

Laurel Zaks Oral History Interview
Returned Peace Corps Volunteer Collection
Administrative Information

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Biographical Note

Laurel Zaks served as a Peace Corps volunteer in Ecuador from 1997 to 2001 on a community health and nutrition project.

Access

Open.

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Oral History Interview

with

Laurel Zaks

July 24, 2005
Atlanta, Georgia

By Adrienne Fagler

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

FAGLER: [00:00:06] Today is July the 24th, 2005. My name is Adrienne Fagler and I'm interviewing returned Peace Corps volunteer Laurel Zaks. And she served as a volunteer in Ecuador from July 1997 through January 2001 as a community health volunteer. OK, Laurel, can you tell me a little bit about what you do with your life now and your family and where you live?

ZAKS: [00:00:34] Currently I'm living in Atlanta, working at the Centers for Disease Control, the CDC. And I've actually been here since I left Peace Corps Ecuador in 2001. I came straight here. We'll back up a little bit. My family, my family, it's great. Not a single one lives here in Atlanta, but we are all in the United States in various states and they were not overly happy, I'll put it that way, that I was applying for the Peace Corps. But you know, they supported me throughout the process by all means once I got there. But it wasn't a joyous celebration. This was my choice at my age when I went in and everything like that.

FAGLER: [00:01:16] Tell me a little bit about the year before you actually started your Peace Corps service.

ZAKS: [00:01:22] Sure. I actually applied in the fall of '95 to the Peace Corps. And at that point I had finished a masters. I had worked for a few years and I just completed a master's in public health actually earlier that year. And I was going to live in Guatemala, and I was going to do some community work and see if I could learn a little bit of Spanish because I always knew I wanted to master, I saw master, another language, at least be proficient in another language. So I applied and then went off to Guatemala, and during that process, my Peace Corps application got bounced around. And because I wasn't in the country, it wasn't necessarily something that went as smoothly as I would have hoped for. So in that year before, in '96, it was kind of following up on what's going on because I was doing, I came back from Guatemala to do a fellowship. I was awarded a fellowship at the Center for Development and Learning in Chapel Hill, North Carolina. And just kind of kept, what's going on with the application? Where is it? And actually I had applied with a boyfriend at the time, and they informed us very promptly that you have to be married if you want to go together. So I still kept my application and he kept his application. And it was all good by then.

FAGLER: [00:02:33] And why did you really want to join the Peace Corps?

ZAKS: [00:02:35] Why I wanted to join Peace Corps really came down to the fact that I wanted to understand things at a basic level in international health. I had done six months in Romania in the handicapped orphanages. In '92, I had been in Guatemala. I had been all around the world before that, three months here, six months there, and I was just ready for a longer-term commitment. And I got a lot of flak for that, for joining the Peace Corps, because I had worked with a dietitian at a master's in public health. Why would you join the Peace Corps? You could work for AID or CARE or Carter Center or wherever. Because I want to live with the people. Peace Corps is going to, my understanding beforehand, is going to help with all that for me.

FAGLER: [00:03:18] And can you remember the first time you heard about Peace Corps and why you really decided to apply?

ZAKS: [00:03:25] You know, I don't know if I could remember the first time I heard about it. I knew it was always out there. I also always knew I wanted to do international work, and I'm community focused in my approach and professionally and personally. So I think it just kind of made sense. But I actually didn't really know Peace Corps volunteers. Now I can't imagine life without Peace Corps volunteers as part of my life, you know, with my friends and terms of volunteering, people going off to go. But at that point in time, I wasn't exposed to it so much.

FAGLER: [00:03:54] And I know earlier you said a little bit that your family, they weren't really happy about your decision to do Peace Corps. Can you tell me a little bit more specifically what their reactions were?

ZAKS: [00:04:08] What they didn't understand was that, and this really sums it up. They said we gave you everything but poverty, and that's what you want. No, it's not to that degree, but I think they had seen that just growing up in the suburbs of the Annapolis Washington area in Maryland. And we're a comfortable family and didn't want for a lot or anything like that, and they just couldn't get why I would go places. Or why I continued to want to go places, because I had been living in places where you didn't have water and you came back with parasites, all that stuff.

FAGLER: [00:04:39] And what about your friends, what did they think?

ZAKS: [00:04:42] Some were like, how do you have to go away for so long? And they didn't understand that. And others were like, of course this is what you want to do. So it's a mix, you know, it was a real mixed reaction, but they threw me a great surprise going away party. They tried to keep it a surprise. I'm glad I found out because, you know, it's enough to get ready, as you well know cause you did this yourself, to go off and go to another country or culture for a few years so. It was lovely, you know, and so they all came out to support me from different states. They flew into the D.C. area and that was a real treat.

FAGLER: [00:05:12] Now, when you were doing the whole application process for Peace Corps, did you have a specific country in mind or a region in the world that you really want to serve?

ZAKS: [00:05:23] I mean, it wasn't totally altruistic because I did want to learn another language and I was pretty open. I think I said I'd go pretty much anywhere. And they actually gave me, the recruiting office gave me Guyana. I said, great! South America. Well, first I thought, Guyana? Ghana? I actually had to look, is this Africa or is this? I wasn't sure actually. And Guyana happens to be an anomaly in South America. It's an English speaking country. And I just said to them, this is good to know and I will look into it. And I actually found about some volunteers from Guyana and half of their training groups had left. It wasn't yet a full-on set-up place at that time. They had been there I guess many years ago. And then in the mid-nineties, they just had to go back. And you know, everything I heard made me ask them, is there another option essentially? And the recruiting officers, absolutely, they're like, you're going to let them down. And I understood that and I felt very guilty.

