

Sandra Wilcox Oral History Interview
Returned Peace Corps Volunteer Collection
Administrative Information

Creator: Sandra Wilcox
Interviewer: Evelyn Ganzglass
Date of Interview: December 13, 2015
Location of Interview: Chevy Chase, Maryland
Length: 29 pages

Biographical Note

Sandra Wilcox served as a Peace Corps volunteer in Ecuador from 1971 to 1974 on nutrition education and community development projects.

Access

Open.

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Suggested Citation

Sandra Wilcox, recorded interview by Evelyn Ganzglass, December 13, 2015, page #, Returned Peace Corps Volunteer Collection, John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum.

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Oral History Interview

with

Sandra Wilcox

December 13, 2015
Chevy Chase, Maryland

By Evelyn Ganzglass

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

GANZGLASS: [00:00:02] This is Evelyn Ganzglass, and I'm interviewing Sandra Wilcox. Sandra Wilcox was a volunteer in Ecuador from 1971 to 1974 and she became a trainer, which I'm sure she will tell us about, from October '74 to June of '75. So with that little introduction, why don't we start? The first question is always why did you join the Peace Corps? Well, how did you find out about it and why did you decide to join?

WILCOX: [00:00:37] I think mainly, probably like a lot of people, it was a very popular thing to do. When I joined in the early seventies, late sixties, everybody knew about it. And I had spent some time working on development projects in Central America in high school and in college with a Texas youth group. By happenstance, the father of a friend of mine was involved with it, he was a surgeon and had been asked to go down. And these were, they used kids our age to run clinics in these little aldeas, little towns. Immunizations and first aid, and then doctors and dentists. The boys were driving doctors and dentists that would

come around for short periods. And it was a great introduction and I decided I really liked Latin America. That and later I did a semester in Mexico studying, because I studied anthropology, and so I was always interested in cultures in South America. So I said, I want to.

GANZGLASS: [00:01:40] And you spoke Spanish I assume?

WILCOX: [00:01:42] Yeah. And the thing was, I wanted to go to South America. And so when I applied, they were going to send me. I wanted to go to a Spanish speaking country and they sent me to. The invitation was for Brazil. Now I could kick myself because I should have gone. But at the time I turned it down and I went and I worked for an anthropologist at the Smithsonian for about a year. And while I was there, I got another invitation, but this time for Liberia. So I was talking to my neighbor, who had been a volunteer, one of the first volunteers in Ethiopia, and he just said, why don't you just call the Peace Corps office and tell them what you're interested in and see what they can do? So I called them, and the next invitation I got was for Ecuador. So I accepted it, and then I went at the end of, well, it was summer for training and then went to Ecuador at the end of '71.

GANZGLASS: [00:02:30] So you really didn't need language training by the time you got into the Peace Corps.

WILCOX: [00:02:35] Well, I needed some, but I was. It was a very funny circumstance when we got to the training center in Puerto Rico. They told us that, you know, they gave us some money and assigned us to neighborhoods and said, OK, go find a place to live. And I wound up helping a lot of volunteers find places to live because I spoke more Spanish than they did and they were a little intimidated. And I had sort of felt with my limited experience in Honduras with these projects, that I was pretty comfortable going to these neighborhoods. Although I have to tell you that one time I went with a young man who was from Colorado, but I don't think he spoke any Spanish and he was kind of nervous. And so I said I'd go with him. And we went to this town and I looked for the priest and somebody who could help with the community and people showed us.

WILCOX: [00:03:32] But when we left, there were two boys following us and one of them grabbed my purse. And so we wound up on the road with this big tug of war and I'm yelling at them. I was just, I was so mad that they would do this, and I'm yelling and I didn't even consider that it might be dangerous. And I looked and they had knives and stuff. And I yanked and yanked and I started yelling it and I said, what do you think you're doing? You know, I have nothing. I have no money in here and I have all my information. Now I'm going to give it to you? Why am I going to give that to you? Now give it back! And so I took it back and I was still yelling at him and I said.

GANZGLASS: [00:04:03] This is in Puerto Rico?

WILCOX: [00:04:04] Yeah, in Puerto Rico. And he said, what do you want? And they said, *un beso*, a kiss. And I said, right, I'm going to kiss some guy who has knives and tried to steal my purse, so they put the knives away. And we chatted and then we went on. And later Mike told me he became quite good friends with these guys when he moved into the village.

GANZGLASS: [00:04:23] Really funny story. So you were clearly equipped to go in. And what did your friends and family say about you going into Peace Corps? Or was it just accepted?

WILCOX: [00:04:33] Yeah, pretty much. You know, it was kind of the thing to do, and my father had had us. He was sort of a jack of all trades. He did real estate and did this and that. But he was also a professional photographer and was teaching at an institute in Santa Barbara where we grew up. And he always was kind of traveling. He was from the northwest and every summer we would go up. Originally he had a sailboat. He had been recalled in the Navy when I was little and we lived in Italy. He brought a sailboat back and we traveled in the summers up there, and then they eventually bought a place up on an island and very remote, you know, took a while to get there. And I got used to latrines and lanterns and things up there. So for them, you

know, well, Peace Corps was OK, you know, it should be an adventure. Sounds interesting. So they.

GANZGLASS: [00:05:26] Why not? And you had been working for a couple of years after college before you went in.

WILCOX: [00:05:31] Yeah. And then the other interesting thing was when I was in Peace Corps training, I wound up with living with a little old lady that someone told me about was desperately looking for someone to live with them. So at this point, I've been helping everybody else, so I didn't have anywhere. So I went to that place and this lady was very nice. But she was very traditional and very much believed in *espiritismo*, which was a spirit belief. And one day I woke up and I was really feverish and I asked for blankets. And here it is, boiling hot. And she got worried and she called the Peace Corps office, said, I don't want a sick person in my house. It's a.

