

Gloria Montalto Oral History Interview
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Administrative Information

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Biographical Note

Gloria Montalto served as a Peace Corps volunteer in Iran from June 1969 to June 1971 as an English teacher.

Access

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Oral History Interview

with

Gloria Montalto

January 27, 2019
Ringoës, New Jersey

By Candice Wiggum

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

WIGGUM: [00:00:02] Hello. Today is January 27th, 2019. This is Candice Wiggum and I am interviewing Gloria Montalto, who was a Peace Corps volunteer in Iran from June 1969 to June 1971, as an English teacher at a girls school. Welcome.

MONTALTO: [00:00:24] Thank you.

WIGGUM: [00:00:25] And shall we just start off with, with you letting me know why you joined Peace Corps?

MONTALTO: [00:00:29] I joined Peace Corps because when I was a junior in high school, John F. Kennedy announced the formation of the Peace Corps. And I knew from that moment that it called to me. Then I got, I finished high school, went on to college, and got caught up in being a college student and training to be a teacher. And I became a teacher, ironically, in the high school right across the street from Brooklyn

College, part of the City University where I attended. And I taught there for two years and, um, saved up enough money to take a trip throughout Western Europe, which I did. When I returned, the New York City school teachers were on strike and we were picketing and I had just had this exciting summer in nine countries in Europe.

MONTALTO: [00:01:23] And I remember saying to my fellow, my colleagues on the strike line, I'm getting out of this job. It's just not exciting enough. There are no eligible men here. At which point one of the strikers said, don't quit. We just hired a young man in the social studies department and he's of your ethnicity. You might be interested in that. And he's tall, which many men from Italian American backgrounds were not. And I'm a tall woman for, five foot eight. So I stuck around on the strike line. The strike ended. I had his name and I went and checked him out. He didn't know that, of course, and I manipulated my teaching schedule in such a way after I looked at him and I said, I might want to get to know this guy. And I checked him out and we ended up having lunch together. And of course the rest is history.

MONTALTO: [00:02:24] But in the process of getting to know each other, we shared our interest in things international, in foreign languages, in the world in general. And, uh, very quickly, he proposed marriage and said the only thing he would like is if we went into the Peace Corps. Well, of course, um, I was shocked. I never expected to find someone who had his head in the same place. And after thinking about it, because by then I was into, well into my twenties, and of course 50 years ago, that was kind of late for a girl to get married. So I thought, two years abroad, when are we going to have children? And I hemmed and hawed a little bit, but it just drew me because it was really what I wanted to do. And here I found someone who was similarly interested. And we got married, and it will be 50 years ago, in two weeks, on February 9th, 1969.

WIGGUM: [00:03:29] Congratulations.

MONTALTO: [00:03:30] Thank you. And on one of the biggest blizzards New York City had. We almost did not get married on that day because I could

not get there. I, a, I had called the police to help me because the car that was supposed to drive me canceled. Everybody canceled. But I was dressed and I did have my flowers in my hand and I'm on the phone talking to the police who in true New York fashion said, hey lady, you can get married any day. We're having people with heart attacks and delivering babies, which, he was right. And he hung up. The phone rang again and it was telephone operator who was obliged to listen in on that conversation. And she said, I will try to get you there with the car that brings us to work in emergencies. Good luck. And 2 minutes later, she must have radioed him, the car came. We got, eventually got married, had a reception after the wedding because we couldn't have a reception that day. And ten weeks later, we were in training for Iran.

WIGGUM: [00:04:33] Wow.

MONTALTO: [00:04:34] So I was newly married and my honeymoon was going to be the Peace Corps. And that's how we, we went to Iran. We originally were assigned to Korea, but there had been an international incident at that time. And the invitation was rescinded. And my husband was interested in the Middle East, and he'll explain that, I think, in his interview. And so we opted to go to Iran.

WIGGUM: [00:05:11] How did you feel about going to Iran?

MONTALTO: [00:05:14] Um, I was just excited to do, to have an adventure. I mean, that's where my head was. I would have gone anywhere. I knew I was a teacher and I had a skill that could be used. I had been throughout Western Europe, so Iran certainly was, uh, was exotic to me.

WIGGUM: [00:05:34] Mm hmm.

MONTALTO: [00:05:34] I could see flying carpets and that kind of Scheherazade kind of image in my head. So I said, okay, let's do it. And I did not know. I only knew one Muslim before that trip. And it was a student who I was teaching ESL in the high school. I was, it was just beginning at that time and they gave it to me because my

undergraduate degree was in speech. And, um, there was one young man who came into my class and everybody called him Turk.

WIGGUM: [00:06:13] Hmm.

MONTALTO: [00:06:13] And he was a Muslim and he was the nicest kid, you know, he was just so great. And we, we hit it off as teacher and student, and he learned English very quickly. And that was the only non Judeo-Christian person that I had ever knowledgeably met.

WIGGUM: [00:06:33] Mm hmm.

MONTALTO: [00:06:34] So I was a little bit curious, you know. I didn't know too much about Iran. I knew about the Shah and Fawzia, his wife, and how he divorced his first wife because she couldn't bear him an heir. I mean, all that stuff was. But, uh, other than, and I knew it was had been called Persia and it was desert. I mean, other than that, I did not know, uh. I had heard the name Mosaddeq, but I didn't understand the United States' role in putting him in power and then getting him out of power. I was not really a scholar at that point in my life. I was just a 24 year old young woman who wanted excitement.

WIGGUM: [00:07:22] And what did your parents think?