ZAKS: [00:06:23] But I also knew that, you know what? I knew I had a lot to add, and I do want some other things other than the hassles of not having an office and the infrastructure setup from the Peace Corps side. I knew I was going to encounter that enough when you get into the work. But Peace Corps wasn't, you know, standing up on their own yet, from these people. From what I heard from the people that have been there, I felt let me see what else is there. And I also felt fortunate because I was bringing in, being a dietician and bringing a master's in public health and skills and work experience. I knew wherever I went, I would be able to offer something right from the get-go. And they basically say, OK, how about Honduras, the Dominican Republic or Ecuador? And I chose Ecuador because it was the most diverse culturally in the three options that were presented to me.

FAGLER: [00:07:11] OK, great. Was there anything, I know you have a wonderful background in terms of public health, was there anything in your family background that really made you go into public health initially?

ZAKS: [00:07:20] Not really. I mean, my dad is an orthodontist by training and by all means serving the community and work is really important. It was important to him to work with the kids, with Down syndrome, to the kids that, you know, were walking on their own two feet. I mean, he was just real involved. So I think, and all of us were involved, for my whole four years in high school and, you know, schooling and high school, I was always doing something in the community, so it's just a part of me.

FAGLER: [00:07:46] And when you were invited to Honduras, Ecuador, and I think the Dominican Republic, you said. Did they tell you specifically what type of project you were going to be in, since you did have that background in public health?

ZAKS: [00:07:56] They did. All of them had to do with health. The Honduras was a little more focused on HIV AIDS at the time, and this would have been in '96, '97, when that was being discussed. Dominican Republic, I think, had to do more with maternal and child health. And the Ecuador one had both components, bless the Ecuador one, as I said. I mean, the fact that there was just more diverse indigenous cultures there, I just thought that would probably be the most interesting. Plus, it was the furthest away.

FAGLER: [00:08:25] And since you have had a wonderful background in terms of international experience and experiences, do you think that prepared you for Peace Corps? Or were there other things that prepared you for the two years in Peace Corps? I think the fact that I had back in undergrad, I'd lived on a ship that went around the world. A semester at sea, at least 12 cultures of the world, all the way from Asia to the Americas to Europe to Africa, we were all over. So that helped to get my mind set. I already had a sense of other cultures. I hadn't worked in other cultures prior. So I think that that helped me going in and I could see that once I got there compared to some of the other people in training, how it made a difference. And I wasn't fresh out of school in undergrad, I was in my late 20s at the time.

FAGLER: [00:09:16] And how did that change your life? I mean, you were just about to go the Peace Corps. You've been working. You've been to graduate

school. What kind of changes did you have to make in your life before you actually went into that training for Peace Corps?

ZAKS: [00:09:28] Well, I had, I was working at the time in inner city D.C. with HIV AIDS population, with babies basically, Children's National Medical Center, and I was the HIV AIDS dietitian. And I knew, you know what, this is great work, but I wanted to do a different kind of work and prevent these kids from getting on. And they're not clinical as feeding kids through a tube as much as working to figure out what is going on in the community and why is this happening. So I think I knew I needed to not be in the job I was in and it seemed the right time to go and make a strong commitment to something internationally, because the three months here, the six months there and whatnot, that gave me a good insight to know I wanted to do more of that. But it really, it was time for a bigger commitment and I figured this was a good way to get it.

FAGLER: [00:10:17] And now that you decide where you want to go, you're going to Ecuador, and the training we know is all about three months time. How is your training in Honduras? Where was it?

ZAKS: [00:10:29] Oh, you mean in Ecuador?

FAGLER: [00:10:31] In Ecuador, excuse me. In Ecuador. How was your training, where was it in Ecuador, and how many people in your training group? Did you enjoy it?

ZAKS: [00:10:39] Well, training was a fascinating experience. One. I'll just back up a little bit. The airport, Baltimore-Washington International Airport. My boyfriend and I, we did stay together up until the time I went on that airplane. And I was sitting there in the area waiting to get on the plane. And this is before September 11th, so he could be sitting with me until I left. In fact, my own family was on vacation when I left and they didn't change their vacation because I was going to Peace Corps. So that kind of tells you something. So they were like, she's going to do this, she does it herself. But all that being said, I looked around and there was a woman who was also there with her family, and she just had these camera lenses and all that stuff. And I was kind of curious, like what if she's going to

Peace Corps too. I mean, she just had this air about it. And we were on the plane together, flew to Miami, where they did a staging for all of us. And that was a trip, just to kind of start getting the first glimpses. I mean, granted, this is your first impressions, but I thought, I'm going to be the oldest one here. And I didn't even feel that old being in my later 20s, but it was still like these kids are right out of school.

FAGLER: [00:11:47] Yeah.

ZAKS: [00:11:47] You can relate to that. But all that being said, it was fun that, you know, just being randomly assigned to somewhere in Miami. We spent the night there. A bunch of us went next door to one of the Cuban area. Versace had just been stabbed in South Beach, and that's where our training was. So a lot of community, that was like, you know, we were getting a taste of Latin culture in Miami, put it that way. Went off on the plane and I can remember it landing and the trainers greeting us on the tarmac at the airport with flowers. And they were just so gracious and welcoming. And there we all were. And then when they holed us up in this hotel in Quito, in the capital, which is in the Sierra part of the Andes, high altitude about 8,900 feet. So some people had to get used to that. And you know, kind of went through the medical stuff. Give us a few more immunizations and things like that. And then we were all transported to an area about a half hour from Quito called Tumbaco.

ZAKS: [00:12:53] And at that time, Peace Corps Ecuador, and Peace Corps Ecuador had been around since the beginning pretty much of Peace Corps, so they were well honed in Ecuador for Peace Corps volunteers. They had their own training center and community. The community around the training center hosted, many of the families there hosted volunteers to live with them for their cultural training. And of course, we went to Peace Corps every day to learn our languages and then some technical stuff. So they had us all in one place. I say all of us. There was something like 36, 38 volunteers, half, there were about 18 in the health group and about 18 in youth development groups. And so we're all in one place and they divvied us up language wise by the health and the youth, and they divvied us up technical wise, health and youth. But at the same time, you had 36

instant friends to get to know if you so chose to do that. And your families, some of them knew each other and things like that.