GANZGLASS: [00:06:11] Bad spirit.

WILCOX: [00:06:11] Yeah. So they transferred me to a residencia hotel near the office and it turned out I had measles, which I had never had. And so I sort of recovered. But then we were all moving in country. Well, my parents were in Miami. They had bought a boat and they were traveling around the Caribbean. And so I said, well, can I spend some time there before I go down? So I did. I spent a few days sort of recovering there and then went down, so I arrived a little late. But so my parents were kind of used to.

GANZGLASS: [00:06:44] That's interesting. So what else happened in training? You talked about living with families and just having to find a place? Yeah, but what was your formal, I guess what did you do? And let me back up. What did you do in the Peace Corps and how was the training for that? What was your job in the Peace Corps?

WILCOX: [00:07:02] OK. The Peace Corps training that we did in Puerto Rico was just language training, and we had that all day long. Now, interestingly, we were the first group of women to be going to Ecuador.

There were seven of us. We called ourselves the Magnificent Seven. And we, you know, we didn't have any training there. We were trained when we went to Ecuador to work with a Caritas program doing nutrition education. And the only nutritionist in the country who had been sent by AID, I think, to Chile to study nutrition. Or she'd studied nutrition in Chile and then AID sent her for more advanced degrees. Was the only nutritionist in the country, and she trained us. She worked for Caritas, and she was quite a bundle of energy and very frustrated with Caritas. But they trained, you know, she gave us basic training on basic nutrition and growth monitoring and things that are now pretty standard. But that was.

GANZGLASS: [00:08:05] So the training. That's very different than our training. So your training was all language before you came in country and then the specifics. And was your whole group nutrition?

WILCOX: [00:08:19] Just the women.

GANZGLASS: [00:08:20] Just the women. What did the men do?

WILCOX: [00:08:23] They went off to their sites, and I don't know how much training they got. You know, a lot of them.

GANZGLASS: [00:08:28] What was their job?

WILCOX: [00:08:30] There were different jobs. Some were doing agricultural development, some were doing construction, and some were doing what they call community development, which is pretty popular. And then, you know, some worked in small business development, tourism and things like that. And some, what this one friend that I can tell you about up here in Rockville, he was a media person and stayed in the Peace Corps office doing a lot of media stuff.

GANZGLASS: [00:08:57] Totally different things. And then where did you do your nutrition counseling?

WILCOX: [00:09:03] That was in Quito.

GANZGLASS: [00:09:06] So you were stationed in Quito?

WILCOX: [00:09:08] No, I wasn't. The work itself was in Riobamba. We decided when we were in country where we were going to go. And I went to Riobamba, which was. R-I-O-B-A-M-B-A. It's a provincial capital in the mountains about four hours from Quito then, now it's probably a lot less because the place has developed a lot, but it was four hours by bus. And it was in the mountains, beautiful area and town. And the thing that interested me and I think a lot of other volunteers was it was one of the areas. This was a time when the theology of liberation was a big deal in South America, and the bishop in Riobamba was known to be a big progressive theology of liberation bishop. And he actually had sort of a training center there. And a lot of priests and nuns from different areas would come there to study with him, and he was also very active. They were going, the country was going through a lot of agrarian reform at the time. So it was an area where a lot of battles were going on with, especially where we were the blue bloods and then the campesinos were kind of at odds in terms of getting the land distributed because the law had been passed.

GANZGLASS: [00:10:34] Was there a formal process for doing that?

WILCOX: [00:10:36] There was, and interestingly, the lawyer that was in charge of it for our region was married to an ex-Peace Corps volunteer from Montana, who had, they had gotten married and been in Ecuador for a while and then got back to the States. But she said they wound up working as. She was from Montana. She said they wound up working at a school as a couple, you know, because he obviously couldn't practice law up here. So they eventually came back to Ecuador with their five kids or whatever it was, and he had this job there managing the land reform process. But it was very political, as you can imagine, and the powerful entities around Riobamba, which had main landholders, were putting a lot of pressure on him and others not to, you know, to slow this process.

WILCOX: [00:11:29] And the bishop, in the meantime, was very actively educating a lot of the campesinos about their rights and the process. And several volunteers in the area were very involved in educating them as well and working with an organization that the bishop founded there to educate the communities and how they can go ahead and claim their rights. But it's a court process, and it was very complicated, and a lot of times the peasants didn't get it, and so it became very frustrating but, you know.

GANZGLASS: [00:12:02] So the landowners kept the land basically?

WILCOX: [00:12:05] They kept a lot of it. I mean, it eventually gradually got transferred, but it was a long process and it wasn't very easy. I remember a lot of times volunteers coming back and saying they'd gone to court and they had worked with the campesinos and explained their rights. And they were yes. And there was a great game that one of the trainers came up with, like Monopoly, that explained it. And the campesinos loved it. And so they had thought they'd educated them and explain the process and what they had to do. But the minute they would go into the courtroom and the landowner would come in and talk to them like they were his children and convince them that this wasn't what they needed to do, and they'd go, *si patrón, si patrón*. So it was a slow process. And one of the things the bishop was very good about was really showing. He knew how to kind of talk to them and convince them what was right and be behind them.

GANZGLASS: [00:13:01] The landowners, did they take out after the bishop?

