

Myrtis Becker Justiniano Oral History Interview
Returned Peace Corps Volunteer Collection
Administrative Information

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Biographical Note

Myrtis Becker Justiniano served as a Peace Corps volunteer in Bolivia from 1962 to 1964 as a teacher trainer (Bolivia II).

Access

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Oral History Interview

with

Myrtis Becker Justiniano

June 19, 2012
Branson, Missouri

By Sharleen Simpson

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

SIMPSON: [00:00:03] This is June 19th, 2012, and this is Shirley Hirschi Simpson. And I am interviewing Myrtis Becker Justiniano, who was a Peace Corps volunteer in Bolivia in the Bolivia II project from 1962 to 1964. OK, now, Myrtis, would you think back to the year before, you know, you were going to join the Peace Corps and try to tell us what made you decide to go into the Peace Corps?

JUSTINIANO: [00:00:44] Well, let me go back a little further. Yeah, I'm Church of the Brethren and ah, we do a lot of service projects. In fact, Dan West, who was a member of our denomination, is a beginner of Heifer Project back in 1939 when he was involved in the Spanish Civil War. My father, after World War II, was very active in helping displaced persons from the war, personally signing for approximately 40 individuals and finding sponsors for another hundred people. I had gone to school, to college and had graduated and taught for years

when I decided to join our Brethren volunteer service. I spent two years in Germany working basically in a girls' refugee camp as these girls left East Germany and came into West Berlin and West Germany. Then I came back home and taught another half year and participated this summer of '61 in a Brethren work camp in Ecuador where we dug latrines and started surfacing for for catching the rainwater coming down. It was after that the Peace Corps was beginning and therefore I started to sign up.

JUSTINIANO: [00:02:05] I did not choose a place to go or when I did my application. But on May 10th of '62, which happened to be my birthday, I received a telegram asking me to report June 30th to Arizona State University for Bolivia II. My family and friends were not surprised at the time. To go on, we went on and we arrived at Arizona State University for training in Tempe. We lived under the stadium, it was not an easy life. I remember some people came in and took a look and walked right out the door again. We had lots of classes. We spent a month there and then a month on the Maricopa Indian Reservation, living in mobile homes and doing our training there with lots of classes. Language at that time was learning by repetition, and we spent a lot of time in our language classes. From there, we went to Puerto Rico, where we were at Mayaguez for more classes and then at Camp Crozier. My recollections of Camp Crozier was basically the rock climbing, the rappelling over the dam, survival swimming. And of course, the three day hike that we had to do. The basic things the sport taught us was we can do anything if we really try. One of our highlights was as we were ready to leave Puerto Rico and we're in the airport, Sargent Shriver happened to be sitting in the coffee shop.

JUSTINIANO: [00:03:42] And so we had our picture taken with him. We went home for home leave and then we reported to Miami on Monday. I don't remember the date, but our plane was plane flight was delayed for mechanical reasons. And we were told to go to our hotel rooms at seven o'clock and turn on the television. It was the night of Kennedy speech of the Cuban Missile Crisis. So, of course, Peace Corps didn't

know what to do with us. How was the world going to react? Also, there were teacher strikes going on in Bolivia. So the next day they shipped us out to the beach. But on Wednesday, they shipped us up to the Experiment in International Living, at Putney, Vermont. We were all very disappointed at this point because we were all geared up to go. And so finally, we asked for some language study and we got busy up there. A few weeks later, we finally did get to go to Bolivia. My assignment, because I was a trained teacher.

SIMPSON: [00:04:46] Can I ask you one question? So we're talking about the training and all this sort of adventure. Now, this wasn't necessarily new for you because you'd already done some of this kind of thing in with the Church of the Brethren, right?

JUSTINIANO: [00:05:03] Yes, but it wasn't the physical type training, it was more classes.

SIMPSON: Right. OK. OK, so think back when you first got to the country, to Bolivia, what was your first impression of it?

JUSTINIANO: [00:05:22] It wasn't that much different. It was like it was being used to being in another country and living in another country. Of course, it was more third world than Europe had been, even though I had lived under some other circumstances in Germany of the whole climate, the whole agricultural aspect was quite different. And the landscape and let me say it that way. And the people.

SIMPSON: [00:05:48] OK, so then once you got, then talk a little bit about what you ended up, where you ended up going in Bolivia and what you were going to do.