MONTALTO: [00:07:27] Uh, they thought it was a little strange that we wanted to do this. They would have preferred, of course, within the Italian American tradition that I get married and have an apartment around the corner nearby. That was what they wanted, but I think they knew that I was going to break that mold because I had always expressed ideas that were a little out of, uh, the cultural context in which I was brought up.

WIGGUM: [00:08:02] What generation American were your parents?

MONTALTO: [00:08:05] My parents were both born in the United States of Italian born parents.

WIGGUM: [00:08:11] So they were second generation.

MONTALTO: [00:08:12] Second generation, yes. Yes. My father had a college degree and a master's from Columbia University, which was very unusual for a man in, at that time, of that background. My mother had a high school education and was denied college because she had been accepted to Cooper Union to, uh, in their design, clothes designing program. She was very talented, but she hurt her hand making her wardrobe to go there. And of course, her parents didn't speak English, so they didn't call the college and say, give her six months to recuperate. So she never went.

WIGGUM: [00:08:55] Mm hmm.

MONTALTO: [00:08:56] And I think I fulfilled in some way a wish that was not granted to her by pursuing a higher education.

WIGGUM: [00:09:09] Were your grandparents still alive?

MONTALTO: [00:09:13] Um, when I got married, my, uh, I had one grandfather who lived with us, which is very traditional Italian American, and he passed away. We were married February '69. He passed exactly a month after our marriage, March 9th, 1969. So now my mother was an empty nester.

WIGGUM: [00:09:36] Yeah, yeah.

MONTALTO: [00:09:37] You know, and I lived at home, which most Italian American girls did. You lived at home until you got married. So needless to say, I got married, was living with my husband, which was unusual and, not before, I mean, after we got married I lived with my husband, which was usual for our ethnicity. And then we went to the desert on the other side of the world. So there was a lot to get adjusted to, to say the least.

WIGGUM: [00:10:09] Mm hmm.

MONTALTO: [00:10:09] And that's what I did.

WIGGUM: [00:10:10] Yeah. Yeah. How about friends? Were they excited for you or they think you were a little crazy?

MONTALTO: [00:10:17] Uh. They were all getting married and having babies, so. Oh yeah, Gloria wants to do that. Okay. I mean, they were kind of, go have a good time kind of thing, but not that involved in what I was doing. And of course, they gave me back all my letters when I returned home because they had found them very interesting. So I have those letters that I had written to them while I was there. And coming back, you know, people would say, how was it? And you'd say, great. And that was usually the end of the conversation. Yeah.

WIGGUM: [00:10:55] So you went to training in June?

MONTALTO: [00:10:59] May 5th, I think it was. We went to Philadelphia, um, to the Sylvania Hotel, which no longer stands there. And we were given orientation and sent to a dentist to have our teeth checked, which Nick and I had had our teeth checked and had complete physicals on our own before we got married to make sure there were no serious problems. And I had no cavities and I never had cavities. But the dentist for the Peace Corps found ten and drilled holes in my mouth, and they said if I didn't allow him to drill, any problem I had in Iran would not be taken care of.

WIGGUM: [00:11:49] Wow.

MONTALTO: [00:11:50] So I sat in that chair knowing, believing my dentist in Brooklyn, that I had no cavities. And the man drilled ten holes, one of which exposed a nerve. And in Iran, I had to have a root canal.

WIGGUM: [00:12:04] Oh my.

MONTALTO: [00:12:05] So, and I still, you know, have, once they dig into your mouth. But I think, and this is for the record, my feeling is that this guy was looking to get money from the government. That's, I always felt that way. And 50 years later, I still resent that.

WIGGUM: [00:12:27] Mm hmm. What was your medical clearance like? Did you have to have a bunch of physicals beforehand?

MONTALTO: [00:12:34] UH, you know, I don't remember the details of that. I remember the dentist, but I know that we had to, we had to prove that we didn't have any serious conditions. Now, whether we did that privately, I know we went for physicals because we were getting married. But whether that was accepted or they sent us to another doctor, I don't know. But I do remember the ride to the dentist on Passyunk Avenue. And of course, the name of the street was so bizarre. And then this man just drilled holes in my mouth. I do remember that.

WIGGUM: [00:13:07] So how long were you in Philadelphia?

MONTALTO: [00:13:10] I think it was 3 to 5 days. Maybe it was three days. And then they, then I, they brought us up to Brattleboro, Vermont, where we trained in the beautiful Green Mountains of Vermont to go live in the desert for two years. So, uh, that was wonderful. Nick and I five years ago took a trip up to Brattleboro to revisit the site, and it changed somewhat, the campus. Some of the buildings were different, but it was a beautiful feeling to be there again.

WIGGUM: [00:13:45] What did you learn in that training?

MONTALTO: [00:13:47] We learned, um, supposedly culture, but I found out that it was not sufficient when we got there. It was general Iranian culture. We learned certain things that were different, but we did not have practical advice as to how to cook food that you don't even know what it is because it doesn't look like anything that you know. It's in its raw form. Nobody told us to get a pressure cooker, which is essential, at least was, in Iran in those days, because the meat was mutton. The first time I bought it, I threw it in a pan and fried it up thinking, oh, we'll have meat and.

WIGGUM: [00:14:34] Broke those teeth.

MONTALTO: [00:14:36] We could not chew it. It was not chewable. Also, as city people, we knew nothing about corn, but we saw an old man sitting on the side of the road with a basket of corn. And we went, oh, corn. And we went and bought his whole basket of corn. Of course, the man thought we were crazy and probably thought we were from another planet. And we took the corn home. And it was corn that is fed to livestock. So our ignorance was, I mean, we were city kids. We didn't know anything.