WILCOX: [00:13:04] Oh yeah, oh yeah. There were, you know, a lot of instances. And there was, one issue was they had wanted a new cathedral. And the bishop said, well, um, I can maybe do this, but it'll mean maybe what I have to do is sell this school or do away with the school. You know, it's not being used anymore, and use that money to then build a cathedral. So he wrote to Rome and Rome wrote back and said, no, if you do something with the school, you have to put something like it in its place. You can't just transfer it to a cathedral. So then one day while he was gone, the town got together and tore down the old cathedral,

except for the facade. So he just built a little chapel, which was lovely not quite what they had in mind.

GANZGLASS: [00:13:56] That was all that left. So come back to your nutrition program. How did that fit into this whole process?

WILCOX: [00:14:06] It was basically working with Caritas, which was, you know, a Catholic NGO there that received Food for Peace money and food, um, food supplements to distribute to people in the communities. And it was, you know, like flour and oil and some other food items that were given, basic food staples. And the point that the nutritionist tried to make was that we needed to, you know, that they had basic food. They had a lot of potatoes usually in these areas, but they needed more protein and more vitamins. So the idea was to educate them more about vegetables and fruits and also figure out ways that they could mix grains and carbs to form complete proteins.

WILCOX: [00:15:08] So it got a little complicated, but you know, and we'd go. Caritas had women's groups all over, so we'd go and we'd educate about that, and then sometimes set up growth monitoring for the babies. And the problem was, in my area the Caritas fellow was very dynamic and very good. But unfortunately, after about a year there, he, um, and I would go with him because I wasn't quite sure how this was, how to organize everything. But after about a year there, USAID or somebody at Caritas had an audit of all programs and he had money that was missing. They think maybe he loaned it to someone or who knows what, because he was a very dedicated man. And they thought maybe his family was in trouble and he planned to pay it back, but whatever. Anyway, it was missing and he was gone. So that was kind of the end of my work there.

WILCOX: [00:16:03] And then I started working with the community development volunteers in the communities, talking to women about education. And then there was an NGO there set up by the bishop and I, they wanted education about nutrition and so different groups that I found.

GANZGLASS: [00:16:19] Did you think you were prepared to do that? Did you learn enough nutrition?

WILCOX: [00:16:23] For what they needed, yeah, the basic. I think where I wasn't real prepared was how to organize the communities and how to set things up in the communities. And that was what I was counting on Caritas to help with. That kind of fell apart. But anyway.

GANZGLASS: [00:16:39] And then this other volunteer group, that was another formal group? I forgot, you mentioned the name. That after he left, you joined another volunteer group.

WILCOX: [00:16:48] No, it was another. It was just a loose knit group of volunteers who worked in community development, you know, with different communities. There were a couple of communities that volunteers had been going to for a long time. And then around them where others and so they went out all the time and worked with the communities, helping them get bridges built or community structures that are just helping the community. A big problem was, for example, they had a cooperative and they would alternate which family or man in the family would manage the cooperative for a month or something. And the problem was that they weren't real good at math, so they'd mess up the money and then everybody'd get real mad. So the volunteers, we, you know, we kind of helped with that and various things and just trying to get them more organized.

GANZGLASS: [00:17:45] So do you think you had an impact?

WILCOX: [00:17:48] Yeah, I think there was. But I think also the country developed as years went on. I mean, I went back.

GANZGLASS: [00:17:55] Because of or regardless of?

WILCOX: [00:17:58] I think it helped. I mean, I always think it helps with the ideas. And, you know, you can probably point to people who had an impact, you know, because they did things in the community and the community woke up and then they pressured the local government for

more. And those kinds of things happened. Um, but I think it also helped that the country itself was developing.

GANZGLASS: [00:18:23] Yeah.

WILCOX: [00:18:23] So I think it was both. I just, I remember going back. When was it? I think late '80s. I remember going back for a visit, and I was so struck by the changes. The communities were still out there, but they now had water and they had electricity and the kids were all getting educated. I mean, they were still in these little communities and their chozas and things like that, but the kids probably were not going to stay and they were going to the city afterwards. But yeah, they. There's one volunteer in our group who was always very close to them, and he teaches now at the University of Utah. But he goes down every summer just about and stays in touch with the families and will often send money and stuff.

WILCOX: [00:19:17] Because this one family that we worked really closely with, Elena, she, her husband, who was the community leader for a long time. It's so funny. He was real short and she was really tall, and it turned out she had been the product of a rape between her mother and the hacienda owner, and she looked just like the hacienda owner. She was tall and blond and light skinned and so forth and he was so proud of her because of her bloodline. And it was just so funny, you know, for us to think about that and she was quite.

GANZGLASS: [00:19:53] And she was blond, right?

WILCOX: [00:19:55] Yeah. And she was quite admired in the community. So but anyway, he died sometime when we were in Bolivia. So that would have been in the early '90s. He was cutting down a tree or something and died. And so Joel has continued to go down and send money and things like that to the family. Although when I went, as I said, I was astounded at how well all the kids are doing.

GANZGLASS: [00:20:18] Well, talk a little bit about what the community was like, because you said by that time they had water and electricity suggesting that they didn't when you were there.

WILCOX: [00:20:27] No, no. When we were there, you know, you'd walk in for a ways and it was a scattered rural community basically. There was like a little place where they would meet. But yeah, they, um, it was rural and there was no water. There was no electricity and it was an evangelical community. These both were. And there was another one in Colta Lake, another area where we worked in other areas. And so there were a lot of them were evangelical. And the difference there was, the volunteers used to say. The difference with the evangelicals is the Catholic community still drank, and the evangelicals came in and convinced them not to drink and not to smoke and to save their money and so forth. And so the Protestant ethic had taken root a little bit more with these communities, and they were a little bit more open to change. And their houses, they would copy the missionaries and so their houses would have, they'd have these little mud houses and then they'd have tin roofs. But that they liked.