JUSTINIANO: [00:06:01] OK, because I had been a trained teacher, I was asked to work with the rural schools. I was assigned to live out in Mineros. Mineros was a town north of Santa Cruz. There was a school there, a *nucleo* school which had kindergarten through sixth grade, which had

been my Point Four and the comparison is that most of the schools, little rural schools, were only first and second grade. The children got of course, Spanish is a very phonetical language. So with the first and second grade education, they could basically read and write. My job was to inspire them, shall we say, to improve their education kind of work. As a consultant, I tried to encourage them to make teaching supplies as they had very little. But at the same time it was hard for them to spend money because they weren't going to make any more money as they did a better job.

JUSTINIANO: [00:07:04] I really found that my best work was through the director of the school, Eusébio Justiniano, who later became my husband. He was very receptive to new ideas and he had the authority and respect of the teachers to get these ideas across to them. I lived in a house that had been built by Point Four. There were, I think, two or three houses that behind the *nucleo* school there were two room houses, one of them being kind of a living room, dining room, kitchen, and the other being a bedroom. Of course, the other part was we had a little tree and the shower was over behind the school. It was an enclosed shower located below the windmill. The windmill would pump the water and you could shower, of course, on a very hot day and know when I would get somebody to climb up and turn the windmill in order to shower. We ate meals in town, so we had contacts with the local people, did many activities with them, going to movies, sitting out in front of the homes and visiting, going to parties offices and took part in the other activities that we do now. At the same time that I was basically working with teaching, Lunelle was busy working with health and nutrition.

SIMPSON: That was Lunelle Self?

JUSTINIANO: [00:08:31] Yes, correct, I'm sorry. We would travel out to the outside of the neighboring schools, which were those persons which only had first and second grade. There were probably about 15 schools, maybe two. I don't remember the number and she would have classes in health

and nutrition. I do remember we had a latrine contest at one time getting the people in the village to build their own latrines. It was interesting to see sizes and what they what they ended up doing, different, different and different ideas about what it is, how it should be. But it was the idea was that they were improving their health. This way, I had to laugh because many of the other volunteers would like to go shopping with me. I had Spanish in high school, but it wasn't that much. But I had a way of walking around. If I didn't know that word, I had a way of working around explaining what I wanted by what I did with it. And they seemed to enjoy that. I do remember specifically a couple projects where we had this kindergarten children making calls, and I had been very active in a workshop type of activity with the teachers making different teaching materials. Of course, we were in Bolivia at the time of Kennedy's assassination. I happened to have developed an eye infection, was at the eye doctor that day. And as I came out of the inner office, somebody said, oh, Kennedy had been shot. And I thought, oh, they don't know what they're talking about. But as I walked down to the plaza, there, of course, were always the men with their suitcase, like supplies of candy, gum, cigarettes, et cetera, sitting on their stands outside the post office.

JUSTINIANO: [00:10:25] And as I walked by, one of those I heard on a radio play, I do solemnly promise to perform the duties of president of the United States, which was Lyndon Johnson taking the oath of presidency. So that I knew it was accurate. Wasn't too long after that, that we had a conference in Cochabamba where the other half of our Peace Corps group was. And we were told that out in one of the villages, they were going to have a mass in Kennedy's honor. So I, along with two or three others, decided that we should go to represent the United States. The only problem was that they treated us like family, set us in the front of the church. They had a box covered with black cloth as if it was the coffin and we had mass. This was a little hard on me not being Catholic, being on my knees that long, but we got through it. So do you have any other questions at this time?

SIMPSON: [00:11:25] Well, other than what happened, how did what was your reaction to that assassination, being a volunteer?

JUSTINIANO: [00:11:35] Well, we saw how the people and Latin America revere him because he had finally given attention to Latin America attention that had not been done before. And people in the village offered us their condolences right away. And we were like family to him. We were treated that way by that.

SIMPSON: [00:12:02] Well, yeah. One of the things that I have been trying to get people to talk about a little bit is any kind of specifically notable events that we mentioned, the assassination. And what other kinds of things stand out in your mind during your experience there as a volunteer?

JUSTINIANO: [00:12:29] Well, I guess it was mainly the friendliness and the being friends with the people were the main things. I really felt like that I was part of them. Well, and of course, part of this happened, too, because I became engaged to the director and eventually married him before I had finished my Peace Corps volunteer so that I was really part of the community and really felt like I was. To go on then, as far as my Peace Corps experience was, I really felt that I had done my best work through him because he could get done. And but and then the other part was that I had become very, very good friends with people there. After Peace Corps was over, I remained in and Bolivia and Santa Cruz. I stayed on and taught at the Santa Cruz Co-op School, which was located west of town, starting towards the road to Cochabamba, and it was located behind the Gulf Oil company offices complex. Gulf Oil had been there and had it subsidy, its contracting companies, I should say, underneath them.

