I just felt. We were such a wasteful country. Yeah, I had no clue about the rest of the world and how the rest of the world lived and how the rest of the world could live for a month on what we would throw away in 48 hours. And I just. I just couldn't fathom it. I had a really difficult time coming to grips with American affluence. Yeah, yeah, I would say it was a matter of months and months, if not more months.

NOBLE: [01:27:50] And I'm seeing how that affects your life, even today, you and your husband have given up your car and walk and ride the busses, and I wonder, would you have had that determination to do that had you not had your experience in the Peace Corps in Bolivia?

BOWDEN: [01:28:07] Good question, Phyllis, I don't know. I, I expect it was a factor.

NOBLE: [01:28:13] Because both of you had experience with it.

BOWDEN: [01:28:15] Right. And neither one of us came from well to do or even middle class. Yeah, no, we both came from working class family. So not family's accustomed to a lot of things and a lot of comfort and privilege or no privilege at all. But. Yeah, I expect it was an important factor.

NOBLE: [01:28:43] Yeah, well, let's just briefly take a little side trip here and tell me the story of how you met Adam. He was in the Peace Corps in Bolivia but later

BOWDEN: [01:28:53] He was in the training group that I was sent to work with in Seattle.

NOBLE: Ah yes.

BOWDEN: He and his wife were in that group. I met them and along with everybody else in the in the group and did my job and then went on to Santa Fe and then went on to graduate school.

NOBLE: [01:29:14] But you remember them?

BOWDEN: [01:29:17] Years years later, years later, keeping track of Peace Corps volunteers.

NOBLE: Sure.

BOWDEN: I worked for a foundation in Central America and the Caribbean for two years traveling, representing this foundation after graduate school. And they would send me to programs here in Boston. And eventually I left being tired of traveling and settled here and started a career as a fundraiser. And, oh, I had worked at Tufts for raising money and was working at M.I.T. and was interested in moving on and was interviewing for a job as a fundraiser for the American Bar Association in Chicago. And I called a bunch of volunteers that I knew in Chicago asking, you know, is anybody free to have dinner the night? Because I'm only going to be in Chicago one night and I'm going on to Los Angeles for another interview.

NOBLE: [01:30:23] So you still had contact with RPCVs? You know with the Bolivia volunteers.

BOWDEN: [01:30:31] Oh sure. Yes, just informal. And Adam was the only one who had the evening free. So we met he met my plane and we had dinner together and he was by that time divorced and so forth.

NOBLE: [01:30:46] And the rest is history.

BOWDEN: And we got reacquainted, beginning then.

NOBLE: Very, very nice. Very, very nice. Is there anything else you'd like to say about Peace Corps either and how he how it's affected your life or what you might say to a young person today about Peace Corps?

BOWDEN: [01:31:05] But I think you don't know your capability, your real capability, until you're faced with very difficult circumstances, challenges, and it's a great, it's a great thing to learn that you're far far more than you thought you than you have ever imagined. So I'm writing a book right now. I've never written a book before, are you kidding? It's just a matter of, you know, like doing anything difficult. Of course, it can be done.

NOBLE: [01:31:54] You know that now. You know that about yourself.

BOWDEN: Of course.

NOBLE: How beautiful. Have you ever gone back to Bolivia?

BOWDEN: I have not.

NOBLE: I think you might someday.

BOWDEN: [01:32:04] I wouldn't rule it out. It's not a mecca for tourists. Even today, it's you know, it's extremely, extremely poor. There's hardly any place in

the country that you can find comfortable accommodation in the way that we know it here in the United States and so forth. And so but it's a magnificent, beautiful country.

NOBLE: [01:32:31] I think we'll stop here. It's been a great interview. It's been a privilege to hear your story. Thank you.

[END OF INTERVIEW]