WILCOX: [00:21:38] But it was, you know, I think they made a lot of progress, although we worked in another area too. I think those were Catholic communities up in San Juan, another area going up there and um. Yeah, and people were pretty responsible, you know.

GANZGLASS: [00:21:57] Well, before we, I'd love to pursue the Catholic Protestant part, but just talk about the kind of house you lived in. How did you get water and how did you?

WILCOX: [00:22:08] OK, I lived in the city.

GANZGLASS: [00:22:10] Did you have a lantern to read by night or how did?

WILCOX: [00:22:14] I lived in the city, so we did have electricity and water.

GANZGLASS: [00:22:17] What city did you live in?

WILCOX: [00:22:18] Riobamba.

GANZGLASS: [00:22:20] Oh, Riobamba.

WILCOX: [00:22:21] Yeah, it's Chimborazo province. But yeah, this city, and it was the provincial capital city. So I had, um, when I was first, I lived with some volunteers in a house and then I moved somewhere. I moved to some other volunteers and then I had my own house. Somebody left and I had my own house. Until I was away, I got meningitis and was shipped to the States, and while I was away, they broke in and stole a bunch of things. So then I wound up living with a Belgian woman who was working with this NGO that the church had started and we lived over by the train station in an apartment there. And I think was that the last place? There may have been one other place I lived after that, but various apartments in the town.

GANZGLASS: [00:23:14] So you had electricity and water?

WILCOX: [00:23:17] Yeah.

GANZGLASS: [00:23:18] How did the people in the towns get water? Rainwater? Or what did?

WILCOX: [00:23:22] No, there was a water system they had.

GANZGLASS: [00:23:24] No, no. I mean in the villages.

WILCOX: [00:23:26] Oh, in the villages there would usually be a well or rivers. You know, there was a river near the place I was talking about, where people would go down and get water in jugs and bring it back up.

GANZGLASS: [00:23:39] How did you get meningitis?

WILCOX: [00:23:42] Good question. I don't know, but I think it was. You know, it was going on for a while and we couldn't figure it out until one day I was back and I scratched. There was something on my eyebrow that had bothered me, but I kept looking and couldn't see it. And I finally

dug around it and pulled out a tick. And then I got it again, this moving paralysis and everything. And then I get a terrible headache. And the next day I managed to get ahold of some neighboring volunteers who drove me to Quito and then they said, OK, we're sending you to the States. Because I'd been up there once and they'd done testing and they knew it was a viral meningitis, but thought it was OK and didn't realize it was still going on.

GANZGLASS: [00:24:18] But it might have been from a tick.

WILCOX: [00:24:19] Yeah, and once I got rid of the tick, then that was it, even though I went to the States and went through a million more tests. But at that point they wanted to send me home because I was near the end of my second year. It was probably in the fall and I didn't want to go back yet. I felt like I had people in Ecuador and just didn't want to up and leave. And so the agreement was that if I extended, the director said, if I'll extend six months, maybe that would work.

GANZGLASS: [00:24:46] So that's how you ended up being a trainer?

WILCOX: [00:24:49] Well, I extended six months and then after that, this friend of mine, who was a volunteer in Loja, said she'd been talking to the director about doing training, and we decided we'd like to do it. So we, you know, we went ahead and did that after.

GANZGLASS: [00:25:03] So let's go to that next. So you are both staff and volunteer. Could you reflect a little bit about the differences. Or how did being a volunteer impact on your training?

WILCOX: [00:25:17] Yeah, I think the problem was, I think we were really more like volunteers with the set. What happened was they had brought the training in country and I think, you know, and they had hired local Ecuadorian organization to do the training.

GANZGLASS: [00:25:32] You mean language training?

WILCOX: [00:25:34] Language and culture.

GANZGLASS: [00:25:36] Oh, both together.

WILCOX: [00:25:36] And I don't know that they were doing much job training, but they were doing the culture and language and, um, they had. They were having some problems, I guess. You know, they didn't feel like it was right. So somebody who was down from Washington suggested the director that they might want to get some, you know, retiring volunteers involved. So that's how that happened. And it was a good experience. You know, what happened a lot of times. They had the training, the language training set up, but there were some like, you know, they always had a lot of older volunteers. And so we'd often help with the older ones, just one on one with the Spanish training. And there was one man I remember. He must have been close to 80, who had been born.

GANZGLASS: [00:26:21] A volunteer?

WILCOX: [00:26:23] Yeah, he was going to be a professor at the technical university in Guayaquil on the coast. And his wife had stayed at Berkeley. He'd been at Berkeley. I think he was retiring from there. And he spoke several languages. He'd grown up in the Austro-Hungarian Empire days, so he spoke several languages, but he was having a terrible time with Spanish. I think at that point, the synapses just weren't ready for another language. So we would have a good time with him. But I think in the end, he wound up mainly teaching in English, but he was good. And then some of the other older volunteers. And then what we mainly did was work with, there was a young man, an Ecuadorian, who had trained at the School of International Living in Vermont, and he wanted to do cultural things. So we came up with different cultural scenarios and had like a training event, you know, where people would move from one scenario to another and you'd be acting out different scenes for them. And it was, you know, it was fun.

WILCOX: [00:27:28] There were some issues I know. There was an issue at one point with one of the volunteers who was accused of having marijuana, which was a big deal. And unfortunately, the training staff, which I think

did not relate as well to the volunteers on a personal level, discovered it or found out something. I'm not sure they actually found something. Anyway, whatever it was. And so all of a sudden, I'm getting a call from these volunteers about the whole thing. And so I remember getting involved and trying to organize it and talking to people. And eventually what happened was the group had a meeting with the director and the staff and discussed it, and eventually it blew over because they didn't really have any evidence, although it was clear that this was an issue. And I remember getting in the middle of it because I was the one that they called and I just said, OK, we need to work this out. Let's get everyone.

