

Evangeline H. Tierney Oral History Interview
Returned Peace Corps Volunteer Collection
Administrative Information

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Biographical Note

Evangeline H. Tierney served as a Peace Corps volunteer in Honduras from 1962 to 1964 as a social worker.

Access

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Oral History Interview

with

Evangeline H. Tierney

May 13, 2016
Washington, D.C.

By Evelyn Ganzglass

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

GANZGLASS: [00:00:00] Today is May 13, 2016, May 13, 2016. My name is Evelyn Ganzglass. I was a Peace Corps volunteer in Somalia from 1964 to 1966. And I'm interviewing Evangeline Tierney, who was a Peace Corps volunteer in Honduras, in Honduras I, from 1962 to 1964. And Evangeline, I forgot to ask you, what was your job in the Peace Corps?

TIERNEY: [00:00:42] Well, I worked as a part of the social work staff at the Junta Nacional de Bienestar Social, which was the infant national welfare organization for the Peace Corps, for Honduras at that time. It was brand new. Social work was brand, professional social work was brand new in the country, and the part of our host, uh, part of our hosting was by the School of Social Work in Honduras. So we were sent as a group of social workers and nurses to work in the social welfare organization and to work in the health care organizations, the clinics of Honduras, all over the country. We were the first group, and so I worked for the Bienestar Social in Tela, which was up on the north coast of Honduras.

GANZGLASS: [00:01:45] Okay. So let me back up a little bit and then we'll get back to your job. I just had forgotten to ask you that. So let me start with the obvious question. Why did you join the Peace Corps?

TIERNEY: [00:01:58] Well, actually, it just felt like it was calling me. It was the beginning of the Peace Corps. And I was still a college student with plans to become engaged after graduation and move to Chicago and get married.

GANZGLASS: [00:02:17] That's what we all did.

TIERNEY: [00:02:19] But the recruiter came to my college, Xavier University of New Orleans, and a friend of mine, Brenda Auguste, and I often talked about wanting to do something, wanting to go places. But we had a life that was pretty organized for us and that we participated in organizing. But the recruiter came that day. It was a Wednesday, I'll never forget it. And talked about the Peace Corps and Kennedy and, um. And basically said the Peace Corps does not have very many African Americans who are beginning to, uh, who are finding interest here or who are, who are joining the Peace Corps, and very much encouraged us to think about it. And I did. And as a matter of fact, I mean, by the time that recruiter got done talking, I knew that this was something for me, that I wanted to do this. And my girlfriend and I talked about it immediately after that time. And we both said this is what we want. And so we joined, both together.

GANZGLASS: [00:03:29] And she went to Honduras as well?

TIERNEY: [00:03:30] She went to Honduras as well. And that was our one request when we did our applications was that we would go together. And Peace Corps was so new then that they basically honored our request and sent us to the, to the same country, different, different cities, different assignments, but the same country, which was a wonderful thing for us. We are lifelong friends because of that experience.

GANZGLASS: [00:03:54] So did other people from Xavier go?

TIERNEY: [00:03:56] There were five of us that went in 1962, and one person I think went to Africa.

GANZGLASS: [00:04:05] Who was a close friend.

TIERNEY: [00:04:05] Ethiopia.

GANZGLASS: [00:04:07] Somalia. Charles Baquet, Chuck Baquet? Richard?

TIERNEY: [00:04:12] Yes!

GANZGLASS: [00:04:12] He's a good friend of ours. We will have that, we will have that conversation offline.

TIERNEY: [00:04:17] Okay, yes, absolutely. So there were five of us that went to various to various countries. Brenda and I went to Honduras together.

GANZGLASS: [00:04:24] Right. So then where were you trained?

TIERNEY: [00:04:28] We trained at Saint Louis University in Saint Louis. The training was phenomenal. Because we were Honduras I, Peace Corps was brand new and our training experience was phenomenal. We just, I just got back from the Honduras, the 50th anniversary, and we, Brenda and I went together and talked about what training was like for us since Peace Corps really didn't know much about what to do, they did everything. So we did some of everything. We had language about 8 to 10 hours a day.

GANZGLASS: [00:05:09] Had you spoken Spanish before?

TIERNEY: [00:05:10] I had Spanish in high school and in college. But I actually by the time, in that Peace Corps training, two weeks into training, I'd covered all the Spanish I knew. And so by the third week of Peace Corps training, I was in new territory. So we had, the language training was very intense. We had health training, we had political, um,

science. We had civics, both of the United States and Honduras. Just about everything you could think of, we had in that training. And they jammed it all in because they didn't know what we would face. And so they gave us it all, gave us everything. We spent eight weeks in Saint Louis with that very intense, like 15 hours a day kind of training. They started the physical training then, and then they sent us to Puerto Rico for the Outward Bound training, which was phenomenal.

TIERNEY: [00:06:12] And the whole point of that really, it seemed, was to, uh, the Kennedy family was very much interested in people being physically fit. And so Peace Corps volunteers, Kennedy wanted, he specifically said Peace Corps volunteers must be physically fit. They must be able to encounter anything in terms of their physical capacity as best as they could. So they really pushed us on the physical. But partly I think it also had to do with, um, making sure. They were looking for, I think, what the breaking point was for volunteers. So that what would happen what, and everybody's breaking point is different, and everybody has, uh, a breaking point around different situations. And so they exposed us and they pushed us in every one until they saw where that point was for each person and then saw how you cope with being at that point. It was, it was incredibly challenging.

GANZGLASS: [00:07:19] Did they deselect anyone?

