

**Henry Drewal Oral History Interview (Part 1)**  
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Administrative Information

**Creator:** Henry Drewal

**Interviewer:** Phyllis Noble

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**Biographical Note**

Henry Drewal served as a Peace Corps volunteer in Nigeria from 1964 to 1966 as a French and English teacher.

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Oral History Interview

with

Henry Drewal (Part 1)

September 11, 2014  
Madison, Wisconsin

By Phyllis Noble

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

NOBLE: [00:00:08] Today is September 11th, 2014. This is Phyllis Noble. I am interviewing Henry John Drewal, who was a Peace Corps volunteer in Nigeria from September of 1964 to August of 1966 in a secondary education project in which he was teaching French and English. Henry, tell us a little bit about what you were doing a year before you joined the Peace Corps. Let's go back to one year before.

DREWAL: [00:00:43] Trying to finish college.

NOBLE: And where was that?

DREWAL: I was at Hamilton College in upstate New York, near Clinton, New York. That's where I did my bachelors work and trying to decide what to make of my life.

NOBLE: [00:01:01] We stopped the tape recorder just to make sure it's picking up. Henry, let's go back. Where did you grow up?

DREWAL: [00:01:12] I grew up in first in Brooklyn, New York, in the part of Brooklyn known as Brownsville, and I was there for the first, what, eight, nine years of my life. And then we moved to Hempstead, on Long Island, where I finished grade school and high school and then went to Hamilton College in 1960 and into the Peace Corps in '64.

NOBLE: [00:01:44] And did you have a big family, siblings?

DREWAL: [00:01:49] It's a small family. I have one older sister who was three years older than me. We were a very close family. I loved my parents very much. They were very supportive in what I wanted to do, very encouraging all along the way.

NOBLE: [00:02:10] And did you travel with you, with your folks, as a kid?

DREWAL: [00:02:15] Yes, we traveled some on the East Coast and sometimes longer trips and but not a whole lot. We, in the summertime, we had there was a place that my grandparents had purchased in Monroe, New York. It was a kind of farm, an old farmhouse, and with a barn. So summers were spent there. So exploring a rural situation, out of Brooklyn and out of Homestead and, uh, but not so much traveling. And I became involved with social activities in the high school and some sports, some track and some tennis. I became the president of the student government at my high school, at Hempstead High School, and that led to my first international experience.

NOBLE: [00:03:18] Ah, what was that?

DREWAL: [00:03:20] It was a program run by the Herald Tribune, at that point, called the Herald Tribune Youth Forum. This was a program in which an essay contest identified winners from countries all around the globe. And those winners became the Herald Tribune Youth Forum people. They were the equivalent of seniors in high school, but some of them were maybe a year older than we were at that point. And these were extraordinary individuals,

all of them at the top of their generation in their countries. And they came to the New York metropolitan area and they had, um, homestays in two or three different communities and one on Long Island in Hempstead and other Long Island communities. And then they had a second homestead, homestay, I think in New Jersey. Well, being the president of the student government, I got to, me and my family, got to host one of those extraordinary students. And it turned out to be Peter Crone, who was representing West Germany at the time. He was from West Berlin. And he came and stayed with me and my family for a two week period.

DREWAL: [00:04:55] And I think that was my first eye-opening experience, eye-opening and mind-opening experience to the rest of the world. I think that was pretty much a typical New York suburban kid, high school kid. My world was my community and maybe sometimes trips to New York City, but those were special. They were not often, um, and Peter's presence, even though he was just a year older than me, his life experiences and his vision of the world was much broader than mine. I think I grew up a great deal in those two weeks that he was living with us. He actually introduced me to opera, which was one of his favorite things. Unfortunately, the first opera concert that we went to at the Metropolitan Opera was Wagner's Tristan and Isolde. So in fact, that killed opera for me. But at least it was an experience that opened my eyes and my ears to something new. And he was, he was very special. And the other fifty representatives of countries around the world were incredible.

NOBLE: [00:06:12] You got to meet some of them too?