FAGLER: [00:13:52] And how did you react with the other or interact with the other trainees?

ZAKS: [00:13:56] It was a mix. And this is what I've always found with my life. I get along with most everybody. At the same time, you know, cliques would form. I'm not a particularly cliquey person. I can get along with the cliquey folks. But at the same time, I'm also attracted to the people that are kind of hanging on the edge. I want to make sure that everyone's comfortable. And so I would talk to everyone and make sure they, you know, do lunch with the folks there, or take a walk with different people that clearly were having a harder time with things. And then along those lines, we were also given, or I was given an opportunity. All of us were given the opportunity I think, the trainers said that I was the only one that ever took it, to do a self-directed training. And why I did that is because the trainers themselves are nice people. But I felt like I had as much experience with public health as these guys that did and I wasn't getting as much out of the technical training part of things.

ZAKS: [00:14:50] I was, not that I knew everything, but there were things I knew once we started giving site assignments what I wanted to do to start exploring my site versus sitting there and listening to something on anemia when I could teach the thing on anemia, you know? And but the other part with the creative ways of doing a training and what they called *charlas* in Ecuador, like a small little health class, that was super helpful for me. And the cultural things were super helpful by all means. Our language class, I tested into an area that there was three of us that were kind of in that upper beginner, low intermediate. And Jason Dvorkin and Becky, the three of us had a great language teacher. She had been a dentist by training. You know, it's sad but true commentary on the economics of Ecuador. She made a lot more money being a language instructor, and she did some private clinic work as a dentist by all means, but that that was pretty fascinating too. And, you know, to learn that those kind of insights too.

FAGLER: [00:15:57] So you said that you had one of the more self-directed type of training programs, how did you actually do that? And what was the reaction of Peace Corps staff to your recommendation that this is what you needed to do?

ZAKS: [00:16:11] Well, they offered it. I just remember hearing someone mention it one of the many times when they gathered us all together and I jumped on it. And they said, no one ever takes us up on this. I said, well, I am, and what are my options? And for me, because one of the places that they were talking about was the Amazon region, the rainforest region of Ecuador. I grew up in the suburbs, and we have mountains, we have the beach, but we certainly didn't have a rainforest. So I just wanted to get a sense. And so I actually took the time in Quito, while I was close enough to Quito, to start talking with people that had worked for NGOs that were, non-governmental organizations that were invested in the Amazon area. Talking with university people. Just to get a sense of what is it? And then I went out there on my own also, to just kind of see what some of the people in that region were actually doing and things like that.

ZAKS: [00:17:07] So it was limited. I mean, they wouldn't let me go very long, you know, so it was a handful or, you know, if it was even a cumulation of seven full days of the group training. But it was enough that it gave me some insight. And I wasn't going to go spend the weekend with the volunteer to see what a volunteer lives like. I knew I was going to live however I was going to live. And for me, it was more getting that technical part of and the reality check in.

FAGLER: [00:17:36] And was doing some of this training on your own, was that useful for you as you went into Peace Corps service?

ZAKS: [00:17:42] It was. It freaked my poor family that I was, that was hosting me. I brought back a tarantula into the house in the Sierra in Quito. I heard screams like shrieks and thought, what's going on? And I run out and they're like, you brought back a spider! It's a tarantula. I was like, that is a tarantula? No idea I was even carrying this on a four and a half hour bus ride in my backpack. I mean, who knows where it was, but it happened to land back in there. And they actually, one of the little girls in my family

tried to keep it as a pet and tried to figure out how to feed it. It didn't make it, it died. So that was their, this family from the Sierras, introduction with where are you going to? You know, they couldn't believe it.

FAGLER: [00:18:28] Now was your host family stay for the full three months? It was.

ZAKS: [00:18:33] It was. That's how they did it. And they had never had a vegetarian. I was a vegetarian going in. I'm still a vegetarian all these many years later, and they did their best. I mean, our hygiene practices are different. Our food choices, of course, are different. Being a nutritionist, I love learning about food in other cultures, but we made soy burgers and tofu burgers and things like that. And I am not a tall person and I was a full head taller than my host family. I mean, I'm barely 5'3", and I was like towering over these people. Yeah, it was remarkable. Absolutely remarkable.

FAGLER: [00:19:13] Now was your Spanish before Peace Corps good? Is the Spanish in Ecuador a lot different than what you may have learned here in the States?

ZAKS: [00:19:23] I felt that. I had Spanish in junior high and high school, so we're talking like eighth, ninth, and tenth grade. I knew vocabulary words, which is probably how I tested into an upper beginner, low intermediate. And I felt that my Spanish leaving training was better than I walked in the country. But I had a long way to go and I knew that. The Spanish in Ecuador, if you're in the Sierra, it's clear. If you get to the coast where I had some time there, they dropped their S's, it's super quick. And in the Amazon region, the Kichwa, a lot of the Kichwa, which is one of the many indigenous groups, had moved down into the Amazon, and they spoke a mix of Kichwa and Spanish, so it was interesting. The thing is, when I was given a counterpart to work with, she happened to be a wonderful woman, [inaudible name]. She's from the Philippines, and she'd been living in Ecuador with her family for 14 years, because she spoke perfect English. So that was a little bit of a concern because she had Spanish down. I didn't have Spanish down. If I was struggling, she'd immediately whip into the English so that was a little frustrating.

FAGLER: [00:20:32] And when you first got into the country, can you tell me about your first day, when you first landed in Ecuador?

ZAKS: [00:20:40] I can remember thinking, wow. I mean, it was a city. So there were some fascinating. The high cheekbones of the Sierran people or the indigenous people, the dark jet-black beautiful hair. And there was a clear difference between the mestizos, the people that had some European mix and indigenous mix. Versus the indigenous that held to their traditional native wear and the jewelries and things like that. So I mean, for me, it was very visual. The visual changes were, that's what was fascinating. But I mean, they had high rise buildings. They had a little monorail that went in a certain part of the city. They had an area where Peace Corps offices at the time that I was in Peace Corps Ecuador, was over what we call Gringolandia. So they had internet cafes and Thai restaurants and all kinds of things that, you know, we had actually available to us in the U.S. But of course, there was an Ecua, as we call it, Ecuadorian kind of feel to it.