TIERNEY: [00:07:19] They deselected people, both in St. Louis, which was an awful experience, and also several people in Puerto Rico. Some of the things I remember about Puerto Rico in particular were, I was, um. I mean, we lived in these tents, these outdoor. We looked terrible. They, you know, we flew into San Juan and then they put us on a bus and took us way out into the mountains. And we never saw civilization again for a month. For a month. And we lived in these tents, these like Army tents. And the only personal thing you had was your footlocker with your stuff in it that you kept at the side of your bed. But it was just rows of beds and the women were in one tent and the men were in another. Outdoor cold showers, a tent for food, ten plates, obstacle course, and big pool in the middle.

TIERNEY: [00:08:18] And they woke us up at 5:00 in the morning to run a mile every morning at six. And then you had swimming in a pool and obstacle course training and just almost any kind of physical test you can imagine. And it started out as just making sure you could survive in the water so that, uh, cause I'm not a strong swimmer, but I learned how to survive. I learned how to live in that water. And they started you off just slowly kind of swimming. And then they, by the third week, they said you will learn how to survive in the water. And they said, we, your next step is to tie your hands and feet and throw you in. And we'll come back for you in 15 minutes. And it was about surviving in that water. They taught us how to do it, but it was terrifying.

GANZGLASS: [00:09:17] Wow. We didn't have anything like that.

TIERNEY: [00:09:19] I know. I mean, later volunteers talk about they had none of this. And I remember the swim in the ocean where there was a mile swim and I'm not that strong a swimmer. So I remember about being out about half way and really thinking, I'm not going to make it. I'm going to drown out here. It was terrifying, but somebody came along and buoyed me up for about 5 minutes, just enough for me to orient myself. And I was able to finish and back. And then the other thing that stands out for me is the rappelling over the dam. There's a dam over a river and it's really high. And they taught us how to rappel on, after climbing mountains. We had a, not little, it was huge, climb up a mountain and have some, we had someone, you know, up at the top to kind of help with the other end of the rope. But the climb was your own, and then rappelled down the mountain.

TIERNEY: [00:10:27] Well, that was challenging enough. And we have, I still have pictures of the looks on our faces. Somebody took a picture, that we were all just horrified and terrified, watching each other struggle.

GANZGLASS: [00:10:41] Wow.

TIERNEY: [00:10:42] Up that mountain and then back down, rappelling. But we thought we were done until they said the next day, every day it was worse. And just when, every day you thought it can't get worse than

this. And every day it was, it was worse. It was harder. Rappelling, then back, jumping back was off the dam, and I could just look down and there was nothing but a little river down there. I probably stood there in that, in the rappel position for 15, 20 minutes and just couldn't do it. I remember it because that was my breaking point. That was the place where I learned, and it served me for the rest of my life. Really. I've used this, this image and this story many times, because I stood there hanging backwards, holding on with two hands for a long, long time, long enough to actually strip some of the muscles in my arms.

TIERNEY: [00:11:47] Because the issue was I couldn't let go. I couldn't, I couldn't come back. I just couldn't face myself coming back. And I couldn't let go. I had to do it in myself. I had to do it. I mean, I think there was, there might have been somebody who just said, I can't and came back. I don't know what happened, but I know that I was stuck there in that position with, um, just enormous internal struggle with I can't go forward and I can't go back and I'm stuck here and everybody got to that point. For other people, it was something different. That was it for me. And at some point I finally decided I'm going to go and I think I'm going to die here. But I think I would be too, I wouldn't be able to face myself if I didn't do it. So I remember letting go and really thinking into, Father, into your hands, I commend my spirit. It was like that feeling.

GANZGLASS: [00:12:47] And then you jump?

TIERNEY: [00:12:48] And then I just let go. And actually once I let go, the rope pulled me and I was able to bounce off the wall going down. And so I was able to bounce off the side of the dam all the way down. And so I did it. I made it. And by the time I got to the bottom, I felt so brave. I felt like I could do anything.

GANZGLASS: [00:13:19] Which was the whole point of that, right?

TIERNEY: [00:13:20] Which was the whole point of that, is that I really felt like I could do anything.

GANZGLASS: [00:13:25] Wow.

TIERNEY: [00:13:26] Yeah.

GANZGLASS: [00:13:26] So this was a real bonding experience.

TIERNEY: [00:13:28] Well, it was an incredibly, I mean, we still, we still are in touch with each other 50 some years later and, um, yes. I mean, that was an experience that if you made it through that experience and you felt like you were a family to each other.

GANZGLASS: [00:13:47] Wow. So you got to, so you left Puerto Rico.

TIERNEY: [00:13:51] We left Puerto Rico. We were able to go home for a week. And then we left wherever home was and flew to, uh, where did we? We flew to New York.

GANZGLASS: [00:14:06] And then together?

TIERNEY: [00:14:07] And then together we all flew to Honduras, to Tegucigalpa, and we were in Teguc for three weeks with training there, in-country training, where we met the, all the dignitaries, because it was one. The president's wife, the president of Honduras, his wife, Dona Alejandrina, really sponsored the Peace Corps. And in her country, that was her First Lady job. That's the job she took, was to bring Peace Corps to her country. So she sponsored us and she had parties for us. We met dignitaries.

GANZGLASS: [00:14:47] So from rappelling off dams to the presidential palace.

TIERNEY: [00:14:52] Exactly. In that, within a two week period of time, and dressing up and none of us had dress up clothes and but we're trying to make it work. And so we had many parties, many parties. The Hondurans loved to party. And so that all, and the president and the president's first wife, of course, had all kinds of people around her. So the head of the School of Social Work sponsored us a big gathering. So we met all the students and all the professors at the school and we met all the, the Minister of Health and all the doctors. And so it, it was.

The social part of it got tarred because it was just day after day after day after day. And because it was the First Lady, everybody wanted to sponsor.