WIGGUM: [00:15:08] So how long was your training in Brattleboro?

MONTALTO: [00:15:12] In Brattleboro, I think it was ten weeks. Let's see from. It was May to July and we were home for the 4th of July weekend. We came back to Brooklyn. We brought a lot of volunteers, future volunteers with us, because it was too expensive to them to fly back to their families in the Midwest and the West Coast. And so it was 4th of July and we had the barbecue and goodbyes to both our families who lived close to each other. I mean, we were a very local romance, to say the least. And, um, we took off, I believe it was on July 5th, and we flew to Paris and then stayed there overnight and then flew to Iran via Lebanon, where we got off the plane.

MONTALTO: [00:16:05] And I've never been so scared in my life because we had to walk through a phalanx of soldiers holding arms and we walked through and there were Jewish members of our group also, and they were told not to say they were Jewish and not to let on to that at all. So that was my first experience with animosity in the world. I had seen it once in in Spain with Franco's troops. I thought they were statues in the airport, but they were troops holding guns. But I mean this, Lebanon was very intimidating.

WIGGUM: [00:16:42] Mm hmm.

MONTALTO: [00:16:43] And then we got back on the plane and we flew through the night to Tehran, which was chaotic when we got off the plane. It was the middle of the night. We were exhausted and they processed us

however, I don't remember the details, but we went then to a hotel where they put us up and went to sleep. And in the morning I got up and I looked out the window and I said, we must be in the Armenian section and those are nuns down there. My, I could not wrap my head around the fact that these were veiled women in black chadors. Now, they had taught us about chadors, but they showed us a pretty little white one with flowers on it. And we really were not prepared for that and my mind couldn't accept it. So there was a lot of culture shock in the beginning.

WIGGUM: [00:17:43] Mm hmm.

MONTALTO: [00:17:44] We stayed in Tehran for a day or two and a couple of us got sick. I don't know what we drank or ate, and then they put us on a bus to a, um, an agricultural school up in the mountains. Mozandaran, I think, was the name, Mazandaran, and we were, a couple of us got sick again, and all I knew was that I could not eat the food. I couldn't stand the smell of the food. Now I'm a New York girl. You would think I'd have a cosmopolitan palate, but in those days it was not. New York was New York City. Brooklyn was made up of a bunch of villages, really, that's what we were. So my palate was not used to anything other than Italian American food or hamburgers or Chinese food. We had a lot of Chinese food in Brooklyn, so Middle Eastern spices and smells really revolted me.

MONTALTO: [00:18:46] And plus, you know, we had a couple of us had gotten sick, so I was really turned off on the food. But we stayed in that agricultural school. I don't remember really what we did there. I think it was more ESL training, maybe cultural training. It certainly was cultural because the drive up there was through the desert outside of Iran. And I kept thinking maybe around the next bend there'll be grass and trees. My mind could not wrap itself around desert either. So it was, it was a big adjustment.

WIGGUM: [00:19:23] Mm hmm.

MONTALTO: [00:19:23] You know, fortunately, Nick and, Nick and I were together. I don't know how I would have survived as a woman alone, I mean, when I think back on it now. Maybe I would have, I don't know. There were single women in our group, a few, but our group was mostly married couples. And of those married couples, only three couples are still together.

WIGGUM: [00:19:46] Wow. How many? How big was your training group?

MONTALTO: [00:19:52] I'd say maybe 25, 30. It was a big group. Was a big group. The ESL training was pretty good, except I felt that they were too rigid in what they expected us to do. They, they had an American mindset on how learning should take place, which is you present information and the student analyzes, synthesizes, and makes, draws conclusions on their own about what to, what should happen academically. But in Iran, the students spent their evenings in the rural areas, out in the *kuchehs* or the alleys, under the streetlights, pacing back and forth with their notebooks open, memorizing their lessons. That's how they learned.

MONTALTO: [00:20:46] So we went in there and we were instructed to teach them the ABC song. So here is this American woman standing in front of a group of Iranian girls, some of which walked a few kilometers from surrounding villages, and singing to them.

WIGGUM: [00:21:04] Mm hmm.

MONTALTO: [00:21:04] Well, needless to say, that destroyed any sense of decorum in the classroom and it took a long time to get it back. And eventually, when I became a bit more familiar with the language, I broke the rules of what we were trained to do and did it my way. And it worked.

WIGGUM: [00:21:27] Did you get Farsi training at this time?

MONTALTO: [00:21:30] Yes, we did. Oh, we did a lot of that in Brattleboro was intensive language training. It was an aural oral technique where we

listened, repeated, substituted, changed. And we were able to do that because we were, our learning pattern was different. I mean, we had a more flexible mind, mindset. We did not memorize everything and regurgitate it.

WIGGUM: [00:22:01] Mm hmm.

MONTALTO: [00:22:01] So we were expected to use that technique in a classroom in Iran. It didn't work. We did oral drills, but the surrounding teachers were not too happy about that because the windows were open. Ninety little girls repeating, I am a student. You are a teacher. He is a student. You know, that kind of stuff, um, did not endear me to my colleagues.

WIGGUM: [00:22:28] Yeah. Did you have a co-teacher that you worked with, a local person?

MONTALTO: [00:22:33] No.

WIGGUM: [00:22:33] So you were given your own classroom?