FAGLER: [00:21:45] And once you got through your three months of training, then did you live with a family or did you have your own place? Tell me a little bit about your project, your city.

ZAKS: [00:21:55] My first site assignment was in the area where the headwaters of the Amazon actually start, in an area called Tena, Ecuador, in a province called Napo. And fortunately or unfortunately, depending on how you look at it, because I thought in Peace Corps I going to be on my own more. They put a youth volunteer in the same city. And it was a city. And that was good and bad both, I mean, we are the best of friends. We've been through a lot together, but I didn't go into the Peace Corps thinking I would be hanging out or working or living necessary next to another volunteer. And it became, we kind of bonded more in the beginning because of the housing issues. They have a lot of people with oil companies coming through that area unfortunately, because they're destroying the rainforest. As a result, they're looking at us with dollar signs thinking we have the money and the ability to pay a higher rent than Peace Corps would allow us.

ZAKS: [00:22:52] And Peace Corps does not find any of our housing. We're absolutely responsible to find our own housing. My counterparts did nothing to help with that. I shouldn't say that. Evgenio tried, but my agency that I was placed with did not. And that, you know, that took some time just to get that on order. So my first room was a room, literally, of people that had set up a place where you had your own room and you had your own bathroom and then kind of where everyone did their laundry was our sink, our kitchen. And I bought a cursenada, a two-burner thing that gets connected to a gas tank, to be my stove. Set it up on a table and laid it on the sidewalk. You know, it was not ideal. So we eventually, I say we moved because then Deanna and I ended up finding and securing another place. We ended up going in on it together because really that's about the only thing we could afford, to do it that way.

FAGLER: [00:23:47] Was the Peace Corps staff helpful in any way trying to, you know, get you guys a place to live?

ZAKS: [00:23:55] They send a trainer out I remember in the early on, and she went around and looked to different places with us. But then, which we appreciated that by all means, but that, we ended up finding it ourselves. And I think it's changed just with the safety and security for volunteers that the staff are more involved now. And I could even see that in my later years in Peace Corps Ecuador.

FAGLER: [00:24:17] How far were you living from the Peace Corps office?

ZAKS: [00:24:20] At that point in time, it was about a four and a half to six and a half hour, really depends on the quality of the roads and the time of the year, ride. Bus ride. And there was a direct bus ride into the city. It wasn't a bazillion different stops and changes.

FAGLER: [00:24:35] And so now once you've gotten a place to live and you're starting a project, what was your project like? How many people did you work with? Are you on your own lots of times?

ZAKS: [00:24:45] I was working with a local nongovernmental organization who sponsored out of Spain, actually, and there was a team of 10 to 12 people,

and we worked with about 115 indigenous communities along the headwaters of the Amazon. So what was fascinating was we would get out and we would be able to, if we were doing a health brigade taking, you know, medicine kids in or doing vaccination campaigns or doing a health *charla*, health talk, to the community. We may take a bus for three hours, a canoe ride for four, a hike for six through Amazon mud like you have never, never imagined. And it was intense. I mean, that was a rural experience. You're living in and out of these communities, you know. To come back to the city of Tena, the city of Tena had one track of light. And you sometimes had running water, not all the time. But I mean, it was just like, it was unbelievable the difference, but it gave me the insight to understand how the local indigenous in that area truly lived.

ZAKS: [00:25:50] And I can tell you the hikes in the, we all invested. I mean, they all have the boots, the rubber bridge to go up to your calves. Of course, I quickly learned I needed to have a pair of those. My Chacos or Tivas were not going to do it. And even that those big old boots you get sucked off your feet and the next step, you're stepping smack into the mud and it's going up way steep and you're just laughing, almost laughing. So there is a lot of that kind of experience.

FAGLER: [00:26:19] So specifically, what did you do in terms of your project?

ZAKS: [00:26:23] Well, that first project, we truly did health education with all the communities. There was identified by their own communities a health educator, and we worked with them in Spanish. And then they often translated things into Kichwa, which was their local language. And it could be everything from, you know, mental health and what was happening in the body from birth to aging. It could be a vaccine. It could be hygiene, you know, remembering to wash your hands, if you have the ability to wash your hands. Cut your fingernails. What to do, how do you make a toothbrush? And because, you know, buying a toothbrush isn't an option a lot. If you have water accessible and you have the capacity to boil the water, why that's important versus just drinking it straight from the rivers. It was, it was hardcore initially, hardcore health education, and bringing things out like vaccinations to the different communities because that wasn't normal.

ZAKS: [00:27:14] And it gave me the opportunity to work with a lot of these other agencies, not solely the one I was assigned to. I had the ability to work with the Ministry of Health on some issues there. And they were doing decentralization of health, that was fascinating to be involved and asked to be involved with that. There's a great book that UNICEF has. And one of the groups was translating this to do specific work with the Kichwa communities, and was asked to be a, you know, author participation, participator in that to be a project. That was wonderful, just to bring that in. I mean, a lot, I would say a lot more professional than a lot of the things I get from other people, a copywritten document or booklet that's used to go pretty far in those communities, and it's catered to those communities.

FAGLER: [00:28:08] And can you tell me a little bit about what your typical day was like when you woke up in the morning? Did you work Monday through Sunday or Monday through Friday?