GANZGLASS: [00:15:51] This is also not a typical Peace Corps experience.

TIERNEY: [00:15:53] No. No, it was not. It was not. So being kind of shuffled around and moved around to all of these social functions, as well as being introduced to the School of Social Work and to the Health Department to begin to get familiar with the leadership. So by the time we got to our country, our sites, we actually knew the people who were the heads of the national welfare association and the national health. So that's the, I know that's different for other volunteers because we connected as volunteers on the ground, but we had access to people who were in leadership positions.

GANZGLASS: [00:16:41] So was everybody in the social work health program or were there other? Were you all in the same?

TIERNEY: [00:16:47] In that group, in Honduras I, we were half nurses and half social workers.

GANZGLASS: [00:16:52] And what is, what was your training at the time?

TIERNEY: [00:16:55] Social work.

GANZGLASS: [00:16:55] So you had a college degree?

TIERNEY: [00:16:57] I had a college degree in sociology, psychology. And actually it was in Peace Corps that I got actually the beginning of actual social work training, though I had some of that in college and I am a social worker now. That's after Peace Corps.

GANZGLASS: [00:17:16] Is that why you are a social worker, do you think?

TIERNEY: [00:17:19] I think I would have become a social worker anyway, but I think the Peace Corps experience directed my social work training and my interest.

GANZGLASS: [00:17:32] But you'd prepared for it anyway in undergrad?

TIERNEY: [00:17:34] Yes, as an undergrad.

GANZGLASS: [00:17:36] You'd always do that in grad school, social work.

TIERNEY: [00:17:38] That's right. That's right.

GANZGLASS: [00:17:40] So then, um, so then in the beginning you said you were assigned to? I forgot the name of the town.

TIERNEY: [00:17:47] Tela.

GANZGLASS: [00:17:47] Tela.

TIERNEY: [00:17:48] Tela was the main town up on the north coast that I was assigned to. And I worked in the office, the Bienestar, the social welfare office there mornings. Another person, Kat Marek, worked there for pretty much the day, but I worked there in the morning and then the afternoon, which was my real assignment I think, was with a little Carib village that was about eight, nine kilometers outside Tela. And that's really where I worked. And the Caribs are.

GANZGLASS: [00:18:26] Yeah, what is a Carib?

TIERNEY: [00:18:26] A Black, are Black people who were escaped, made up of slaves that escaped slave ships years ago, hundreds of years ago. They left those, got off those ships, landed on the little, a little island out in the Caribbean, fought and conquered the people who lived on that island, who were called Caribs, took the women, came to the north coast of Honduras and set up little villages. So they are a Black people with a different language. They don't, some of them speak Spanish, but many of them, the older people don't. The young people and children

usually do, but they learn that in school. They grow up speaking Garifuna, it's called.

TIERNEY: [00:19:27] So I worked with that group of people with, and that was one of the best experiences of my life. I drove in the first day and they looked at me like I was something strange. They'd never seen anything that looked like me. Young, black, African American girl in a Peace Corps jeep just driving in and trying to begin to talk to people. People were very, very, um. A lot of older people couldn't speak Spanish. And I had my Peace Corps Spanish, which was young and broken still at that time. But I just kept going every day. And the children began to talk to me. Often the little kids don't speak Spanish either, so I couldn't really talk to them. But we played and we chatted and they liked my jeep. And so I went out every day. I wasn't making much headway though.

GANZGLASS: [00:20:31] What were you supposed to be doing?

TIERNEY: [00:20:33] Well, it didn't matter. It's just whatever. See what I could. It was a community organization, so it was to get in to that community and see what they needed and figure out how to create a community organization and then decide what that organization would do, that would be. So there was no assignment. It was get in was the assignment and organize a group and see what needs to happen. So getting in was crucial. There was no structure, there was no, nothing to go into except get find a way in. And finally, after about two months of really some people talking to me, but it was, hi, how are you? Yes, bye.

TIERNEY: [00:21:24] And then I found out at some point, I don't remember how, that the older ladies were not, I had to get there. I had to go through them. And I didn't know how to do that. And finally, at one day at a party, somebody invited me to one of the holiday parties. I went to the party and the old ladies took me by the hand and took me away. And one of the younger women came with me and said, they want to see. They do not believe you're an American. They do not believe you're really Black. They think you're some kind of spy. You're a white person painted. You're, what are you? You're not us. And what are you?

You're not white. Americans are blond and blue eyed, and that's not you.

TIERNEY: [00:22:21] So I said, well, how can I prove? I mean, what do I do? And they said, she said, you want to go with them because they want to see. I said, okay, I'm game. I had done many things, but I'd never quite, I didn't know what they wanted. I was a little nervous, but they took me into one of the little huts because they were manaca huts, just grass roofs and made of, uh, bamboo, not bamboo, but coconut, the tree, the.

GANZGLASS: [00:22:51] Fronds.

TIERNEY: [00:22:52] Fronds of the coconut trees, the houses were made up. So they took me in and the old ladies took off all my clothes and checked me out from head to toe.

GANZGLASS: [00:23:03] And you were in fact Black.

TIERNEY: [00:23:04] And I was Black all over. And I looked just like them and the paint did not come off.

GANZGLASS: [00:23:10] Wow.

TIERNEY: [00:23:11] And they came out and announced to the people that I was Black and it was okay for them to talk to me. And so I was in. That was how I got in. Peace Corps did not train me to do that. They missed something in the training.

GANZGLASS: [00:23:24] Did they consciously assign you because you were Black?

TIERNEY: [00:23:28] Yes, they did.

GANZGLASS: [00:23:29] Because I would think a white person would have had much more of a problem.