MONTALTO: [00:22:35] I was giving my own classes. I was not introduced to, to any, to the students as this is Mrs. Montalto or however they addressed their teachers at that time, came to you from the United States to help you learn English. Nothing. I was thrown to the lions and my fellow colleagues too looked at me a bit strange, and my Farsi in the beginning was, you know, not that good. So, uh, it was rough. The first three months we almost came home.

WIGGUM: [00:23:16] Mm hmm.

MONTALTO: [00:23:16] And, you know, at times we ate things that didn't agree with us. And I mean, there were, there were some issues. But what eventually broke the ice was around Christmas time I got very homesick. And remember, I came from a traditional home. I had never been away from my family at a holiday and I got really, really homesick. And the teachers, one teacher in particular whose husband

was the governor. Now, that doesn't mean the same thing it means in the United States. The governor of the province that we were in. And she noticed that I was crestfallen and she asked what the problem was. And I was able to express to her that it was, you know, holiday season in my family and I was missing my family.

MONTALTO: [00:24:04] And that day when I came home from school, propped up by the door of the house that we rented, was a huge branch taken from a, um, an evergreen tree in the public garden that was so big that it looked like a tree itself. And she had asked her husband to sanction a municipal employee to go in there and cut it down and deliver it to my home. So, uh, there it was, and we made decorations to decorate it. And then I invited all the teachers to my house, and that broke the ice. That was three months in. And they came and we had food and after that we just were part of the community.

MONTALTO: [00:25:03] Now, during that time period also, food is very important in the Italian American culture. And I was determined, of course I was a young wife too. I was not an experienced cook at all. And here were foods that were totally unprocessed. So we were having trouble pulling together decent meals. The same woman who got me the Christmas tree told me she could find somebody to help me. And she sent us this little lady who was phenomenal and whom we grew to love. We thought she was older than we were, but we subsequently found out that she was probably our age. She may have even been younger, but she looked older. She recently passed away and I put her picture on the Peace Corps website with a little testimony to her.

MONTALTO: [00:26:00] She was totally illiterate, but extremely smart. And she came in, she was a fireball of energy. She was hilarious. She had a sense of humor. She enjoyed the challenge of working for us. And, you know, we had communication issues, but we managed. And she also saved us in that we had three meals a day. And she had a husband. She lived nearby. And he eventually would come over too, and of course, you know, as Americans, we didn't treat her as if she was a servant. She was a helper, and she became like a member of the family for us. Matter of fact, at some point she was trying to

conceive a child and she couldn't. And we had befriended some people in Shiraz, which was a city not too far away. In those days, it was three and a half hours on an unpaved road with the goats in the bus and the, you know, the washboard road and the dust.

MONTALTO: [00:27:07] But we took her into Shiraz to see the missionaries at the Anglican Church. There was a hospital there. And we paid for her and her husband to have testing done subsequently. She never had children, but that was how much we loved her and how grateful we were for her assistance, which made us get up in the morning. We taught her how to make coffee, which we got in that big city, Shiraz. We were able to get coffee there and we had brought a coffee pot from home in our trunk, and we taught her how to make coffee. We taught her how to make pancakes and all sorts of things. So she would do those things. And in turn, I stayed by her in the kitchen and I learned how to cook. She taught me how to cook, and I learned how to do everything from scratch.

WIGGUM: [00:28:03] And did you guys pay her out of your Peace Corps allotment?

MONTALTO: [00:28:05] Yes, we did. And I'm sure we treated her much better than the locals would have. Matter of fact, we went back in 1999 to visit and she was still there. And she was the reason, really, that we went back and people said, why? She was only a servant, why? I said, no, you don't understand. Without her, we could not have put in the two years there, given our cultural context. I mean, there were other volunteers who had already lived away from home who knew how to cook and take care of themselves. I didn't. So I had a lot to, to adjust to in that period.

WIGGUM: [00:28:44] Now you went up to the training school with the other ESL, I assume, teachers. There probably were some other volunteers that went someplace else. Or was it all ESL?

MONTALTO: [00:28:54] It was all, all ESL.

WIGGUM: [00:28:56] Okay.

MONTALTO: [00:28:56] And we were sent all over the country.

WIGGUM: [00:28:59] Okay.

MONTALTO: [00:28:59] And we also had training in country where we were sent to after the, um, the agricultural school we were sent. Uh, we had a test. We had to go to the bus station, buy a ticket. Go to the town we were assigned, connect with people there who were waiting for us, stay with them for three days, and then make our way back. If you didn't come back, you failed the test. So we did that. And then, and then we had some sort of an interview. And at that point we were assigned training locations. Nick and I were in the mountains of Tuyserkan, T-U-Y-S-E-R-K-A-N. Tuyserkan. And we spent, I think it was a month up there practice teaching.

MONTALTO: [00:29:53] And that was when the first moon mission was accomplished and we had a shortwave radio. So we were able to listen to the men landing on the moon as we sat looking on a little veranda, a little balcony, looking up at the moon from there. And that was the, you know, looking at it and saying, there are Americans standing on there! And here we are looking at them. We didn't see any television images. We lived without television. We lived without a phone. We lived without a refrigerator for two years. And we were very happy. So we wrote a lot of letters. That was how we communicated.

WIGGUM: [00:30:44] How long would the turnaround be?

MONTALTO: [00:30:46] What do you mean?

WIGGUM: [00:30:47] You would mail a letter and they would mail an answer.

MONTALTO: [00:30:50] Oh, two weeks to sometimes get there. The letters were censored. They would arrive with wax on them. So we knew that people had read our letters to make sure we weren't doing anything subversive.

WIGGUM: [00:31:04] Mm hmm.