DREWAL: [00:06:14] Yes, because we met as a group on two or three different kinds of occasions, those who were hosting, host families with the students. It was a marvelous program. And in fact, one of the other students was somebody who I fell in love with, an early love. But of course, she had to go back home and I had to stay home. And so it never went anywhere. But it was it was a great experience. And I think that was that was kind of the start of it. It showed me what the possibilities were. So in my, uh, so then I graduated from high school in '60, began as a student at Hamilton College. And in my freshman year.

NOBLE: [00:07:08] I need to interrupt you. Where is Hamilton College?

DREWAL: [00:07:11] Clinton, New York. It's upstate New York. It's a small liberal arts college. Very good. It was a very good school, kind of a monastic experience for me at that time because it was a small men's college. It's now coed, but then it was not. But it was a situation of serious work, you know, serious academic work and so on. And in my freshman year, I found out that Hempstead had a program called the Community Ambassador Program, which is run by the Experiment in International Living, which is now called World Learning. And so I applied to become Hempstead's ambassador overseas for a summer. And I won that position. And that was coming directly out of my experience with Peter and the Youth Forum. And so I represented my community, Hempstead, and I was assigned to go to France.

NOBLE: [00:08:23] At this point, you're 18 or 19 years old?

DREWAL: [00:08:25] Yeah, 17 or 18. Yeah, well, first year of college it would be 18, I guess probably 18, 19. And I had studied French in high school and was continuing to do it at Hamilton. So that was fine. So it was great. So I spent the summer of '61 in France living with a French family, traveling locally with my French brother. And we also did a kind of camping trip, all of us that were in our group, with our brothers, our French brothers and sisters, in the south of France. And we spent some time in Paris. Um, that summer, as you might remember, was the summer when the wall in Berlin was starting to be built. And I wanted to reconnect with Peter, who I had been keeping in touch with. So.

NOBLE: And he was in West Berlin?

DREWAL: [00:09:29] He was in West Berlin. Yeah. And so at a crucial moment in our program, when we were going back up to Paris and just for a final week to 10 days before returning to the States with the Experiment group, I went A-W-O-L. I went AWOL and I flew to West Berlin to see Peter and to see what was happening in Berlin.

NOBLE: [00:09:54] Yes, but you had finished pretty much your time?

DREWAL: [00:09:57] Yeah, pretty much. The program was finished and we were back just with our group. We had left our families and it was the last few days in Paris. But I decided to go to West Berlin to see what was happening.

NOBLE: [00:10:11] Did you folks know you were doing this?

DREWAL: [00:10:11] No, no. I told them afterwards and I got to see Peter. I stayed with him and his family. We saw the wall being built. And all of that was a kind of extension of that initial experience. So I came back and then continued my four years at Hamilton, majoring in French, because I came back speaking pretty well. And I also did other languages because I was interested in cultures, different cultures, I did Spanish and I did Russian. That was my roots journey because my family, my grandparents, had come from the Ukraine and from Belorussia and they self-identified as Russians.

NOBLE: [00:11:06] Your mother's people?

DREWAL: [00:11:07] And my father's people, both. My father's people from the Ukraine, but from eastern Ukraine, especially the area that's under duress right now and my mother's family from Belarus in that area between Russia and Poland. So I wanted to do that kind of tracing my own kind of roots. Came to the senior year in college and didn't really know what I wanted to do. I was being asked to engage or participate in interviews for jobs with companies and so on. And I went to one interview for Ma Bell as she was called at that time.

NOBLE: [00:12:00] Yes, AT&T.

DREWAL: [00:12:01] AT&T, and was offered an administrative position in New York City. Most of my classmates, many of them who came from boarding schools, private schools, were thinking of going into either their parents' business or business world or to become lawyers or to become doctors. That was not for me. That wasn't something I was interested in. And after the interview, I realized that that was not what I wanted to do. That's not

what I want to be. I had no interest in that. So I had been very much moved by JFK and the idealism of giving back to your country, you know, and contributing in some way. And I think that had a very strong impact on me. His assassination was a very powerful emotional moment.

NOBLE: [00:13:05] You were somewhere in Hamilton?

DREWAL: [00:13:07] I was at Hamilton, well, when the news came, actually, I was in Canada because I was visiting friends in Montreal with two of my classmates when the news came. And I was also taking a studio art course because in addition to languages, I minored in studio art, was a painter, a sculptor, because my father was a great craftsman. So I was keeping that interest going. And I remember the painting that I drew when I heard the news about it. It was an image, I don't think I have it anymore, but it was an image of great violence. And so I was very much moved by that and that stuck with me. So I think it was at that point that I decided to look into joining the Peace Corps, making some contribution, whatever I could. And somewhere in the world that, you know, I could learn.