TIERNEY: [00:23:33] Much more to get into that community.

GANZGLASS: [00:23:36] I'm just fascinated by this. So do you think the president's wife really, I mean, was it a government policy or her idea?

TIERNEY: [00:23:47] No, I don't think so.

GANZGLASS: [00:23:48] To reach out to this population?

TIERNEY: [00:23:49] No, it was our director. Tom Walz was a marvelous man, is a marvelous man. He led our training in Saint Louis. He's connected to Saint Louis University and became the director for the Peace Corps I training. He, so he led there. And while we were in Puerto Rico, he was in Honduras scouting out places where we would be assigned. And he thought I would be the perfect volunteer for that.

GANZGLASS: [00:24:21] Were Hondurans, Hispanic Hondurans biased against this group, or were they especially disadvantaged? Isolated?

TIERNEY: [00:24:30] Well, they were isolated, but it was by their choice. They were not isolated by the larger community so much. I mean, this is really a group of people who established themselves on, right on the water. They were fishermen, what they ate. So they were very healthy people. They were strong people. They were a very fun-loving people. Most of the poor people in Honduras are very sick and malnourished and struggling from day to day. That wasn't really true of these people because they stayed isolated, because they ate fish, because they ate coconut, because their diet was so different from the larger population. They were a very healthy people.

GANZGLASS: [00:25:25] Wow.

TIERNEY: [00:25:26] They went to the monte to use the bathroom so that the water didn't get contaminated.

GANZGLASS: [00:25:32] So they knew that.

TIERNEY: [00:25:33] Well, I don't know if they knew it or if that just was the way they lived I think in Africa. And so they took that set, that cultural set here. And it worked for them. It kept them healthy. And I think that was their, partly why they didn't mix much with the. They went into town once a week, once a month to get flour, to get cloth, to make clothes, for supplies. But they basically either grew what they needed and they ate food, they ate their basic diet was from the ocean.

GANZGLASS: [00:26:18] How did they have money? Did they sell their fish?

TIERNEY: [00:26:19] They sold their fish. They made, they got flour. They made pan de coco, which is coconut bread. So the women would make coconut bread, they made coconut candy. They made all kinds of things out of coconut. They made baskets out of coconut fronds. They would sell that in town.

GANZGLASS: [00:26:36] And that's why they got the money?

TIERNEY: [00:26:37] That's where they got their money from. There were a few of the men from the village who were the probably the families who were better off in the village, who worked as, uh, worked for the United Fruit Company and worked as seamen. And so that they brought, sent money back into the community. But primarily, it was a very subsistence life in the village, but it was a fairly simple life and a healthy life. People were physical and so they were physically healthy. They ate well and they didn't contaminate their water. And so therefore they lived.

GANZGLASS: [00:27:22] Do you know what's happened to them?

TIERNEY: [00:27:23] That's drugs, all of, uh, all of Honduras and north coast. Drugs has just hit Honduras tremendously. It's why the Peace Corps has, part of why Peace Corps has taken Peace Corps volunteers out of Honduras because.

GANZGLASS: [00:27:41] So they all got wrapped up in that?

TIERNEY: [00:27:42] They all got wrapped up, many people got wrapped up in drugs there. They were like, they had so little exposure that once it came in, it just took over. It was like wildfire, which is so sad. It's so sad.

GANZGLASS: [00:27:58] So once you were accepted, what did you then do?

TIERNEY: [00:28:04] Well.

GANZGLASS: [00:28:05] Or what did they do?

TIERNEY: [00:28:05] We did, we. We did, uh, came together. Pulled together. Probably 40 or 50 people came together. They were ten at election, people voted about. It was about 40 or 50 who became the central kind of operating committee to decide what kind of project they would do.

GANZGLASS: [00:28:31] And they voted?

TIERNEY: [00:28:32] And they voted. And I set up the wherewithal to do that and procedures and did all that stuff. And we had a real regular voting operation going. And so with that group of about 40, many of whom were men, we, the community decided what they really wanted was a community center and they wanted a place to dance. These Hondurans will have a party at the drop of a hat, and the Caribs love to have parties and they love to dance. And so they would have dances where the entire community would show up. And they just did it on the sand, on the beach. They didn't have a place, so that's what they wanted. And so that's what we decided would be the first thing we would do. It was to figure out how to build a community center.

TIERNEY: [00:29:28] And as part of that organization, I began to talk about what we could do other than dance. We could do classes, we could do immunizations, we could do periodic water testing, we could do, we could do all carpentry workshops, we, things like. They were like, oh yeah, yeah. So we could do other things with this facility. So that's what we did. And it was amazing. I was able to get some donations from the United Fruit Company to lug wood. People.

GANZGLASS: [00:30:07] You did that?

TIERNEY: [00:30:08] Yeah. I got them to do, to do some donating. And the community had had functions. They sold things. Everybody put in a little money. Then every lady decided when she sold her bread, she would give 1/10 of it to the community center. And other people decided when they caught fish and sold it in town, they would put it in the pot. And so we collected money from the, from the community. We got money donated from outside. I wrote proposals and had meetings.

GANZGLASS: [00:30:46] Highly successful.

TIERNEY: [00:30:46] It was a wonderful experience. And we got that building built. I mean, it was amazing. We had other Peace Corps volunteers from other parts came to help with the actual building, but the men in that community actually built it and they knew how to build it. Our one problem was because that community is on sand. It's right on, the whole communities on the beach. So it was hard to get a foundation built because nothing, they didn't have anything that was up off the ground. And they wanted that because their houses were on the ground, dirt floors. So I was able to write to an architectural firm here in the United States to ask, how would you do this? And they wrote me back and said, told me how to do it.