JUSTINIANO: [00:13:45] And had started this school for their employees and their and children of their company, as well as the contracting company, but they had also included very many Bolivians who were basically many of them were paying ones, but they also had scholarship Bolivians there. The curriculum was in English and I was there at the time and

happened to see the actual nationalization of the Gulf Oil company. I happened to beg down at the office shortly before lunch that day, and the secretary got a phone call and she had an odd look on her face. And I being concerned, having two small children at home, which I had at that time, was concerned. And she said, come with me. And we went out on the patio. And as we stood there, we saw the soldiers come into the Gulf Oil complex and the noon bell rang this where they were there before the men had taken the vehicles home for lunch. And so all the vehicles were there. Within a week's time, all of Gulf Oil employees were out of the country except for four men. So the school was left in pretty, of course, and we lost the children, too. But I stepped in and helped in and directed the school for a time. And until we got it back on its feet, we had a couple of the teachers who some of the teachers basically were contracted through Gulf Oil has come down and they were sent home, too.

JUSTINIANO: [00:15:19] But we had a couple who hadn't been paid for the full year, even though they had taught it came down, it would teach for us. Again, as I mentioned earlier, I had two children at this time. They were born there and we had built a home there.

SIMPSON: What was the experience like having your kids in Bolivia?

JUSTINIANO: Health wise, you mean?

SIMPSON: Well, and the experience of just having a baby in Bolivia, that was always a concern.

JUSTINIANO: [00:15:47] Well, I happen to have both of mine Caesarean. I had had some corrective surgery before Kendall was born and the doctor thought it was best to take him a little early. And then my daughter was born Caesarean. Also, when Emily was born, it was very hard because there was a woman who had not healed properly down the hall and her family was coming to visit her. And so I got them to release me from the hospital a little bit early because that was not a good experience to

be there at that time. I continued to teach at Santa Cruz School until '73. We had also had a hook up with the Office of Overseas Schools and had had a connection with University of Arkansas, had had some teachers down and I had been home the summer of '72. And so in '73 I decided to bring the children home. I wanted them to experience winter. I wanted them to know that my parents, and I was working on my master's through the University of Arkansas after I got home and took a good look at the schools of the States, there was no way I could think of taking my children back, even though our school was very good down there.

JUSTINIANO: [00:17:00] It didn't start to compare to what we had, the opportunities that are available here in the States. And so we stayed up here. My husband was not interested in coming up, so I continued to teach. For twenty years I had gotten my foot in the door teaching. That was an important thing to do at that time. It wasn't that easy. And I retired from teaching in '93. I currently live in a retirement community. I love it there. I am very active in volunteer opportunities there on campus. My community has approximately eleven hundred people in it and I live in an independent manner with approximately two hundred people. So I'm very active. I guess I try to serve people as much as I can as I need it and she needs.

SIMPSON: [00:17:52] Well, think back. What really do you think over the period of time now that you're, it's been a while since you've been out. What exactly do you think you got out of the Peace Corps experience?

JUSTINIANO: [00:18:08] Well, I think I grew as an individual with understanding of other people. There's circumstances try not to be critical of their circumstances. We all we all build our lives the way it happens to occur. We all make choices and our choices guide where we go. I don't always agree with choices other people make, but that's their lives. And they have that right to do that. And I've made many choices that I feel are good. I might mention that I also have developed a very good love for needlepoint and I have gotten. I recently and caveating and I'm

very active in a couple of the girls of this nature and as well as my activities on campus.

SIMPSON: [00:18:55] So overall it was kind of a life changing experience for you, wasn't it?

JUSTINIANO: [00:18:59] Yes, it was. It was. And I got two wonderful children out of it. And that's a blessing.

SIMPSON: [00:19:06] Yeah. Yeah. OK, so if you if you were back at 30, again, thinking about what to do, would you do it again?

JUSTINIANO: [00:19:15] Yes, I would. I would. There's a need for this in the world. Sometimes I wish I were younger and had more energy again and to do it, but I do what I can as I'm able sure it. Was there any experience that was not pleasant that you remember particularly? Not really that really. I think we tend to forget those and zero in on the good.

SIMPSON: [00:19:44] Did you experience Carnival while you were there?

JUSTINIANO: [00:19:47] Yes, not to a great extent. I did not travel a whole lot. I was good friends with June and Clyde Wolf who were in charge of the Cochabamba group, and I spent many of my vacations visiting them because it was like visiting family.