ZAKS: [00:28:16] And I'm going to say this was my first site because I was in Tena for about a year and I'll explain why I unfortunately had to leave. It wasn't by choice. But a typical day in the rain forest area was my first several months sleeping with bugs. Man, that rainforest. Birds called laurelles, which is my name, and essentially they talk to each other through the night. The frogs and the bugs are unbelievable. I have a great appreciation for the frogs and the bugs now, having lived with many of them next to me in around and, you know, on my hammock. And I slept in a hammock my first year there so, it was just easier. And I truly, that was an adjustment to get used to that. And typically, you know, hanging out with your counterparts in various ways. Sharing meals together after a brigade or getting, you know, all the supplies together.

ZAKS: [00:29:17] Typical day also, because it was the headwaters of the Amazon area, there are a lot of kayakers that came in. Kayaking is pretty big in Ecuador. I actually learned how to kayak there. I thought, well, I'm going to be here, why not? So that actually allowed me to explore the rivers in a different way in the rainforest, in a different way than trudging through the mud in the health brigade. That was, you know, playing in the balsa

wrapper or in a kayak. And that was fun. So, you know, you mix up the business with the fun and really did get a good sense.

ZAKS: [00:29:48] But a typical day. We worked long days, you know, when. My dad actually has a misconception, and he shared this with me, on how he didn't find that folks from Latin America or Central America or South America, wherever it may be, particularly hard working. I said, Dad, we get up pre-dawn to get out there to catch that canoe that has to go through our next connection or whatever. And we go nonstop. It could be a ten hour day or 12 hour day. There could be a four hour day. It really depended. And it could be a seven day workweek very easily because these communities don't, the communities in the rainforest are not tracking Monday through Friday. That's not how they work. So it really depended on the accessibility to our resources, our access to transportation, and that dictated it.

ZAKS: [00:30:38] And unfortunately I had to leave Tena and because of two assaults, unfortunately, and because this is an area that doesn't have transportation after 6:00 and you might be at your counterpart's house still working on something and I'd walk home. Well one time I was cutting across the tarmac where the airport was and there's just high reeds and this is rainforest so there's a lot of foliage that's quite large and someone just jumped right out, jumped on me. And thankfully, you know, it was not a fun assault, but it was one that I could live with and nothing serious, serious happened. But that happened.

ZAKS: [00:31:11] And then another thing happened with one of the keto people for the agency that I was assigned. The director from the NGO I was working with in Tena, he made some inappropriate moves on me that I immediately reported to the Peace Corps. And that my counterpart, my counterpart quit over it actually, which I felt badly because that was. She had been working there for eight years and that was a big support for her family. But she had seen him do this to other people, and not everyone speaks up. And I immediately spoke up. Like, no, no, no, no. I don't know what you think this is all about, but that's not what Americans are about, that's not why I came here and you know. No, absolutely not. So anyway, I ended up getting moved and it was for safety reasons, which was

upsetting because I really loved what I did. But it was safer for me between the assault and with this inappropriateness with the first, the head of the first NGO.

FAGLER: [00:32:07] Did you tell your parents about this?

ZAKS: [00:32:10] No, no, not, not at that time. They eventually, I think, have learned. But no, absolutely not. So that would not have gone over well. Peace Corps then, my APCD at the time assigned me to an area of the country that was about 14 or 18 hours from Quito in the high Sierra, in a place called Chordeleg. Beautiful. I have the real pleasure to work with a whole different culture. This is a whole different kind of Kichwa and absolutely a different kind of group of people. A women's *cooperativa* who and in that they had basically set this up. There's a foundation in a bigger city called Cuenca that was helping them. And they basically were like, we want to get these women who are weavers by vocation. And that was natural for that part of the country. And they made these gorgeous sweaters. Anyway, they wanted to have a clinic for these women to provide their medical needs and whatnot. So I did a lot of health education with the women.

ZAKS: [00:33:18] I was only there, I can't even remember how many months. It was months, because the one thing I had in my Peace Corps medical record said no high-altitude cold climates. Because I lose my hands, I have something called Raynaud's. And I had, there's a nurse in the area, and she called Peace Corps and said she doesn't have the function of her hands and this is not right. And anyway, the Peace Corps director then basically said, move to Santo Domingo, there was Colorado, there's a great fit for her there, and this is what we're going to do. My APCD, it wasn't so easy. I mean, he looked at it like problem volunteer. It's like, I didn't ask to be assaulted. Certainly didn't ask to be put in the place that I lose my hands. And I'm here to work and I'm not leaving. I mean, I don't want to leave Peace Corps. That wasn't my goal. But I was thrilled that the country director stepped in.

ZAKS: [00:34:08] And a big, ugly city is where I was placed. Big, ugly Latin city. But it was a real Latin city so that the ride was beautiful. And this is about

three and a half, four hours from Quito towards the coast. So at this point, I had gotten to experience the Oriente, as they call it, the rainforest, and the Sierra. And now I was going towards the coast.

FAGLER: [00:34:28] Now that you're in a different setting, how is your life in terms of your personal life? And I don't want to make a big deal about when you were talking. I'm very sorry that happened. But what, just really just briefly, why do you think you were so strong as a person within yourself to want to stay? Because you're in a different environment, a culture, and something terrible has happened to you. Why do you think you want to stay versus? A lot of Peace Corps volunteers would have left.

ZAKS: [00:34:59] You know, there's just something in me that I just look like this is a challenge. This is a hurdle. I can get through this. Peace Corps forced me to go to counseling because they say after something like this happens, you have to go. And the counselor said, you're a bird. You're a bird that's going to fly or you're going to fall. And you're going to soar. And she could tell that just from our interview. And I don't know, I can't fully understand what's in me to know. I just knew I was dedicated and committed, and the word perseverance goes with me quite regularly. And the Peace Corps director would say that over and over again. Yeah, over and over again. And also, I think the placement of where I was going, the placement happened to be at a center for malnourished children. I'm a dietitian by training. This was the absolute perfect fit, so in the aspect.