GANZGLASS: [00:31:32] Was it on stilts?

TIERNEY: [00:31:34] On stilts, on. I was able to get pipes like sewer pipe, water pipes, old discarded pipes from the fruit company that we could fill with concrete and set in concrete. And so that that, we got, were able to get use those as the stilts, which are enormously effective for holding up that building in sand so that it would be strong. Yeah, it was great. People were so excited. I was just thrilled to be able to find that out. I am not handy, but I was able to.

GANZGLASS: [00:32:15] You were able to organize the people who were.

TIERNEY: [00:32:17] Yes, I was able to organize the people who were and that worked. And so we got that building built in about six months to seven months.

GANZGLASS: [00:32:27] Exciting.

TIERNEY: [00:32:28] It was exciting. It was.

GANZGLASS: [00:32:30] And then when you left, did another volunteer come in and work with that?

TIERNEY: [00:32:34] I don't know that. No, not right away. I think it was two, two Peace Corps volunteers later that somebody actually went there. But people didn't feel like they needed much. I mean, we did. They wanted that center. We got that center built and we began to. CARE donated some sewing machines. We got another organization to donate some toolboxes. So that was the, they stayed in the center so that people from the community were able to come and borrow tools and then bring them back to the center. The center owned them and ladies could come and sew on sewing machines in the center.

GANZGLASS: [00:33:17] Did somebody then run the center?

TIERNEY: [00:33:19] No.

GANZGLASS: [00:33:20] They just did it communally?

TIERNEY: [00:33:21] They just did it communally, which is how they had always lived. They're very communal in the way. And so they really didn't need or want any boss, anybody running it. They did it themselves and it was wonderful. Wonderful.

GANZGLASS: [00:33:38] That's really great.

TIERNEY: [00:33:39] It was great. So we had many, many all-night dances.

GANZGLASS: [00:33:44] And you commuted from this, from Tela?

TIERNEY: [00:33:47] Tela.

GANZGLASS: [00:33:48] How far was that?

TIERNEY: [00:33:49] About eight, about eight kilometers.

GANZGLASS: [00:33:52] Not far.

TIERNEY: [00:33:52] No, no, no. I could get there in half an hour on terrible roads.

GANZGLASS: [00:33:55] And you drove a jeep?

TIERNEY: [00:33:56] I drove the little Peace Corps, the terribly uncomfortable Peace Corps jeep, but it got me there. Yeah.

GANZGLASS: [00:34:04] And where, did you have contact with other Peace Corps volunteers?

TIERNEY: [00:34:07] Occasionally our director, Tom Walz, who I mentioned, would come by and he'd often bring another volunteer along who, somebody who needed a break, on his travels. He would bring somebody along. And because we lived on the beach, it was the place everybody wanted to come. Now, we actually got to the beach on weekends, just like everybody else, because we were working. But it was, uh, it was a beautiful, beautiful beach, one of the most beautiful beaches I've ever seen in my life. Tall palm trees, white sand, blue turquoise water, beautiful beach. And so it was a great place to have a break, recreation on weekends. And volunteers would often come to see us.

GANZGLASS: [00:34:53] And your friend from school as well?

TIERNEY: [00:34:55] My friend, she would come every now and then to, also to help. And I had a project with, uh. Easter is always a big deal in Latin America and Semana Santa and so that they have, they do, um, a whole process where the girls are, it's like a coming out for girls, for

young teenage girls who dress up and parade around. And then now they can see boys. And now, you know, it's like a debutante, except very simple. But it was like, one of the girls. The teenage girls were always fascinated with my hair. And because we had the same hair, the same texture, African hair. And so they wanted to do with their hair what I did with my hair. And so I had about, there were about 12 of them who were coming out that summer. I said, I cannot do all this hair by myself. So I got my girlfriend to come and help me do. And we sat on the floor, on the floor, and just did hair all, for three days, that's all we did.

GANZGLASS: [00:36:14] Did you have a straightening iron?

TIERNEY: [00:36:15] A straightening comb that was mine and my friend had hers. So I said, bring your comb. And we just, and we're used to having a stove with heat, but they have no stoves out there. They have, they cook, they make heat with the rind of coconuts.

GANZGLASS: [00:36:38] Oh.

TIERNEY: [00:36:39] So we had this huge, it was like a bonfire. And it was hot. It's like, oh my gosh. But we worked.

GANZGLASS: [00:36:47] And they all looked beautiful.

TIERNEY: [00:36:49] They all looked beautiful. They were so happy and so proud. And we were, we were proud for them. It was just a very fun.

GANZGLASS: [00:36:57] That is great.

TIERNEY: [00:36:57] It was a fun experience. Yeah.

GANZGLASS: [00:37:00] Did you travel at all during your, did you have a vacation? I know people who were teaching had school breaks, but did you have a vacation as well?

TIERNEY: [00:37:08] We did. We had a vacation. I think it was a week somewhere after the first year, they gave us a week off and we went to the islands, to Roatan and. It was the vacation islands are that outside the coast. Off the coast.

GANZGLASS: [00:37:30] Also part of Honduras?

TIERNEY: [00:37:32] Yes, part of Honduras. But it was beautiful. And we could, we hired a boat and it took us out to the islands, and we stayed out there for a while and just relaxed. It wasn't that different from where I spent my time, but it was not work.

GANZGLASS: [00:37:47] It was vacation.

TIERNEY: [00:37:48] It was vacation. So it was different. So that was great. And often sometimes we went to Tegucigalpa. That first Christmas, we all felt pretty lonely. And first time, for some of us, it was the first time we'd ever been away from our families. And so we all went to Tegucigalpa so that we could be together. By the second Christmas, we were in our towns and we, nobody ever.