GANZGLASS: [00:28:24] I'm really interested about the older volunteer, you know. We had a next-door neighbor who was an older volunteer. She was the only one, and she was, I don't know. I was really young, maybe 40. Or maybe she maybe she was 50, but I doubt it. What was the age? I'm surprised. Eighty?

WILCOX: [00:28:46] Well, this guy was almost 80, I think.

GANZGLASS: [00:28:48] Yeah. And the other ones that old as well?

WILCOX: [00:28:51] There were others that were retirees. Um, I would assume more in their sixties, but maybe seventies too. I don't know. I mean, in this case, I think they took him because he was a professor of some renown. And I guess the university was requesting someone with his skills, and I don't remember what they were now. But um.

GANZGLASS: [00:29:15] Was there a lot of interaction between the older and the younger volunteers?

WILCOX: [00:29:20] There was some in training and then I think. You know, actually, I think there did become more when they got to their sites too. I just remember, I think a lot of the older ones had real difficulty with the language, especially if they'd never studied a language. Like there were a lot of Midwestern farmers that would come. And I can remember going to market and hearing somebody screaming at the

ladies running the little stands there, as if yelling louder would get their message across in English.

GANZGLASS: [00:29:52] You hear it all the time on the bus.

WILCOX: [00:29:53] Right. And you rush over to help them and figure out what they need. And I think a lot of these older volunteers did, you know, the younger ones that were in town would try that, you know, help out and the older ones were more experienced, so they would help too. And there was a woman, when I got sick, there was a woman in the Peace Corps office that kind of took me under her wing and she was. I can't remember why she was in Quito, but maybe it was her husband's job or what. But she was helping out at the office and she kind of took me under her wing when I got sick and made sure I got everything done and helped. And it's just very supportive. So I mean, it was nice to have.

GANZGLASS: [00:30:31] It's nice to have that blend.

WILCOX: [00:30:33] Yeah, yeah.

GANZGLASS: [00:30:35] Different people bring different skills to that.

WILCOX: [00:30:38] Yeah.

GANZGLASS: [00:30:38] Can we go back to this? You said, well, you remember this was a Catholic village as opposed to an evangelical one. How do you characterize the differences between these communities other than obviously the religion?

WILCOX: [00:30:55] Yeah, it was interesting. In a lot of ways, the communities themselves to me weren't that different. The difference, I guess, would have been the evangelical ones really took the, they didn't drink and they took the work ethic seriously. And they, you know, and so when they said they would be there, they'd be there. And they're fairly industrious, like this guy who was the community leader. He also sold beautiful ponchos to all of us. Unfortunately, mine got ruined where we

lived before, but beautiful ponchos that he would collect and he would sell. He was quite entrepreneurial. He had other things as well that he would do, which I didn't notice among the Catholic communities he worked in. Although the people were very good and the ones we dealt with were very, you know, reliable and helpful and so forth. But maybe because their family were the leaders in the area.

WILCOX: [00:31:53] But the main difference was, it seemed like, um. There was a lot of fighting among the Catholic communities. A lot of times that happened, we think, because of the alcohol. I mean, I remember we had a saying, you know, you didn't go to the campo, the rural areas, on Sundays because that was the day everybody drank. And I remember a couple of times taking a bus back from one of the communities on Sunday, and everybody on the bus was drunk and singing and yelling at each other. And it was kind of a mess, so you could see, it was actually a train I took back, so you could see why, you know, it might be problematic.

WILCOX: [00:32:33] But on the other hand, it was also the Catholic communities that the bishop was working with and he had an address with. So he was working to change this as well. And he had decided to donate church lands to the whole, to the communities and the agrarian reform process. And he actually was meeting, he and the nuns that worked with him. They were wonderful. Would have like education sessions with the campesinos in those areas to figure out and plan once they got this land, how were they going to organize it as communities? Because this is the other big problem, you know, is they'd be given the land and they'd just divide it up and you'd have the same problem you've had. You know, they'd divide it up and it wouldn't be productive. So this was trying to get them to form into cooperatives and be productive.

GANZGLASS: [00:33:26] Did you make any close friends, either Peace Corps or Ecuadorians, while you were in the Peace Corps?

WILCOX: [00:33:32] Yeah, I did. You know, there were some Ecuadorians in town that we became really good friends with. One was in a building

where Peace Corps volunteers had lived for a long time. Another I met at the local, the first and only supermarket there, and I became good friends with the daughter there, who had come back from being in Europe and had. She was an artist and I think she was a little frustrated because she had come back. She's an artist. She had worked in Laurentiis studios, she was very involved with the Italians and had quite a nice life and I think probably had relatives there. And then she'd come back and I think she wanted to go off and do her art. She had beautiful. She'd show me these beautiful bronze statues she'd created and other things. And I think she wanted to leave. And the one time, you know, I remember she went to leave, her dad had a heart attack, so she just felt like she had to stay, and that was kind of it for her unfortunately I think. I saw her a few years later and she was still there. I don't think she ever married. And, you know, she was a beautiful young woman. Yeah.

WILCOX: [00:34:38] And then the campesinos we became friends with. There was one woman who was very active in the campo, and I told her if she needed a place to stay when she came into Riobamba, she was welcome to stay at my apartment because I always had a lot of, you know, you never found small apartments there. They always had four bedrooms, you know, so I. And we just sort of built the furniture. So she did, and she stayed there and she was quite active, and I think she stayed active. Unfortunately, one of the times while I was there and gone, she met a young man who was, she was from a big evangelical community and I think a leader in that community. She met a fellow who was Catholic community and they got involved and she got pregnant. And then, of course, the families wouldn't let them marry. So then, you know, she had the baby and we were all there at the christening and all of that but, and tried to stay in touch over that. And I think she did OK after that, but it was obviously a problem.