ZAKS: [00:35:45] And I was placed in the team of all Ecuadorians. There was the Ecuadorian physician who oversaw the center. He's a cardiologist by training, but he helped out. The odd thing was I was placed with the Catholic diocese that runs this thing, even though Peace Corps is not religious by any stretch of the imagination. You know, a lot of times the folks that are faith-based are doing a lot of the community service type work. So was placed with the Catholic Diocese there, and so we did have meetings with Padre Finbar. The father of Finbar was actually from Ireland, who'd been placed there for years also. But I didn't work with him directly. I worked with him because he ran the show over there. But the team was, you know, the Ecuadorian nurse, Ecuadorian social worker.

Just the whole bit. Everyone was Ecuadorian but me. And we would have some other volunteers from different places by all means.

ZAKS: [00:36:35] But we were replaced an old center, in this old, old building that was not meant to be what it was. It was four stories high, and we're working with malnourished kids and kids that, you know, can't fully walk and whatnot. But there's a German drug company that did eventually offer some money to build a new center for malnourished children. And that was there, and that was a great experience because I got to work with the architects and the whole staff to create a new center and design a space and figure out the flow. And these are the kind of training I have anyway. So it was important to me to see that through and to also get the staff comfortable in their new space, because what that meant was we're going to be seeing more people. Ecuador is going through horrific economic times. There's five different presidents in '97 to 2001. We would wake up in the morning and an egg may be the equivalent of eight cents. In the afternoon, it could be sixteen cents for one egg.

ZAKS: [00:37:38] People were just absolutely in abject poverty, especially in the Santo Domingo de los Colorados. In the city that I was placed in, it had a lot of shanty towns and we did a lot of home visits and whatnot there. But that area was a crossroads in Ecuador. So you had the Afro Ecu contingent that came in from the coast. You had the Sierran people. So the faces of the people that I worked with were a biggest mix of Latin people than most places I was used to. And that's what I meant by big, old, ugly city. That city also brought a lot of people in. A typical day there, it was a Monday to Friday job of sorts. We did have activities on the weekends, but moms who were the caretakers, some dads, could bring their malnourished child in after they were released from the hospital. And they could come and they could live there for the week if they lived too far away to bus in and out every day. Or they could bus in and out every day. Most honestly lived there because they didn't have the money to bus in and out.

ZAKS: [00:38:34] And even though we were supposed to only serve the child that was actually truly malnourished, quite often half the families is malnourished. So you ended up at the mom with maybe four kids or a

mom seeing one kid. Various levels and degrees of malnutrition. We did a lot of work in the communities, especially the communities we could see that more of our kids were coming from. That was pretty fascinating. We served breakfast, lunch and dinner. We did our snacks. We did activities through mealtime. To work with a malnourished kid, it truly is a multidisciplinary effort. So it was really important to have good, good working relationship with the social worker and with the nurses and with the other doctors in the area and health professionals that knew about us. We would do activities in the streets that we would get our moms all involved with and talk about the importance of breastfeeding and not a bottle.

ZAKS: [00:39:24] And just lots of great activities and did tons of cooking demonstrations using soy, using products that were natural to their region that were still nutrient dense, with a wonderful nurse practitioner that worked with the mothers who was a sister in an order that was there. We had just, it was a wonderful experience. And when we moved to the new center, my mom actually flew in for three days, of my three and a half years in Ecuador, just to. When the German drug reps, people from Germany came in. Some of the higher up bishops and whatnot came. Peace Corps country director came when we were blessing or getting started in our new environment.

ZAKS: [00:40:09] And I at that time hadn't planned to extend, but I did end up extending and I didn't do it the traditional way. I kept, you know, three months. I need another three months. I need another six months. Eventually that became, you know, I was already there a year. And at that point I said, I need a break because my brother's getting married. I will officially do the year extension if I can go home and see my brother get married in 2000. And Peace Corps was very supportive of me. They let me do that. They also were supportive of me keeping extending because they knew how absolutely involved I was with moving the center from the old place to the new place and really me wanting to get them to a comfortable place. Hiring an Ecuadorian nutritionist, training that person. As I said, there were other volunteers from other countries there.

FAGLER: [00:40:55] Can you tell me a little bit about how did you get around when you were doing all these demonstrations or presentations? Or was it always in a center or was it someplace else?

ZAKS: [00:41:05] We actually get around a lot by foot. We got around, there was a pickup truck vehicle that we had access to. Not everyone could drive at the center for malnourished kids so, you know, busses, bicycle. My bike was stolen and once it was stolen once, Peace Corps did not replace it. That wasn't their ability to just replace bikes that were stolen. And living in the big city of Santo Domingo, it was a dangerous city. I unfortunately ended up living with yet another volunteer. And I shouldn't unfortunately. I really did think my experience was going to be more on my own. But it was a dangerous city and actually Peace Corps almost recommended it, especially given my assault. And this person had to get moved from another place also. So again, Barb Plek, wonderful woman, we're as tight as can be down to this day. It's wonderful, but it is. My Spanish didn't happen as much as I wanted, given I lived on a very regular basis with Peace Corps volunteers. We also ended up being in Santo Domingo the crash pad for a lot of volunteers because it's where the mailboxes were for all the rural volunteers.

ZAKS: [00:42:09] And if Peace Corps nurses had a problem with some of the volunteers and they couldn't get help, they sent them to my house. And we had plenty of volunteers hooked up to IVs in my bedroom and all of that with, you know, needing help and whatnot. The other adventure I had in Santo Domingo, and I think this is why I was committed to filling my. I ended up spending a full two years plus in my third site, even with all the ups and downs. I actually had two medevacs during that time too. So it was a bumpy start there. But again, perseverance. And [inaudible]. Can you imagine?

FAGLER: [00:42:48] Sorry to hear that. And it sounds like you really worked really hard in your project and you gave a lot of yourself in your project. Tell me what, I know you said you learned how to kayak during your two years or plus years in Ecuador. But what other things did you do, did you socialize with the ladies in Ecuador?

ZAKS: [00:43:04] Absolutely.

FAGLER: [00:43:05] And what did you do for fun?