GANZGLASS: [00:38:16] Did you have contact with your parents while you were there?

TIERNEY: [00:38:18] No. I mean, it's not like now where people are texting and talking and all that. No, we, I talked once a month for 3 minutes. I could get on the United Fruit Company shortwave radio and the operator was able to connect to my parent's phone. And we, they knew when I would be calling and I had 3 minutes. That was it. So I said hello to all my brothers and sisters, all my aunts and uncles, everybody in 3 minutes, and that was it until next month. So there was no.

GANZGLASS: [00:38:51] Were they worried about you?

TIERNEY: [00:38:52] My grandparents were very worried about me. My grandfather had worked on the, actually this is coincidentally, had worked as a sailor on the United Fruit Company boats as a young man

and actually knew where Honduras was and had been there. And so he knew it as a sailor.

GANZGLASS: [00:39:15] And that's not what he wanted for his granddaughter.

TIERNEY: [00:39:17] No. That is not what he wanted for me. He cried when I said I was going. He begged me not to go, and I was like, Grandpa, I'm going to be fine. What did I know, right? But I was fine by and large. I mean, I had some incidents. He died while I was there, which was one of the sadnesses of my life. But I was able to let him know I was fine while I was there, and so it worked out okay. But that was a major coincidence in our family that my grandfather had actually been there before.

GANZGLASS: [00:39:53] And knew all the dangers.

TIERNEY: [00:39:55] All the dangers, he actually, he knew the dangers from that point of view, which, um. And some of the things that, some of the dangers that I got into while I was there were actually things he would have been. He would have said, I told you so. There was the revolution happened while we were there. Kennedy died while we were there. And the revolution happened while we were there. Two major events.

GANZGLASS: [00:40:23] So how were you affected? What was, from where you were, what was the revolution like? What happened?

TIERNEY: [00:40:28] What the revolution was terrible, was awful. And it was about six weeks after Kennedy was killed. And I think, well, there are many thoughts about how those two things were connected, but, um, it's where the military took over the government and the Dona, uh, Pajarito is his nickname and that's the name everybody called him, Pajarito. Pajarito was.

GANZGLASS: [00:40:58] The president.

TIERNEY: [00:40:58] The president of the country was dethroned and that they had to leave the country suddenly and Dona Alejandrina was gone

now. So the person who was sponsoring us was gone. But they took over the government, and the coup was awful. I mean, many, many people were killed. I remember, I mean, I watched people getting shot right outside my front window. I watched cars drive by, trucks drive by with dead bodies in them, with feet hanging out.

GANZGLASS: [00:41:32] So I should know this, but this was a leftist coup?

TIERNEY: [00:41:35] That's right.

GANZGLASS: [00:41:35] Yeah.

TIERNEY: [00:41:36] And so it was a very, it was a very difficult time for people in the country. There was some wonderment about whether or not we would get pulled out then, but we all wanted to stay. I think the military leader didn't have, was not invested in us, but I don't think he cared one way or another. So as long as we weren't going to get in his way, he was going to, he was all right with us staying as long as we didn't do anything political.

GANZGLASS: [00:42:13] He wasn't worried about spies.

TIERNEY: [00:42:15] Right. Not at that point. And so it was a terrible probably three months where it was curfews, where you had to be in your house by 6:00 and you came out at sunrise. You could come out once the sun was up. But you had to be back in your house at 6:00 or you just could be shot on the street.

TIERNEY: [00:42:41] And so one of the stories I tell that my grandfather would not have liked, would have been very upset about, was that my colleague lost track of time and he had the jeep and the keys for me to get into our courtyard. So I'm on the street and it is 6:00 and I'm a girl standing out here and the army trucks with the guns are going by just and I'm trying to just melt into the wall so that they don't see me because they shoot first and ask questions later. That's clear. And so but they went by and nobody saw me. And then the next one went by and I thought he was almost, I thought I was out of danger. And then he stopped and

he said, alto, alto! And I knew he meant stop, stop. Because he thought I was doing something. But he didn't shoot. He came to me and the whole truck

GANZGLASS: [00:43:44] But he knew you are American.

TIERNEY: [00:43:45] No.

GANZGLASS: [00:43:45] Oh, he didn't?

TIERNEY: [00:43:46] No, no, he did not know. And I kept saying, I'm Cuerpo de Paz, Cuerpo de Paz. I'm, you know, *de los Estados Unidos*. I'm an American, I'm from the United States. I'm locked out of my house. I'm trying to get in. I'm not doing anything wrong. So they came over and they looked at my ID and they, they understood that I was what I said I was. But it was like, okay, so we got this girl now out here and can't get in her house. Why don't we just do some hanky panky? And so then the, then the. These are young soldiers. They're like what my grandfather was afraid of. So they start coming on, they start touching, they start. And so then I'm like, what am I going to do? Because clearly they, often they take women off and they never heard from again.

TIERNEY: [00:44:43] So I had to think of my talking about Peace Corps. Quick think. Quick think. And so I decided to say to all of them, there are about six guys who were just getting fresh and more fresh and just. And so I said, I will, I will like one of you. And so I started saying, you get your friends away and let's you and I go off and be friends and get to know each other. So I was kind of flirting with this one guy who seemed the nicest of them. And so he and I kind of went off around the back and I got back there and I said, I won't tell them, please help me get over the wall. Please just help me get over the wall. I won't tell them. And you can tell them you did anything you want. Tell them anything if just to keep your machismo intact. Because I knew that was what this was all about. And so he did. He boosted me and helped me get over the wall.

GANZGLASS: [00:45:42] You were so lucky.

TIERNEY: [00:45:43] And I was incredibly lucky. And I picked the right one that I was.