NOBLE: [00:14:08] Did you have any friends? Did you know people who had been in the Peace Corps? Or who were going to do this?

DREWAL: No.

NOBLE: So you're all on your own.

DREWAL: [00:14:15] Yes, I was on my own. No, I went into it with very little knowledge or expectation.

NOBLE: [00:14:22] So you filled out an application while you were still an undergraduate at Hamilton?

DREWAL: [00:14:27] Yes. I think in that senior year, I don't remember when, but I seem to think it was kind of like early spring, maybe winter or early spring of '64.

NOBLE: [00:14:37] Hoping to be able to do something the following fall.

DREWAL: [00:14:42] Exactly. And so I was accepted into the Peace Corps and was told that I would be going to Ghana because they had just set up a French language program in their schools. And since Ghana is itself surrounded by Francophone speaking countries, as is Nigeria.

NOBLE: Yes.

DREWAL: [00:15:10] And so that was the plan. But then about two weeks, a week or two weeks before we were to go to our training, which I think was going to take place in D.C., I'm not really sure. I don't remember now where I got word that, in fact, I wasn't going to Ghana. The program had been canceled by the Ghanaian government and that we were changing to Nigeria. So I had to look both of those places up on the map, okay? And that was fine. And that my training program would be at Columbia University, at Teachers College, and that would be our training and preparation and we'd head to Nigeria in the fall. So that was fine.

NOBLE: [00:16:02] And so you tell your parents what you're planning to do. What was their reaction?

DREWAL: [00:16:11] They were supportive. They said if this is what you want to do, we're fully in support of you. That's always been the case from my folks, never discouraging. And I think I thrive best when I have supportive energies around me.

NOBLE: [00:16:34] And your friends? You're striking out on something so radically different from what they're choosing to do.

DREWAL: [00:16:43] Well, my closest friends at college were also people who were not bent on the professions, of doctors or lawyers or business executives. My posse, my group of friends at Hamilton, were people who were interested in the arts and were interested in doing something slightly different, a little bit against the grain.

NOBLE: [00:17:15] So they too would have been supportive.



DREWAL: Yeah.

NOBLE: Or found what you're doing very interesting.

DREWAL: [00:17:18] Yes, exactly. And the folks that were also majoring in French were, you know, interested in international affairs and in other cultures, in literature, in the arts, in the histories of other peoples. And that was where I felt most happy. So the Peace Corps was, you know, it was a kind of logical option for me at the time. And I was very happy that it was there because I also needed, I needed some time to decide what I wanted to do.

NOBLE: [00:17:52] Were you at all disappointed that you were being sent to an English speaking West African country instead of any one of those countries between Nigeria and Ghana or Cameroon?

DREWAL: [00:18:05] No, not at all, because I thought my training or knowledge of French would be helpful to people who were interested in teaching and having it taught to the new generations. And I understood it as Nigeria's policy to try to foster a kind of Pan African union or community and language was going to facilitate that. And I felt that I could help in that goal, which I felt was important for Africa at this moment of independence.

NOBLE: [00:18:48] So you don't travel across the country to do Peace Corps training. You're still in New York, although you're in Manhattan at Columbia.

DREWAL: Right.

NOBLE: And what was that like when you first arrived? Did you have, was it a big training group?

DREWAL: [00:19:04] It was. I don't know what the numbers were for Nigeria 11. You'll be able to find out. But it was a pretty large group and they were folks that were coming from all over the country, you know, and different universities. It was an education program. We were all pretty much going into secondary education or teacher training. Some people had more, maybe master's degrees or had certificates in education. And so some,

yeah, some were teaching teachers. But I was not. And I knew pretty early on that I was going to be, I don't remember exactly when we were told our assignments, because those kept shifting. But I think I knew fairly early on that I was going to be going to southwestern Nigeria, to Yoruba country.

NOBLE: [00:20:02] So were you being trained in the Yoruba language?

DREWAL: [00:20:05] Yes, we started Yoruba language studies done during the training program.