JUSTINIANO: [00:20:03] I had known them back at Manchester College when I was a student, and so I only experienced Carnival at the Santa Cruz level, which of course is nothing compared to the other big cities in that. And it wasn't that important to us.

SIMPSON: [00:20:22] Yeah, well, there were there were a lot of things that went on. Did you get to see much of Bolivia while you were there?

JUSTINIANO: [00:20:29] No, I didn't see a whole lot of it I guess.

SIMPSON: [00:20:33] You almost became Bolivian, didn't you?

JUSTINIANO: [00:20:35] Yes, I did. In fact, I had a Bolivian driver's license later and I had a Bolivian car name identification, which I'm not sure I should have had. You worry about that as an American citizen. I might say that when my children were born, I immediately had American passports for them and reported their birth so that they had two birth certificates, one from the embassy down there for American birth overseas, I think it was called, as well as their Bolivian.

SIMPSON: [00:21:02] I was wondering about that because when I took my kids to Costa Rica, when they were little, I mean, I had to take all kind of documentation to prove that they were my kids and I wanted to take them.

JUSTINIANO: [00:21:12] And I had had the advice of a Gulf Oil friend who said get individual passports for them because she said if you're ever in an accident and one of them needs to travel to the states for medical reasons, they need their own passport.

JUSTINIANO: [00:21:27] Don't put them on your own, your passport. And so I had done that as small children. It was interesting also, we were told at the time that they would be considered dual citizens, but if between the ages of 15 and 25, they said that in five years consecutively in the States, that they would be considered by Bolivia as American citizens. My daughter currently is involved in the Air Force and at one point she said to me, Mom, what am I? And I told her this. And I have never heard anything otherwise. So I'm sure everything went OK because she had to prove her American citizenship.

SIMPSON: [00:22:03] Yeah, so that's good. OK, do you have any other observations that you would like to me?

JUSTINIANO: [00:22:15] I don't think so. I just think that Peace Corps is a very good thing. I'm glad to see them having changed it from all the training that

we did in country here in the United States, going through all the psychological testing, et cetera, et cetera, that I think they're very smart to send them overseas and let them get saturated with the language rather than learning it by repetition, as we did with those recordings. I think the youth of today need this challenge of this the same as we did at the time that we were inspired by John Kennedy.

JUSTINIANO: [00:22:52] And that's really what it was an inspiration to, to as he said, there's not much you can do for you, what your country can do for you, but what you can do for your country. And I agree with that. In fact, I had that I happen to visit the Boston area once and bought a magnet which hangs on my refrigerator with that statement on it, because it was very significant for those of us who were early days of Peace Corps.

SIMPSON: [00:23:18] For me, I know that was a very traumatic time for me when I heard that he had been assassinated. Somehow you never did think that that kind of thing would happen to your country, in your country. You expected in Latin America, but, you know. So, what are your kids, they spent a lot of time in Bolivia. Do they regard that as a positive experience?

JUSTINIANO: [00:23:47] Well, they were four and five when I brought the whole, so they were little, but I did take them back the Christmas that they were a junior and senior in high school for Christmas. I felt it was important that I introduced them to half of their heritage as basically adults and figured that then it was up to them to do what they wanted to do with it. They really haven't done much. It was nice that visit because their grandmother was still living, who said I'll never see them again when I took them away earlier and their father was still living at that time. So it was a very significant visit, but they really haven't done much with it since. But they that door is always open for them.

SIMPSON: [00:24:28] Right. And I assume that you don't regret taking them out at that time?

JUSTINIANO: [00:24:31] No. No, I didn't. Originally, I did not divorce because we had a home there. But once you had to sell the house, I decided to the first time I want to start divorce papers. I was concerned for their safety because I knew if he wanted to get upset, he could take them anywhere in the country and I'd never find them. And so the first trip down, I did not take the children with me. And then the divorce was finalized on that trip at Christmas. So I know my daughter was very upset at the time that I didn't take him the first time. I was more concerned for my son because he was getting to the age where he would have been qualified for military service in Bolivia. And so I was more concerned for him. Plus, the divorce laws in Bolivia say a boy goes with the father. And so I was concerned at that time.

SIMPSON: [00:25:22] Well, do you have anything else that you would like to add?

JUSTINIANO: [00:25:26] I don't believe so at this time.

SIMPSON: [00:25:29] All right. Well, thank you, Myrt. That was very interesting. I'm going to stop this now.

[END OF INTERVIEW]