GANZGLASS: [00:45:50] For just thinking about that.

TIERNEY: [00:45:52] Being able to think quickly in that moment to, uh, I said, okay, I think Peace Corps did help me with that. So when my colleague got home then, you know, I. He still talks to me about that.

GANZGLASS: [00:46:07] He owes you.

TIERNEY: [00:46:08] I got him though. He says, oh gosh, I wasn't there, are you going to beat me up? I think I was. So that all that to say that the experience of the revolution was terrible for everybody. And many people died and many people lost money and lost their resources. And it was a very, it was a miserable time.

GANZGLASS: [00:46:32] And that happened in your second year?

TIERNEY: [00:46:35] In the first.

GANZGLASS: [00:46:36] In the first year.

TIERNEY: [00:46:37] Yeah. In '63 actually. It was in '63. It was Kennedy was killed in '63 and so it was, this was '63, about six weeks later.

GANZGLASS: [00:46:47] Wow.

TIERNEY: [00:46:48] Yeah. Yeah.

GANZGLASS: [00:46:50] And then but the projects continued?

TIERNEY: [00:46:52] Projects continued.

GANZGLASS: [00:46:52] And all the other Peace Corps volunteers?

TIERNEY: [00:46:54] Everybody stayed. Everybody, everybody has stories about what happened to them during the revolution. Everybody, all of us has. Everybody has a story. We've been together and shared. What happened to you? What happened to you when Kennedy was killed? And how were the Honduran people with you? And how are you with them? And how did you, how were you in that? And the other story is, what happened to you during the revolution?

GANZGLASS: [00:47:22] Let me ask you that question. So what happened when Kennedy was killed?

TIERNEY: [00:47:26] That was also, that was terrible also a time. I, it was in the middle of the day. I was just getting done with the siesta. I had lied down after lunch, taking a little nap, which is what you do in Latin America. So it was probably about 10 minutes to 2:00. I was just getting ready to leave the house to go back to work on my way out to the village and my landlord came to say he heard on his radio that Kennedy was shot. He didn't know if he was dead. So I stayed there with him to listen to the radio. And then we got the news that he was shot and that he was dead. And it was awful. It was, it was. It really felt like, uh, being lost to be that far from home when that was happening in your country and you didn't know what was, what that meant for the country.

TIERNEY: [00:48:26] And you were in a foreign place when just something so painful and so awful had happened in the United States. And I missed my family. And I knew everybody had to be grieving. But what that meant and? So it was, there were three of us, myself, Ken Marek and Mary Lou Jackson were in Tela. And so the three of us immediately got together and just cried and cried and cried. Our director sent telegrams to us all saying stay in place and that he would be in touch with us. But the Hondurans just poured in. They came in droves with tears and hugs and we're with you. And he was our president too. And we loved him.

TIERNEY: [00:49:22] Everybody loved JFK and everybody grieved him. And they grieved with us. It was, it was like the Hondurans came to us to grieve

with us when JFK died. And it was, it really was like we stayed with them when the coup happened. It was a mutuality that that thing that happened that solidified Honduras I in that country. The people just took care of us. They brought us food. They made sure we were all right. They checked on us every day when Kennedy was killed.

GANZGLASS: [00:50:00] And then a short time later, you reciprocated.

TIERNEY: [00:50:03] We reciprocated. And that was an amazing time. I'll never forget that, ever. That time, that mutuality, that reciprocity, just the juxtaposition of those two events were amazing.

GANZGLASS: [00:50:21] Was that unique to Tela or it was throughout the country?

TIERNEY: [00:50:24] No, throughout the country. We all have those two stories that when we're together, some, well, most, many of Honduras I are deceased now. But there's probably still 15 of us still alive. And so whenever we are in communication, those two stories come up invariably because they marked us as volunteers for sure, but also as people. Yeah, it was an amazing time. Difficult time. Very difficult time, very sad.

GANZGLASS: [00:50:56] In our generation, we all know where we were.

TIERNEY: [00:50:59] Where were you when Kennedy died? And, yeah, that's where I was, in the Peace Corps. My Peace Corps family, my Honduran family was my support got us through that.

GANZGLASS: [00:51:15] Well, let me ask you just a couple more questions. I mean, are there other things? Let me before I go there, let me ask, are there things you want? Anything else you want to talk about the country and your experience?

TIERNEY: [00:51:30] Honduras is a very, very poor country. And it was probably one of the poorest countries in the Americas. And then and it still is. I think the volunteers are very needed there. And it's very sad that that they're not there right now. The resources in that country are very, uh,

scarce and remain so. And so I hope at some point that, that the, that this country and the Hondurans can do something about the drugs so that Honduras, so that Peace Corps can go back because it's just so basic.

GANZGLASS: [00:52:19] Have you been back?

TIERNEY: [00:52:19] I went back two years, three years after I left, because I married and my husband was.

GANZGLASS: [00:52:29] To a Honduran?

TIERNEY: [00:52:30] No, to an American. But I talked about Peace Corps and that experience so much. And I said, you will not, you can't know me until unless you know that. You don't know who I am unless you know that me. And so I said we're going back. And so we went back together. And so he met my Honduran family and saw where I lived and met all my people. And that was wonderful. They got to meet him. So that was, that was the last time I was back. That was three years. So I was back, I got came back in '64. So I was married in '66. So I think I went to Honduras in '67.

GANZGLASS: [00:53:12] So you came back from Peace Corps and you went into grad school right away?

TIERNEY: [00:53:15] I came back.

GANZGLASS: [00:53:16] And what did you do?