GANZGLASS: [00:35:48] But you haven't stayed in touch?

WILCOX: [00:35:50] Just when I went back, I tried to find her. And it turned out, um. I met her daughter. I went to, I can't remember how I met her daughter, but I went somewhere. I met her daughter, the one that

would have been born and beautiful, and gave her a bunch of money because I just felt like I needed to provide, give her some support. And she was actually doing quite well. She was going to college and doing well. And I couldn't find Laura and later one of these other friends that owned the building where we'd all lived, told Joel, my friend Joel, that Laura had come and was looking for me. And she, I don't know where she'd been.

GANZGLASS: [00:36:36] Maybe next time you go back.

WILCOX: [00:36:38] Yeah, yeah.

GANZGLASS: [00:36:41] The volunteers, are you still friends with some volunteers?

WILCOX: [00:36:45] Yeah, like this Joel. Now, not all of them. I think that was one of the interesting things for me. I was thinking about that today, too, was, um, I came from a fairly upper-class suburb of Santa Barbara. And although we'd traveled and lived, you know, gone up and spent summer there. It was. The people I was used to were really different from the volunteers I met. And the original, there were a couple of volunteers that I lived with, a couple who were more, you know, from more of an urban background, but I can't remember. But the ones that really stayed and worked in the community that I've stayed in touch with came from either small towns or more rural backgrounds like in Louisiana, Colorado, some of that. And they were all, these guys were all buddies and they go off fishing on the weekends. And I had this dog that a friend had found and I adopted and she was amazing dog. But when I got sick, they took care of her. And it was awful when I went back because they'd just basically left her in the kitchen while they went off for several days. And she was like, totally shell shocked when I got her and it took her like a day to sort of come out of it. But so these guys were very different, and I was thinking Peace Corps was really good for that. Because it taught you, it introduced you to people who came from really different backgrounds.

GANZGLASS: [00:38:05] In your own country.

WILCOX: [00:38:06] In your own country as well as the country you're in. And it gave you a whole different appreciation for people here, you know, and sort of an understanding. And I try to sort of remember that when I get into these political discussions with people, you know.

GANZGLASS: [00:38:24] That you can make friends and find common ground, right?

WILCOX: [00:38:26] Right. That there's a way to do that.

GANZGLASS: [00:38:27] Not at the moment but.

WILCOX: [00:38:27] No, you even can I think sometimes, you know, it's just hard. I've had a lot of discussion, well, not a lot, but I still remember a discussion I had with the mother of one of my daughter's friends who'd come to pick the girl up and I just come back from Nepal working on a maternal child health project there. And the first thing the mother said to me is, are you promoting abortion? And I said, well, let me tell you something. First of all, this is government funded, so it's not permitted that you can promote abortion. But I said, secondly, abortion is not something you really promote, you know? I mean, even here in the country, nobody's telling someone they have to have one. She said, oh good, because, you know, our doctors tell you you have to have an abortion. And my doctor suggested it to me because the tests for my child came out with problems. We decided not to do that and we had the baby and the baby's fine and stuff. And I said, well, what you have to remember is what your doctor said. It's an option. It's a recommendation. It's still your choice, you know. So.

WILCOX: [00:39:37] You get, I don't know, maybe you just have a. It gives you some insight into other perspectives, and I think that was a good thing for me anyway when I was in Peace Corps. You know, there were a lot of things I learned to like about people but didn't necessarily always agree with their views.

GANZGLASS: [00:39:53] And that's carried over for the rest of your life?

WILCOX: [00:39:56] Yeah, clearly. Yeah, I mean, like.

GANZGLASS: [00:39:58] Talk a little bit about what you have done since Peace Corps, ending up in Nepal.

WILCOX: [00:40:05] Oh, well. But even before I got there, I was going to say. Like these volunteers, a lot of them were Baptists, and they really related to these evangelical communities and stuff. And we'd talk about it like, oh really? But you appreciated what they had to say and their insights and why they thought the communities worked because of it and things. So, you know, it was.

GANZGLASS: [00:40:25] So you learned a lot about that.

WILCOX: [00:40:26] Yeah. And then it's, yeah, I think for me, it was really hard when I came back to the States, I didn't know what I was going to do.

GANZGLASS: [00:40:36] You trained as an anthropologist?

WILCOX: [00:40:39] Yeah, and I had sort of decided. I liked the Smithsonian when I worked there, but I looked around, I thought, do I really want to spend my life in a museum? And I was worried, you know, either. There was a lot of infighting there in the department and I thought, you know, I could wind up in either a museum or academia and there'd be all this infighting, and I probably wouldn't see that much. I really liked the idea of sort of connecting with people and being helpful and all those things. And I mean, I looked at archeologists that, like this recent find where the guy spent 20 years and finally had this big find. But you're lucky if you find a job on, you know. So as much as I think it was helpful in understanding cultures, and I really appreciate what I studied, but I was thinking I really wanted to do more something else, and I had been working in health. So public health was an area to consider, but I was trying to figure out.

WILCOX: [00:41:30] And I wandered around a Peruvian friend that we'd met just before I came up. He was a journalist and we went up to the Bay Area and I was looking for a job and couldn't find anything, and he was totally lost and stuff. And so I finally came home and decided I would

look for a school program because I always needed to do something, especially out in California. There aren't as many jobs. And so I went around to different, this was, by this time it was like June or July.

GANZGLASS: [00:42:01] '74?