MONTALTO: [00:31:04] And the Shah had a reputation for that. But we didn't write any, we had nothing to be afraid of. Of course, now there are journalists being held in Iran. But we didn't feel that way at all. No one from the CIA or any government agency ever approached us while we were there.

WIGGUM: [00:31:25] So you went from the training school to Tuyserkan.

MONTALTO: [00:31:30] Tuyserkan, right.

WIGGUM: [00:31:32] For practice teaching.

MONTALTO: [00:31:33] Right.

WIGGUM: [00:31:33] And is that where you ended up or did you?

MONTALTO: [00:31:36] No. Then we went back to Tehran and they asked us what kind of a, um, an environment we would like to work in. And they offered us, um, university positions. But I said, no, I'm from New York City. I don't want to be in a university. I don't want to be in a big city. I want a completely different experience. And Nick agreed. And, uh, they assigned us to a small town, which is no longer small by the way, 3 hours south of Shiraz in the desert. It was an oasis. And as you approached it, you could see the palm trees and the green. It really was an oasis. And that's the experience that I wanted. I wanted a small town, rural experience. Every morning we were awakened by the donkeys passing under our window with their goat bells, being brought out to pasture somewhere. Yeah, that was what we wanted.

WIGGUM: [00:32:43] What was the name of the town?

MONTALTO: [00:32:45] Fassa, F-A-S-S-A [also spelled Fasa], and it's in Pars province, sometimes called Fars with an F, Fars province. South of

Shiraz. And when we went back in 1999, the town had expanded tremendously. It was no longer what we had remembered.

WIGGUM: [00:33:10] And what was the bus like from? Bus ride like from Tehran when you first went out there?

MONTALTO: [00:33:15] Alright, we first went to Shiraz and then we had a change of bus. And I remember that ride. They put our trunks on their backs, climbed the ladder to the top of, these men, these huge trunks, to the top of the bus. Put the trunk there. And then we went in the bus and people looked at us because people like us were not seen in that part. And some man came around with a bottle of water and a tin cup and was giving everybody water. And we took water. We knew we had to do it. I didn't know what the consequences of that was going to be, but we had to do it. We could not say, no thank you. No, we had to sip that water. And we did.

MONTALTO: [00:34:03] And we got off the bus. It was late at night and someone escorted us through the shuttered bazaar in the evening. And we were in a little hotel in, whatever they called the hotel. I don't even think it was a private room. I think they were somewhat like the kennel. I mean, it was partitions like that. And we slept there and we had a contact for the morning who came to see us. And I do remember that he barged into the room and my husband got very upset because, you know, there I was a woman and I wasn't completely dressed. And he, he, uh, I thought, oh, this is no way to start. But he reprimanded him for coming in without knocking. Of course, maybe that was a cultural difference we weren't prepared for. I don't know.

WIGGUM: [00:34:50] Mm hmm.

MONTALTO: [00:34:50] But nonetheless, we eventually mended fences and he showed us around and took us to see places we could rent. And we rented a lovely house. We could not have lived in a house like that in New York.

WIGGUM: [00:35:07] Mm hmm.

MONTALTO: [00:35:07] Of course, you know, there was no hot water, but there was a hot water heater that you could light when you needed it. And it only went to a special room where there was a shower. That was the only hot water we could get. But it was a lovely home. We were very happy in that home.

WIGGUM: [00:35:25] What was the plumbing like?

MONTALTO: [00:35:27] We had the fixture in the floor. There were three of them in that house, one on the first floor, one on the second. We had a second floor, which we used to store things and we would move around according to the seasons, wherever it was coolest or wherever we needed warmth, we would circulate through the house. An Iranian would not use it that way. Upstairs would have been for guests only, to serve tea or dinner. We didn't use it like that. We adapted in a more American casual lifestyle in that home.

WIGGUM: [00:36:05] Mm hmm.

MONTALTO: [00:36:05] And the third bathroom was in a house. The kitchen, shower, and the third bathroom were in a separate building on the other side of our little courtyard, because cooking smells should not be in the house, which was different also from what we're used to. Um. We had a little pool, about a little bigger than this table, maybe six feet by six feet, which is used for ritual washing before you pray. But we used it to sit in on very hot days, um, and we did use it to wash clothes. But then again, our little helper, Haji, her name was Haji because she was born. She was called Haji Khanum, which means a holy woman, blessed woman, because supposedly she was born on the way to Mecca while her parents were making the Hajj, which is required for all observant Muslims to do at least once in their lifetime. And she had already done it because she was born on the Hajj. So that's, we don't know if she had another name. That's what she was known as.

WIGGUM: [00:37:25] Mm hmm. What was, what was your day? What were your days like?

MONTALTO: [00:37:32] Okay. We were awakened early by the sound of the donkey bells, which I remember. The room was cold in the winter. We had a little space heater that was, we used *naft*, which is I guess gasoline, to heat and put a pot of water on it so that you had hot water for tea or coffee or to wash your face and hands because it was cold. And we would get dressed. And I think I only worked 16 hours a week. Friday was a day off. Saturday was a day off. That's the weekend there. Taught on Sunday. The schedule would change from time to time. Walk through the fields to go to the school. One time a bunch of boys ambushed me and threw stones at me because though I was dressed modestly, I was not chadored or covered. And I reported that. And they were severely punished and made to apologize.

WIGGUM: [00:38:36] Hmm.