ZAKS: [00:43:06] We had, well my counterparts were great and we'd spend time in their homes. And I love food and nutrition, so I learned how to make a lot of foods from scratch. I actually wrote and edited a cookbook called Buen Provecho for Peace Corps Ecuador for all the volunteers. And a lot of what I learned was from living in the three different regions and being so connected to food, you know, could put things in there so that this little book, and it didn't end up becoming a little book. The country director actually got professional people to do the illustrations and whatnot, and it's a copywritten book and it's a resource for volunteers from here on out. So one of my, that sounds like work too, but I would go to Quito on weekends and work on this health book, and it was beyond just recipes for Peace Corps volunteers. It was what are nutrient rich, iron rich foods, and vitamin C rich foods of Ecuador? Very Ecuador specific that can be used as a Peace Corps health manual, so to speak.

ZAKS: [00:44:09] And then the Peace Corps nurses that were doing training for the two groups of new volunteers who come in every year in Ecuador. I was always the one that they brought in to discuss the health needs, nutrition needs. I shouldn't say health needs. Nutrition needs for volunteers. And expose them to all the funky, different foods that they were not used to, but they were going to get used to it if they were going to make it in Peace Corps Ecuador. And that was also a blast. So I helped a lot with the other volunteers, so I got to know all the different, we call them omnibuses in Ecuador. I was Omnibus 78. But all the different omnibuses. And I became known as the Buen Provecho lady because of that.

ZAKS: [00:44:50] Fun things too with things like whale watching. That was an amazing experience and just the cultural, everything from Carnival, that's a big deal in Ecuador, to the new year. They have some fascinating customs that we don't have in the United States so experiencing those with my Ecuadorian friends was really important thing to do.

FAGLER: [00:45:08] And did you do a vacation outside of the country, or did you just travel around when you were there?

ZAKS: [00:45:16] After three years of being in the country, I actually did, in that last year, I happened to be able to go. And I went with the youth volunteer for my original training group before she closed out her service. We went to Argentina, Chile, a little piece of Brazil and Bolivia. So it took about three weeks and got to see some of South America, experience some of South America.

FAGLER: [00:45:39] And how long? So for three weeks, you did a little vacation in Brazil you're saying?

ZAKS: [00:45:45] Brazil, Argentina, Chile and Bolivia. And then we also, a bunch of us also went. I had some friends come in from the States. We went out to the Galapagos, the archipelago that is off the coast of Ecuador.

FAGLER: [00:45:57] Now, since you stayed there longer than your two-year assignment, I'm assuming you did feel a sense of achievement.

ZAKS: [00:46:06] Absolutely. Oh, absolutely. I think when you physically have a structure that you're building from the ground up and you're part of that, that is a huge sense of achievement to see the walls and the moms and their kids come in and use it as a functioning center. And that opened probably, I probably stayed only eight months after. I mean, it was like fully established and really comfortable in their new space and hiring new people and being a part of that. So yeah, I absolutely felt that contributions were made on my part. But I mean, as Peace Corps you learn so much from the people there too. But I had something to offer and I was able to do that. And I know, you know, leaving that behind also helped a lot of kids thrive and grow and not die, because we did have some kids who just didn't make it.

FAGLER: [00:46:54] You've only told us about some of the pluses and minuses and the problems you had in Ecuador and the wonderful things you were able to do in Ecuador. What was it really like to work with the people and do you have any regrets?

ZAKS: [00:47:11] Working with the people was wonderful. The Latin culture Ecuadorians in general, but Latin, having worked in other Latin American countries, they're so warm and hospitable. I've had the opportunity to work all over the world since then and before then, and that is my favorite region of the world to work in. There is a warmth, there's a vibrancy. We walk down the street, because I would walk to work and I often varied my walk, one for safety reasons, two because it was just fascinating. You know, this road is going to be a whole different adventure to get to work. It's about a 30 minute walk to work through a city. So I mean, that's interesting in itself, and you get a sense of the aliveness of a city when you're walking through it every day back and forth.

FAGLER: [00:47:54] And after your service or almost up to the very end, what were your plans for the future? You know you're going to leave Ecuador eventually, so what were your plans? What were you thinking about?

ZAKS: [00:48:03] That was hard because I also knew I've been there for quite some time. I was of an age, I turned 30 there, and I was in my early 30s by the time I left and I knew there had to be life after Ecuador development work. We have to work ourselves out of jobs as Peace Corps volunteers and hopefully leave an infrastructure behind, you know, that was there already and then to build on what was there. All that being said, in November of the year before I was thinking of leaving, I took myself, I flew myself to the American Public Health Association complex because I figured I had been out of touch with what's going on in public health beyond my little world of Ecuador and these malnourished kids and whatnot. And I looked and saw what jobs were out there, and I actually, you know, I left my resume behind and I got a phone call in Ecuador, I was shocked, from the CDC and they said, we'd love to interview you. When are you thinking of leaving? I'm not thinking of leaving, oh my goodness.

ZAKS: [00:48:58] So it forced me to think of leaving in January. I left in February. I started with the CDC in 2001, so it was. I will say, it'd be healthier for me, a regret I do have, not from Ecuador, but to allow myself more readjustment time because, you know, within three weeks. A week after getting off the plane, I had the interview at CDC and within a couple of

weeks I started the new job. I did that partly for financial reasons. Not being paid for three and a half plus years is a long time to not be paid and I needed to to go on. Any regrets I have actually of Ecuador? I don't have a lot of regrets. I think the time away from my medevacs, that would be a regret because I was out. I mean, I was out of the country. I was back in the U.S. For unfortunate reasons, so.

FAGLER: [00:49:47] And overall, can you evaluate your service in light of the three goals of Peace Corps?