NOBLE: [00:20:13] Were you in small groups for languages?

DREWAL: [00:20:16] Yes. It wasn't intensive. It wasn't intensive enough because we were there. You know, we had lots of other things to do and New York City was a distraction.

NOBLE: [00:20:25] Well, I suppose so, yeah. But of course, it's not only language that you're studying, right?

DREWAL: Yeah.

NOBLE: But did you find that the language instruction was, although maybe there wasn't enough of it, was it good?

DREWAL: [00:20:36] It was good. It was good for what it was, for the short time that we had it. And I enjoyed learning languages. That was something that came with. So that was, I appreciated it very much.

NOBLE: [00:20:49] You had native speakers of Yoruba?

DREWAL: [00:20:51] Yes, we did and we had audio tapes I think. There was a Yoruba language program that had already been developed through the Peace Corps. And the training staff were great. In fact, I reconnected with two of the people on the staff who were themselves Peace Corps volunteers in Ghana, I think, and Sierra Leone earlier on, early groups.

NOBLE: [00:21:18] Do you remember their names?

DREWAL: [00:21:19] Well, one is Gary Schultz, who is still very active and just recently this past year got a chieftaincy title in Sierra Leone and is helping with this Ebola crisis right now.

NOBLE: Oh yeah.

DREWAL: So he's still very much the model of a volunteer who has this connection with other cultures and other people and trying to help in one way or another. And the other was John Fanselow, who was in education at that point, I think, in one of the first groups to Ghana, and the two of them became very close friends and mentors to me. And I tried to keep in touch with John Fanselow, I think, still lives and teaches in Japan and has for many, many years. Yeah, but he was, I think he was for a while a faculty member at Teachers College.

NOBLE: [00:22:17] At Columbia?

DREWAL: [00:22:17] Yeah, Columbia.

NOBLE: [00:22:18] So in addition to studying Yoruba language, what else what other things were covered in Peace Corps training?

DREWAL: [00:22:27] Well, I was learning about the politics of Nigeria and aspects of culture and what the culture of secondary school teaching was, what our expectations might be, how we might be most useful, that kind of thing. Um, it was just trying to immerse ourselves in the cultural world that we were going to be a part of.

NOBLE: [00:22:57] And teacher training?

DREWAL: [00:23:00] Teacher training. Yes, yes. Yes, we did that too. We had to teach a course. We had to do teaching demonstrations. And we were graded strictly on those for success or lack, lack thereof. And yeah. So that was an important part as well, because most of us were liberal arts graduates with no training in teaching. So that was a crucial element to it. And so that's the faculty at Teachers College, as well as those who are on

the teacher training program and the Peace Corps training program were wonderful professionals in that regard.

NOBLE: [00:23:41] Was there also a physical education component to this?

DREWAL: [00:23:46] Um, not that was, no. I mean, it was a minor part of it. And the funny thing about that element of the training program was that they were preparing us to participate as games masters at our schools.

NOBLE: And the games there.

DREWAL: [00:24:10] Yes. And the games there, of course. Well, in the elite schools of Nigeria still at that time, what was the major sport? Cricket. One afternoon they take us down to Riverside Park, set up a cricket pitch, and then try to teach us the rules and regulations of cricket in the anticipation that some of us might be asked to be coaches for the cricket team. And the same thing with soccer, with football, because that was also a big sport. So it was physical education, was brought into the training program in that way.

NOBLE: [00:24:56] Preparing you to be a teacher of it or a coordinator of sports.

DREWAL: [00:24:58] Right, right.

NOBLE: Not necessarily to get you physically fit.

DREWAL: Right. Not really, no. It was a New York City experience, you know.

NOBLE: [00:25:10] Some Peace Corps early programs had people doing Outward Bound survival exercises in Puerto Rico.

DREWAL: [00:25:16] No we didn't, you know, we just had to survive Manhattan.

NOBLE: [00:25:22] Yeah.

DREWAL: [00:25:24] Yeah.

NOBLE: [00:25:25] Um, and then, back then, most Peace Corps programs had the big ogre of deselection hanging over everybody's shoulders. Was that your experience, too, that they told you that only a certain, that there would be some fraction of your group that would not go over?