MONTALTO: [00:38:36] And the whole town was aware of it and were very sorry that it had happened to me. The people, once we broke the ice at the beginning, the people loved us, welcomed us. Um. Once a group of men was standing together and I was walking with Haji Khanum and they, I had on a poncho. And one of the men apparently said something disrespectful. And she read them the riot act right there in the street. She wouldn't tell me what they said, but maybe they were offended by my dress, which was always modest. The Iranian women under those chadors dressed very fashionably.

WIGGUM: [00:39:20] Mm hmm.

MONTALTO: [00:39:21] And whereas I always said I looked like the woman in the Grant Wood sculpture of the farm woman and her husband, that's what I looked like in the 19-, late 1960s or early seventies. But they were very chic push, we used to say, very well dressed under the chadors. So I was not the fashion plate, to say the least. So, okay. So I would go to school, sit in the teacher's room, sign in, and then walk into my classroom. And there was always a student who would stand

by the door and saw me coming. And she would turn around and say to the class *ba pa*, which means stand up. And as I walked in, they would all stand, very unlike the American classroom that I had been used to. And then I would motion with my hands for them to sit down, and I would proceed with my lesson, which was difficult in many ways.

MONTALTO: [00:40:18] They loved penmanship. When I taught them penmanship, everybody really cherished that. But the learning of the language, the substituting of verbs in sentence structures and things like that, not many of them really caught on. And subsequently, at the end of the two years, when I was asked if another woman should go there to teach English, my answer was no. Many Peace Corps volunteers say what I'm about to say, and that is I gained much more than I feel that I gave.

WIGGUM: [00:40:57] So you taught about 16 hours a week. What did you do with the rest of the time?

MONTALTO: [00:41:02] The rest of the time, I wrote a lot of letters. I socialized. I made friends. Neighbors would invite me for tea and we'd sit around and they'd tell me how, while they're cleaning their beans or their string beans or popping fava beans to cook for dinner. Uh, I immersed myself in the local female culture.

WIGGUM: [00:41:24] Mm hmm.

MONTALTO: [00:41:25] Occasionally, I would do an extra class. I had, uh, the better students, I did a special tutorial with them at my home. I had classes in my house, so it was 16 hours at school, but there were classes at home. At one point they asked me to teach small children. Didn't have too much experience with that, but I did the best I could. Um, we would go into Shiraz to stock up on supplies. That took a weekend. We made friends there, so we always had a place to stay. I learned how to cook. I did a lot of cooking, but I was really immersed in the female culture. I sat around with the ladies and we did whatever the ladies would do, you know, plus extra classes at home.

WIGGUM: [00:42:13] How big were your classes?

MONTALTO: [00:42:15] 90. In the school, there were about 90 girls sitting on benches.

WIGGUM: [00:42:21] So that was one class, 90 girls?

MONTALTO: [00:42:22] Yeah. Yeah. And when the bell rang or whatever it was that ended the class, they'd jump out the window. It was easier than climbing over the desk.

WIGGUM: [00:42:32] Yeah.

MONTALTO: [00:42:33] So I wasn't used to any of this. I mean, I thought they were very wild at times. The teachers would say the word wild and would sometimes say *heywun*, which were like animals, because it's a terrible thing. You know, in retrospect, 50 years later, I said, oh my God, you don't refer to human beings that way. But that's what was said. And I probably joined the bandwagon with everybody else. They were hard to control.

WIGGUM: [00:42:57] Mm hmm. I imagine, 90.

MONTALTO: [00:42:58] Yeah, it was very hard. And these were village girls. Some of them could barely read and write their own language. They came smelling of smoke in the morning because they built fires to heat the water for their tea. Their skin was very, very dry, especially in the winter, because you really couldn't bathe. We had the luxury of a hot water heater so we could heat a shower.

WIGGUM: [00:43:23] Mm hmm.

MONTALTO: [00:43:23] But we didn't take a shower every day because it was too cold. And even heating water and pouring it into the sink. By the time it hit the porcelain, it was cold. So we learned that you could survive without being scrubbed clean every day. I mean, our hands and face were clean and, you know, the bathrooms. There was no toilet paper.

You had to use water when you used the bathroom in a bucket. So you were pretty clean. I mean, essentially we had to be. Uh. So, yeah, it was, it was a very interesting in that respect.

WIGGUM: [00:44:05] Were there any other Peace Corps volunteers close by?

MONTALTO: [00:44:09] Uh, there were some in surrounding towns, but it was maybe an hour, an hour or two bus ride. And occasionally we would socialize with those people. And once word got out, you know, that we had someone who was cooking and I was cooking and we were having these wonderful meals, you know, people would come and be well taken care of. Iranian hospitality and Italian hospitality are very similar.

WIGGUM: [00:44:36] Mm hmm.

MONTALTO: [00:44:36] No one comes in your home without offering something. I mean, it's just. And we learned. I never liked fruit before, you know, maybe watermelon I'd eat or a good peach in the summer. But I learned how to eat fruit in Iran because that's what you served people and it was delicious. And it was all seasonal. Not like here where you can now get a tomato that's a hothouse tomato. No, it was seasonal stuff so it was really, really good. Learned to appreciate fresh fruit and things of that nature.

WIGGUM: [00:45:15] Did you, were you ever frightened? Was there ever anything that, that was scary for you while you were there? There was that time you got stones thrown.

MONTALTO: [00:45:23] I did, yeah. At night, if we had to go, we were friends with some people who would invite us to dinner. And if we had to walk, there were wolves howling at night. And they called them wild dogs, but we never saw them in the day. And they would howl at night and we were afraid of those, you know. And that was a bit scary. Eventually, I think people, one particular gentleman who was a judge, he and his wife was a teacher in our school, in my school, would

come and pick us up with his jeep because it was really scary, you know? Was I afraid any other times? No.