WILCOX: [00:42:02] Yeah. '75.

GANZGLASS: [00:42:04] Oh, '75.

WILCOX: [00:42:05] Did I get the times wrong?

GANZGLASS: [00:42:07] No, I got it wrong. Yes, you came back in '75.

WILCOX: [00:42:10] OK. And so I, yeah, I came back the end of '75. And so by this time, it was '76, the summer of '76, because I'd been wandering around for a while and so I started going to universities, and they had some interesting. I was interested in the Latin American studies program down in Irvine, and I met with this really interesting professor that I'd known about, but he couldn't get anybody in for a year. And then I was thinking about other things and I figured, God, it's so late. I'm never going to get anywhere. And I happened to, I went on a meditation course and while I was there, it struck me. I should contact this woman I had met just when I left Peru, who had come down on her own. She'd been a, she'd just graduated from Berkeley and she got a ride down with a graduate student to Peru. And he said to her, you know, rather than just traveling around, you should come up with a project and you can use it to go to graduate school with.

WILCOX: [00:43:09] So she decided to study these worker-owned factories that were big in Peru at the time, worker run and owned, and she was studying Spanish. And she heard about me because I was in Lima for a while, and so she came and we contacted each other and I tried to help her and she just seemed really together. So when I came back, I suddenly thought I should contact her and see what she's up to. And so I went down to visit her and it turned out she had gone to UCLA and there was a guy there interested in young women that have been doing

this kind of work and wanted her to go to school there at the Latin American studies program. But she didn't have any money, so he said, oh, you need a job? So he got her a job with the new Latin American librarian that had come there. So when I showed up, she was there and then the librarian came and I said, I really would like to go to school and they said, go see Phil. So I went to see Phil on Monday, and he, all he did before he even introduced myself, he handed me a bunch of papers and he said get started. I was in graduate school a week, a month later.

WILCOX: [00:44:12] I'd start at UCLA in the fall with Latin American studies, and they had a combined program with other more practical programs like public health and management. So I opted the public health route and in the end dropped the Latin American studies and just went to public health. And they got me money. And um, you know, and I did that and then I met my husband. I got a degree in, um, I mean, not a degree. I had part time work. They needed counselors who spoke Spanish in the family planning clinics and then in an abortion clinic as well.

GANZGLASS: [00:44:43] In California?

WILCOX: [00:44:44] Yeah, in L.A. And so I wound up working at this abortion family planning clinic in Santa Monica as a counselor and then working at UCLA when another friend was a counselor there. And that's where I met my husband. He was doing his residency there.

GANZGLASS: [00:45:03] So he's a doctor?

WILCOX: [00:45:05] Yeah. So then that and I kind of pushed him towards the direction of public health, and we both joined Indian Health Service after I finished my masters and we went to Albuquerque and we were there for a couple of years, about two and a half years. And then he joined CDC and we went to Atlanta and then we moved around. We were in Minnesota after that and then Washington, D.C. And the whole time I'm nagging him and saying, I really want to go back to Latin America, we need to do that. Of course, he didn't have any experience internationally, so here I am, nagging him. And then one day he came

home and he said, well, there's this program now. U.S. AID is recruiting people from CDC, and there's this international agreement and blah blah blah. So he went to talk to the person, because he was like a CDC person with Health and Human Services. I think so. Yeah, no, FDA, over at the Parklawn building in Rockville.

WILCOX: [00:46:08] And so I went to see them and they sent our information out. And the woman who we talked to said, oh, well, there are two of you that have sort of a background, so I'm going to send both of that in. And the guy in Bolivia told us later that Joel wasn't the first one ranked, but he saw that I had a background in family planning, and he wanted to send his family planning person to the States. So he thought he'd get two for one, and so he chose Joel and me. And that's how we wound up getting down there. And it was great. We stayed for six years.

GANZGLASS: [00:46:42] Six years in Bolivia?

WILCOX: [00:46:44] Yeah.

GANZGLASS: [00:46:45] Wow.

WILCOX: [00:46:45] And the interesting thing is, you know, people, I still, we're quite the crowd. In fact, we were at a Christmas party and they said, oh the Bolivian crowd's here, you know. And people have said, you know, it was the best years of our lives, you know. It was just, it was at a point where the country was, you know, which has been chaotic all its history and changing presidents every year and lots of ups and downs. And they had just come out of a big period of, you know, deflation and depression and chaos. And they had a new president there and a lot of U.S. AID support going in because of the drug thing. And so and this guy wanted to push family planning. And so we all went in there and, for the first time in the country's history, managed to get a family planning program in. And Joel's area was child survival and the child death rate was like cut in half in the time we were there.

WILCOX: [00:47:42] And you know, everybody worked with lots of local NGOs and you work with the government. And the beauty of this guy that hired us at AID was he was the type of person, he was real entrepreneur. And he just said, you know, I'm not a technical person, that's what you guys do. And he says, I just focus on getting money and getting things together. But what he was really good at was he was a really likable guy and he knew that you needed a network of all the international agencies. So he went after PAHO and he went after UNICEF, and he coordinated everybody and he got the government on board. And I think it was he sort of orchestrated this whole thing. And I think that's how he finally got family planning okayed by this theocratic government in Latin America.

GANZGLASS: [00:48:29] So I'm just struck because so many times people say AID is bad and Peace Corps is good because of the approach to development, not imposing but working with communities. But listening to you. I'd love to get your take, I don't want to say what I think I heard. What's your take on the different approach between your Peace Corps, and to different countries ten, twelve years later?

WILCOX: [00:49:01] Yeah.

GANZGLASS: [00:49:01] But how do you think about these differences? Is that, is it true?