ZAKS: [00:49:54] Well, if I look at the technical assistance where requested, having a nutrition background and just community health background, I learned a lot more about the basics, malaria and parasitic diseases, things like that, but also brought to the table ways that we could make the most of the resources that were there. And so I felt very comfortable doing that. And as I mentioned, just helping kids thrive and grow and getting their families to a point through home visits and working with them one-on-one. And, you know, cooking demos and things like that to where moms could feel empowered too. There were some sustainable development projects that went with that.

ZAKS: [00:50:34] With the Americans and looking at how people view us. You know, the ladies, the wonderful ladies that worked in the kitchen, they would want to wash my own apron for me. No, Laurel, you need to do that. No, I have two hands just like you have. I will wait in the bread line just like you are. I mean, really trying to sell sure, my skin is just certain color. My eyes are blue. But you know what? We are all the same people. So that's important, and I think. They will comment, you know, they're seeing the movies that we bring over there and in Latin America on the busses, that's all they see in the corner with that, and they think every woman sleeps with every man that they meet and they all live together. And just to show them that we're not like that, it's not the way it is, so that's important I think. So that made a difference in different perspectives.

ZAKS: [00:51:20] And, you know, to this day, I'm still in contact with them. It's 2005 now and I left in 2001. I went back a year after I left and got to see what was going on, and I hope one day to go back. In my training group,

there was a bond that we had. Ten of us lasted from the health group by the time COS, or close of service, happened. And of the 36, 38, I think probably a little better than half lasted. So I mean, there was a lot of people that did leave Peace Corps Ecuador, but there were eight of us, eight out of the 38 that stayed after. And I think six of those eight married in Ecuador. Yeah, so there's something about our training group because I had the very big fortune to work with Miriam Freones was a Peace Corps nurse who was there for 39 years, so she was at the start of Peace Corps. She was an institution for Peace Corps worldwide. And she did say our group was a special little group and we really bonded and we still have reunions among ourselves. And that's just, you know, a real treasure.

FAGLER: [00:52:26] And so are you continually in contact with people from your country of Ecuador?

ZAKS: [00:52:31] Sure.

FAGLER: [00:52:31] By email or letters or whatever?

ZAKS: [00:52:32] Email, not some limited email, more with the position, but some of the nurses and whatnot, it's phone calls. Or if I know someone's going back and forth, I'll ask them to bring a letter or a gift or something like that and they'll send something back. So it is. We definitely still have contact and I'm actually a board member of Ecuadorian Rivers Institute, an NGO that a friend of mine started down there, and it works to protect the watershed at the headwaters of the Amazon. So I have regular contact with that. Ecuador is a part of me now.

FAGLER: [00:53:03] And how have you been involved with the whole third goal that Peace Corps has, in terms of how have you, what type of activities have you been a part of with the third goal?

ZAKS: [00:53:15] I think that in my work all around the world, not just Peace Corps Ecuador, it's important to understand that, sure, we come from a research rich country and to be able to share what knowledge we have is great, but to be able to share it in a way that makes the most of the resources in these other places. I think that's probably, just to show that

commitment. That absolute hard core is fundamentally who I am. It's a part of me, and if you know me, you're going to know that. So I think sharing that commitment and showing them the respect that is deserved and, you know, hopefully it goes back to us as Americans too. But to also share with people that we're not just what you see on the TV screen in the, um, not just the commercial kind of things. But just with the political environment that we have and the different reputations the U.S. has, just to show that we are real people who just like other peoples of the world, you know, like to have a safe house over your head and nutrition to feed you and love and nurturing relationships. And just to show that you're a person. You're not just this technical machine that comes out there, but that you are a person.

FAGLER: [00:54:25] And in terms of your Peace Corps service, how has it affected you as a person, your career plans, long term possibilities?

ZAKS: [00:54:36] I think that it's, I'm committed to public health and international public health and to solidify that even more. What the Peace Corps experience has done for me is when I'm out in the field working with the governments or non-governmental organizations or academic institutions in these other countries with my CDC job, I can speak from real experience, having lived in a culture and working in a health perspective for three and a half plus years, in a way that they're real experiences. And when I do training, it's drawn from real experiences of what I've lived in. Long term, I'm going to, I'm committed to public health. It's a part of what I am now, and I think the Peace Corps just is a wonderful experience for people in any location in public health. I actually believe that's the case. And at CDC here, it's very well respected, and we're crawling around all over this place, returned Peace Corps volunteers. And with that, we have a bond, you know, no matter where we served.

ZAKS: [00:55:35] That's great. We have a little bit more time here. Is anything else you'd like to say, Laurel? Or would you join the Peace Corps again, possibly in the future when you retire?

FAGLER: [00:55:42] I would actually. I wouldn't hesitate. Right now, I do realize I need to take care of myself. I've never been motivated by money, but as a

person, as a single female who does need to take care of herself, I need to make up for some lost time with regards the gaining of material things. Not to buy material things, but just to get a paycheck so that when I do Peace Corps later, I have the capability just to still care of myself. I think that's important because you never know where life is going to take us, but I wouldn't hesitate to do it. But it would be, it would be after the fact, after I've worked, you know, a good thirty, forty years here, yeah, at this point.

FAGLER: [00:56:22] So anything else you like to say?

ZAKS: [00:56:24] I'm just so thankful that the people that I've met in Ecuador, both Ecuadorians and the people I shared the Peace Corps experience with, are still to this day. There's not a week that goes by that some piece of Peace Corps Ecuador isn't in harmony. And that's what I feel so blessed and very fortunate with because I had a bumpy road, two medevacs. Three site changes. That's not easy. Absolutely not easy. An APCD that supported me to a limit. It was really the country director that could see that I knew what I was doing. I was capable and competent, and just supported me in that way. Still in contact with the APCD, actually. I mean, well I actually am with the APCD, but more the country director and the second in charge also, the PTO there. They're wonderful people and to this day, you know, many years. Their service is done, my service is done, but you know, those relationships last if you allow them to.

FAGLER: [00:57:20] OK, well thank you very much.

ZAKS: [00:57:22] Sure.

[END OF INTERVIEW]