MONTALTO: [00:46:14] I was more afraid when we went back in 1999 given the history between our two countries. I was, and I had to be covered, really covered in '99, whereas in '69 I just dressed very modestly. One time I went into the bazaar in our town and I had my head covered and word got to me that the hadjis who were the merchants in the, in the bazaar appreciated my gesture of respect, but that it wasn't necessary for me to cover my head because I wasn't a Muslim woman.

WIGGUM: [00:46:51] Hmm.

MONTALTO: [00:46:52] So that kind of thing went on.

WIGGUM: [00:46:54] Now, did you get pulled out at the end or did you serve your whole time?

MONTALTO: [00:46:59] We served our two years. The day that we left was like a funeral, was. I'm not a weepy person, but that really did it.

WIGGUM: [00:47:10] Mm hmm.

MONTALTO: [00:47:10] And getting on that bus for the last time and saying goodbye to Haji, it was like saying goodbye to my mother at that point. That was hard. My husband. So, uh. That was an interesting experience. You said that you wanted to talk about coming home?

WIGGUM: [00:47:32] Yeah. Let me ask you one more thing before we get there. Did you have any health concerns while you were at your site?

MONTALTO: [00:47:39] Uh.

WIGGUM: [00:47:39] And what was the medical coverage for you like?

MONTALTO: [00:47:41] All right. The medical coverage was we had to go into Shiraz for anything. There was a local doctor whose wife taught with me. I guess if I had had a sore throat or something like that, he could have helped me out. But, um, the tooth, when I had a toothache, I had to go to Shiraz for the root canal. And we did have a box with medications in it. And we didn't realize until after we left that we were supposed to take malaria pills. Nobody ever told us that they were in there. I don't know why we didn't see them or take them. We would get gastrointestinal issues a lot. Um. Other than that, I mean, we were young and healthy, so we didn't have anything. I did, oh, I had, of course, gained a little weight. I had initially lost weight because we got sick.

WIGGUM: [00:48:42] Mm hmm.

MONTALTO: [00:48:42] With gastro stuff. And then I acquired a taste for the food and ate a lot of rice and had put on some weight. So I was determined not to come back to the United States fat. So they gave us a book with aerobic exercises. So I started doing jumping jacks and things like that, and weight was coming off of me. And I said, boy, people complain about it's so hard to lose weight. Look at me, I'm getting thinner. What I didn't know was that I had a little personal pet. I had acquired an amoeba. Did not know that. I did not get dysentery. Any gastro issues I had were, you know, de rigueur. I mean, I had had them on and off for two years. But I did have an amoeba. And the Peace Corps, when they mustered us out, found it and would not let me leave until they gave me medication and confirmed that I was cured. And I did come back to the United States looking very good, I thought. But that was quite the way to lose it. But it was really, I really was not that sick.

WIGGUM: [00:49:47] Yeah. How about travel? Did you do any travel while you were there?

MONTALTO: [00:49:49] Yes, we did. Between our two years, we had through letters arranged with our four parents to rendezvous with us in Italy. They had never been to the land of their parents, so we thought this would

be a great opportunity. And we did. We met them and we went to Sicily, where my husband's family is from, and the mainland where my family is from.

WIGGUM: [00:50:18] Cool.

MONTALTO: [00:50:18] Yeah. So we did do that. We traveled through Turkey a couple of times. We did have a car accident, which we never told our parents about. Never. We had hitchhiked with a German couple who drove a Volkswagen and they were driving on a road near Mount Ararat. And along the road was a police car who backed out of his spot without looking and hit us. And we rolled over and over. Now what saved us was this German couple had been camping and they had all their camping gear stuffed into the car and that cushioned us. We crawled out of the car and, uh, my husband and the German fellow were held in that town overnight, brought to the police station.

MONTALTO: [00:51:21] And the woman and myself were sitting by the side of the road and a pilgrimage bus passed and they saw two foreign women and they picked us up. They were going to the city of Tabriz, which is where we were headed. And they, um, we got on the bus and we, I spoke Farsi at that point. And the German woman didn't. She spoke English, but no Farsi. And I explained to them we had a *tasadov*, which is an accident, and they saw that we were shaken and they pulled out oranges and peeled them and kept feeding us oranges until they got us to the American consulate in Tabriz, where we were put up for the night. And my husband was released that night late and he came to the consulate. And they held the German guy, I guess because he was the owner of the car.

MONTALTO: [00:52:22] And then eventually we were all reunited. And we made our way back to Fassa and the Germans went on their way and eventually visited us in the south a couple of months later, when their car was fixed. They had to stay in Tabriz until that car was fixed. But we were, that was close. That was a close call. Plus, they took the men from us. But part of the adventure.

WIGGUM: [00:52:52] How did you find each other in the consulate?

MONTALTO: [00:52:55] We were in, the two women, we were put in a bedroom together and who could sleep, you know? We had had this experience, but eventually I heard the door open, and Bunny was her name. I don't know what her husband's name was, but she was the wife of the consul. And she said, oh, so glad you made it, you know. And then I was put in a room with him and the German woman was left alone. Yeah. So they took care of us for a couple of days. And I remember she made brownies. I said, where did you get brownies? And of course, you know, they had access to things that those of us in the boondocks did not.