WILCOX: [00:49:07] Um, I think, I think. You know, what it is, I'm not sure anybody's bad or good in this scenario. I think it really is a different approach, though. And most of like the NGOs that I worked with kind of grow out of like the Peace Corps community based work, which is mainly funded by AID. And the community piece, according to my husband, who came from CDC and now works at AID, the community piece is something that is unique. I mean, that's really unique to AID and AID funding. So they're funding these NGOs who are doing all this community work, which is good work I think in a lot of the community development, which has evolved a lot more since I was in Peace Corps, at least you know what you would do now. And I think if a volunteer came in and got to work with these agencies, they're head

and heels above what I was learning when I went in. And, you know, AID has a lot of issues. And you can take, my husband's now, he retired from CDC and now works with AID. And it has a lot of issues, you know, but they're basically a contracts agency. I mean, they basically have money and they contract. They don't really know.

GANZGLASS: [00:50:13] Do the work.

WILCOX: [00:50:14] Yeah, they don't do the work. They're not a technical agency. And the people they have in there are often not technicians. So they may have had that background originally, but their main job is, you know, getting money and distributing it and figuring out the programs. And a lot of times it's difficult because, you know, the country offices are trying to figure out what the priorities are by working with the government and working with U.S. AID Washington. And you know, you've got a big political influence here in Washington, as you probably well know, that's going to direct a lot of where you're going. Like AID recently in this last iteration with the director. There's a real problem, because the health area is now, most of the money is in PEPFAR, which is this program that's run through the State Department and less through AID. It's supposed to be combined, but it's really through the State Department and that's where all the money is because that's what. This is the president's initiative for AIDS relief. And that's the bulk of the money and what a lot of people can complain about is PEPFAR's trying to make the rest of AID like it.

WILCOX: [00:51:25] And then we had a director in there, Shah, who I think was trying to break through the PEPFAR thing and couldn't do it. So he basically gave up on health and started focusing on agriculture and other programs. And the nutrition programs in the health office did OK and got attention, but the rest of them didn't. So nobody got money, direction, attention, whatever. PEPFAR had its AIDS money, so it was OK. But the rest of it, you know, there was no other health stuff. One of the best programs that I've really loved are these child survival grants that went to NGOs and it was run out of Washington. But they did a wonderful job because at the time they started, NGOs would do some health, but they didn't really have a technical focus. So the purpose of

the grant to the woman who set it up was wonderful. She was just terrific and set it up out of a relief office at AID. And basically they were, you know, four year grants. And then she set up a technical office that could provide technical assistance.

WILCOX: [00:52:32] You know, how you do baseline surveys? What are the current strategies in, the major killers are diarrheal disease and pneumonia, what are the current strategies in those? And then she took them up with universities sometimes to review the programs or not, give technical assistance. And she arranged for, they asked for a midterm and final evaluations of the program so you could get input. And that's where I got involved as an evaluator. But they give you very specific guidelines and very specific information. And a lot of these NGOs then developed really top-notch health programs, you know, again, community focused and broad areas often. But they would focus on, you know, diarrhea disease, pneumonia, malaria, reproductive health, whatever areas they were, um, maternal neonatal health, whatever it was. And they'd pick maybe two to four areas and develop these programs in the communities. And I think it really helped and worked. And what you saw was a big change in the quality of this work. And then you saw the NGOs coordinating with some of the AID contracting agencies as the community arm, that kind of thing.

GANZGLASS: [00:53:47] So Peace Corps not only influenced us as volunteers, it influenced the whole development process.

WILCOX: [00:53:53] Oh yeah. Yeah.

GANZGLASS: [00:53:56] Both here domestically, I mean in the U.S., but also in those countries by building up the capacity of those NGOs.

WILCOX: [00:54:04] Yeah, I think so. And the other thing to remember is when AID started, it was mainly ex Peace Corps volunteers that were working at AID, you know. It's still heavily, you know, Peace Corps volunteers are still heavily involved in AID, you know. It's just I think they go there because. I was just talking to someone, a woman, who runs a program. AID hires a lot of people through these, like

contracting agencies and leadership. She's run this program for, you know, 10 or 15 years. And she's great because she pays a lot of attention to the people coming in and make sure they get the training and the coordination. But it basically works because AID can't hire directly. They hire this way. Well, it's a contract. And now AID, I just saw her the other night and she said, now AID has decided they're going to go with, what do you call it?

GANZGLASS: [00:55:04] Sole source?

WILCOX: [00:55:05] No, no. But, you know, one of the minority owned agencies or something like that. Or a small business, which hers is not. So she won't be and her choice will be, you know, does she want to go with one of these agencies who do something else. And I remember feeling that way too on different projects. You do this terrific job in Bolivia. You do this terrific job. I worked at first at the AID office and then I worked with an AID contractor. And you know, my project was one of the big successes and picked for a global evaluation in one of three countries. And they came and the first thing they heard when they went in and talked to my AID friend and director of the whole health area was, well, she decided to change strategies now and she wasn't going to refund either the stuff I was doing or a lot of other countries. She was just going to focus on those doing services, and it was mainly because she was lobbying to get a job as head of services at AID when she went back. And it struck me. I think a lot of people feel this, you know, you pour your heart out, you work really hard, and their contract's so short, that are short lived and you have no security and you feel like what happened here. And so a lot of people go to work for AID because at least you have job security and it'll go on, you know, beyond three years or four years or whatever.

GANZGLASS: [00:56:25] And so Peace Corps is a training ground for people at some level.

WILCOX: [00:56:31] Yeah, that's what I think.

GANZGLASS: [00:56:33] Well, let's kind of reflect on the whole Peace Corps experience, the three goals of Peace.

[END OF INTERVIEW]