TIERNEY: [00:53:16] I did, I went into, I started grad school at Saint Louis University. They gave me a scholarship to go to the School of Social Work. But I was so unsettled. I mean, coming back from that intense experience to the School of Social work was such a drag. And back then the School of Social Work was not where I thought it, it wasn't considering the kinds of issues that I thought needed to be considered. Students weren't being prepared to do organization, community development. They weren't being prepared to, uh, to interact with

people from other countries. They weren't being, and I, that's what I wanted. I wanted to be, I thought that I needed to do that. And so I was on a soapbox all the time in graduate school. I finally decided, I'm not ready for this. They're not ready for me and I'm not ready for this. So I stopped.

GANZGLASS: [00:54:12] Oh.

TIERNEY: [00:54:12] And I took a job. I came to Washington and took a job with a job training program, a work and training program that was a demonstration project that was happening here in D.C., in Pennsylvania, not far from where I live, right on Capitol Hill. And that had the, that felt like what my, the intensity that I had in Peace Corps, the people here had the same thing. They really were working hard. It was team, people were committed to it. And the point was to get people from the poverty rolls in Washington, D.C., prepared to work and get training and get good jobs. And so I did that for three years. I met my husband there.

GANZGLASS: [00:55:04] Oh, what was the name of the organization?

TIERNEY: [00:55:06] The Work and Training Opportunity Center.

GANZGLASS: [00:55:08] Oh.

TIERNEY: [00:55:08] And it was in the old Naval Hospital, they, uh, right there.

GANZGLASS: [00:55:12] Because my whole field is in employment and training.

TIERNEY: [00:55:15] Ah, okay.

GANZGLASS: [00:55:16] Another connection.

TIERNEY: [00:55:17] Another connection. Yes. Yes.

GANZGLASS: [00:55:19] We need to talk about that as well.

TIERNEY: [00:55:20] Yes. So I, I worked there for four years. I met my husband there and we were married there. My husband is Caucasian. So that community at the Work and Training Opportunity Center became our family in much the same way that Peace Corps had been family. And so they supported us in marrying in 1966, which was kind of a difficult thing.

GANZGLASS: [00:55:48] Pretty radical, yeah.

TIERNEY: [00:55:49] Yeah, back then. And I mean, I wasn't allowed, we weren't legal in New Orleans, so I couldn't go home to get married. So we did get married here and we had lots and lots of support here to support us in our, in our wedding.

GANZGLASS: [00:56:06] So have you stayed? You went back to Honduras. Have you stayed involved in international things?

TIERNEY: [00:56:12] Not so much, no. I think. I finally did go back to graduate school and I am a clinical social worker and I have work now in private practice here in Washington, D.C. But I worked in private practice in Massachusetts and I lived there for a long time. And then in Philadelphia, where I lived for a while. And part of the, many of the people I see are people who their original language is Spanish, um, and.

GANZGLASS: [00:56:47] So you continue to use Spanish.

TIERNEY: [00:56:48] To use my Spanish. There are people who, most of these people speak English because many of them work for the World Bank or they work for IMF. In Massachusetts, there were people who had come to this country and were working, you know, in all kinds of capacities, but so people could do their therapy in English. But when it got down to really where their pain was, where their young life was, most of that is in Spanish. So we could actually do that work in Spanish, which was quite wonderful. And I love that work. And I understand not just the language but the culture from most of these people come. And so that's great. That's a wonderful thing.

GANZGLASS: [00:57:37] So you've learned about other cultures.

TIERNEY: [00:57:39] I have, that way, other cultures. Not just Latin America, but I know how to think. It's like what I've learned is how to ask the question of the impact of culture on this pain and the impact of having that cultural pain be experienced here in this foreign culture of the United States. I know how to engage that question, which is often where people's upset is.

GANZGLASS: [00:58:15] Which is a really unique capacity on your part because you've been.

TIERNEY: [00:58:20] That's right.

GANZGLASS: [00:58:20] You've been in their shoes just in a different.

TIERNEY: [00:58:23] Different in a different country. And that's, that, knowing how to ask that question then gets applicable to people from all other kinds of places.

GANZGLASS: [00:58:29] Sure.

TIERNEY: [00:58:30] Because I know, I know, um, that it's basically the same issue, even though they come from a different place. And maybe I don't speak French or I don't speak an African, from an African dialect, or I don't speak some other language, but I know how to ask that question because I know that the impact of culture and early life and whatever that experience is, being experienced, where the pain is being experienced here. So I know how to explore that with people and that works.

GANZGLASS: [00:59:05] What do your colleagues in the social work community say to that?

TIERNEY: [00:59:10] Oh, that's a good thing. No, I mean, I get lots of people sent to me.

GANZGLASS: [00:59:14] Because of that.

TIERNEY: [00:59:14] They know that I know how to do that.

GANZGLASS: [00:59:17] It's a unique capacity.

TIERNEY: [00:59:17] It's a unique capacity. Yeah. So I'm still working and old and I'm still working. It's because I still love it.

GANZGLASS: [00:59:26] Yeah. And I'm old and I still interviewing because I love it.

TIERNEY: [00:59:29] Yeah, that's right.

GANZGLASS: [00:59:30] That's good.

TIERNEY: [00:59:31] Yeah.

GANZGLASS: [00:59:31] So this has been a wonderful interview. Thank you so much.

TIERNEY: [00:59:35] Oh, you're very welcome.

GANZGLASS: [00:59:36] Anything else you'd like to add?

TIERNEY: [00:59:39] Uh, no, I think that's it. I think that's it. Peace Corps is still one of the best experiences I've ever had in my life. And, um, it still impacts who I am and how I do my life. And, uh, I'm very, very, very, very glad I made that decision as a young person.

GANZGLASS: [00:59:59] Great. So that's a perfect way to end.

[END OF INTERVIEW]