MONTALTO: [00:53:36] I do want to say that every time we went to Tehran for whatever thing we were called there for, we enjoyed eating in the American embassy. And when they were taken over by the, uh, the protesters and the, uh, the captives were taken, the hostages were taken. We were able to visualize that place. Close our eyes. We knew exactly what was in there. Yeah. We did meet up with a former hostage, uh, Barry Rosen, when we went to a Peace Corps event in Austin a couple of years ago, and we eventually had dinner with him and his wife. They were from Brooklyn too.

WIGGUM: [00:54:22] Hmm.

MONTALTO: [00:54:23] So we had a lot in common.

WIGGUM: [00:54:25] Ah, nice. So you climb on the bus and you leave.

MONTALTO: [00:54:29] Coming back was harder than going.

WIGGUM: [00:54:33] Mm hmm.

MONTALTO: [00:54:33] The readjustment was very difficult. First of all, people, how was it? Great. Okay. End of conversation. Then Nick went on for his doctorate at the University of Minnesota. So we immediately got a car and drove to Minnesota. And the winters in Minnesota were quite the

contrast from Iran. Plus, we were readjusting. Our parents thought we were very strange because we had lived two years very simply. And of course we were very critical of America when we got back, which, you know, is probably normal. But we had to go through that. And we, I personally felt very alienated from a lot of people. At that point, all my friends had small children and were interested in their homes and what kind of knobs they were going to put on their counters. And my attitude was, what are they concerned with that for, you know?

WIGGUM: [00:55:37] Mm hmm.

MONTALTO: [00:55:37] I just felt very different. I had a completely different view of what I had left.

WIGGUM: [00:55:46] Mm hmm.

MONTALTO: [00:55:46] It just didn't look the same. So I was very alienated. Plus, being in Minnesota in 1971, in the winter, with a New York accent, and looking probably a little scruffy because Peace Corps, you know, made us that way I guess. We, I didn't pay attention to much. I mean, I wasn't dirty, but I looked maybe a little hippyish at that point. And people on the university campus asked me, and what country are you from? So I really felt very alienated.

WIGGUM: [00:56:23] Well, for Minnesota, New York's another country.

MONTALTO: [00:56:26] Well, it was in those days. I mean, with globalization now things, you know, have changed. It's much more cosmopolitan. But we did, and who did we make friends with in Minnesota? Well, Iranians we could find. Those were our friends. The Iranians in Minnesota, and we're still friends with them.

WIGGUM: [00:56:45] Nice.

MONTALTO: [00:56:45] They're all in New Jersey now.

WIGGUM: [00:56:47] Now, how long after you left did the revolution happen?

MONTALTO: [00:56:51] 1979. So it was eight years.

WIGGUM: [00:56:54] And what was your reaction about this?

MONTALTO: [00:56:57] I remember exactly what I was doing at the moment that I heard that they had taken hostages. I was in my kitchen using my Cuisinart to slice the pepperoni, and I broke the Cuisinart. You shouldn't do that. I didn't know. At that moment, I heard that. That's exactly what I was doing. It's like if you ask me, where were you the moment you heard JFK died? It was the same, the same feeling. And I have that very vivid memory of that.

WIGGUM: [00:57:27] Mm hmm.

MONTALTO: [00:57:28] And we kept saying, those are not the people that we know. Our experience was not of those people. We had not heard the word ayatollah ever in two years in Iran. Now, maybe things were going on under, you know, that we didn't know.

WIGGUM: [00:57:48] Mm hmm.

MONTALTO: [00:57:48] But we had never heard any of that. And subsequently, when 9/11 happened and there was this anti-Muslim attitude in the United States and people just, they were calling Sikhs Muslim. I mean, the ignorance in this country of Islam was very, very high. I found myself a defender of Islam. Now I'm not a Muslim, but I kept saying that is not the religion that I experienced. Those people were more, I mean, I was brought up in a Christian tradition and what a Christian is supposed to do and how Christian is supposed to welcome a stranger and all that. I always said the Iranian Muslims that we met were more Christian than any Christian we had encountered in the United States. And for a long time after 9/11, I defended their religion. I said, this craziness is not what we knew, and most people are not like that.

WIGGUM: [00:58:51] Mm hmm.

MONTALTO: [00:58:51] You know.

WIGGUM: [00:58:52] Mm hmm.

MONTALTO: [00:58:52] I had a lot of, I mean, a lot of people thought I was being subversive by saying those things. But I said, no, I have to tell you, what I experienced is not this. So in that way, hopefully that experience allowed me to have some sort of an impact in my own country so many years later when, when that horrible event took place.

WIGGUM: [00:59:15] Yeah. Yeah. Is there anything else you'd like to add? Anything about Peace Corps or anything about your experience that you haven't shared?

MONTALTO: [00:59:23] Uh, I felt that we were not prepared adequately in certain ways, certainly in the educational philosophy that was presented to us. I felt that it was very rigid and it was ill-advised. And I also feel that the cultural training could have been far more practical than it was. Now, we were a married couple. I expected a married couple life the way I envisioned it to be. Maybe single people did not feel that way, but I felt that practically we were, we were really struggling in the beginning, you know.

WIGGUM: [01:00:07] And how long did it take you to feel like, oh, this is home?

MONTALTO: [01:00:13] Three months. Once we broke the ice with and we invited people to our home.

WIGGUM: [01:00:17] That Christmas stuff.

MONTALTO: [01:00:18] That Christmas did it. It did do it. That was it.

WIGGUM: [01:00:22] Great.

MONTALTO: [01:00:22] Yeah.

WIGGUM: [01:00:23] Okay. Well, thank you.

MONTALTO: [01:00:25] Thank you very much.

[END OF INTERVIEW]