DREWAL: [00:25:43] Yes, it was kind of, yeah. It was kind of, you know, hovering, um, throughout the training program. And there were, of course, rumors going around about who was going to survive and who was going to be deselected and what some of the reasons for that might be.

NOBLE: [00:26:03] Did you have psychologists coming to interview you?

DREWAL: [00:26:05] Yes, as a matter of fact. I haven't thought about this in a long time, but I do remember that that was part of the selection, the so-called deselection process. Um, and I wasn't very happy about that. And I think I have to say that I had very mixed feelings about my identity as both an individual who has his own political and philosophical perspectives and those of my so-called, my government, okay?

NOBLE: Yes.

DREWAL: [00:26:44] That I, as a Peace Corps volunteer, was also representing my country. And over the years, the distance between my own political philosophy and approach to life and action is very, very different from that of my government. And it was starting to be that in the '60s during that time. So I had kind of mixed feelings about it, but I still felt that I could contribute something and that I would ultimately be judged as an individual by the people I was going to live with. And so I thought I could still do it, but I had mixed feelings.

NOBLE: [00:27:29] Although initially you have to be judged by the gate keepers.

DREWAL: [00:27:30] Right. I didn't appreciate that. That's right. I didn't appreciate that, because many of them were, you know, kind of, you know, representatives of government and of policies that I didn't agree with.

NOBLE: [00:27:44] Were there American studies as part of your training program kind of making it clear what you are to say about communism while abroad?

DREWAL: [00:27:58] Well, if they did discuss it, I ignored it, essentially. There wasn't much of that. We were mostly, what I put my emphasis and focus upon was learning as much as I could about the people and the place I was going to.

NOBLE: [00:28:17] So did training give you what you needed?

DREWAL: [00:28:22] Yeah, well, yeah. I mean yeah, it started to. I think they did what they could in the time that we had. And I remember that that summer of '64, um, what was taking place in another part of New York City? The World's Fair. And the World's Fair, which was in Queens, had a Nigerian pavilion. And so I with my family, went to visit it to learn some more about the place I was going to.

NOBLE: [00:28:54] And what did you see there?

DREWAL: [00:28:57] Well, you know, it was, what was it? It was food. It was, you know, presentation of food, the history. There were cultural performances, dances, music, and so on. Fashion. And there were displays of the products that were being made by Nigerians and something of its government and, you know, its face to the rest of the world as a newly independent nation.

NOBLE: [00:29:28] Did they present a particular culture, Nigerian culture, or were they attempting to be representative of several?

DREWAL: [00:29:35] Yeah, I think at that point, they were trying to represent maybe the three major groups, Yoruba, Hausa and Igbo, at that point. And talking about cultural diversity, but unity within, you know, the Nigerian nation and so on. So it was an interesting experience. And essentially some of my first encounters with Nigerians was at that World's Fair because before that time, I had no connection to Nigeria or Nigerians.

NOBLE: [00:30:12] So you had the fair in Queens, but you also had Nigerians as part of the training?

DREWAL: [00:30:18] Yes. Yes. They would come and present and language instruction. So, yes, of course. Yeah.

NOBLE: [00:30:25] So your training started in September of 1964?

DREWAL: [00:30:29] No, no, I started at the beginning of the summer. By August we were on our way to Nigeria. I don't remember the exact dates, but we arrived in Nigeria, I think it was in August, and those of us who were in the southwestern part of Nigeria went to Ibadan and we had some initial orientation there at the University of Ibadan and the Peace Corps office for the western region.

NOBLE: [00:31:00] Do you remember who some of those people were?

DREWAL: [00:31:02] Um, I've been trying to remember some of the names. So one of the women in the office was Alice, but I can't.

NOBLE: [00:31:11] Alice O'Grady.

DREWAL: Alice O'Grady, of course!

NOBLE: A friend of mine.

DREWAL: [00:31:15] Is that right? I loved Alice. Yeah, she was special. And the director at that point, I can't remember his name.

NOBLE: [00:31:24] It was a John, no. Oh, there was a Catholic priest whose name escapes me.

DREWAL: [00:31:33] They changed. Yeah. Well, I mean, they were very supportive. It was a good staff. And you know, we began our.

[END OF INTERVIEW PART 1]