John W. Bing Oral History Interview
Returned Peace Corps Volunteer Collection
Administrative Information

Creator: John W. Bing
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Date of Interview: November 5, 2018
Location of Interview: Blue Bell, Pennsylvania
Length: 28 pages

Biographical Note
John W. Bing served as a Peace Corps volunteer in Afghanistan from 1964 to 1967 as an English teacher (Afghanistan III).

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Suggested Citation
John W. Bing, recorded interview by Evelyn Ganzglass, November 5, 2018, page #, Returned Peace Corps Volunteer Collection, John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum.

Oral History Interview

with

John W. Bing

November 5, 2018
Blue Bell, Pennsylvania

By Evelyn Ganzglass

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

GANZGLASS: [00:00:02] Today is November 5, 2018. This is Evelyn Ganzglass. I was a Peace Corps volunteer in Somalia from 1966 to 1968. And today I am interviewing John Bing, who was a Peace Corps volunteer in Afghanistan from 1964 to 1967, and he was part of the Afghan III project. John, why did you join the Peace Corps?

BING: [00:00:33] It was a turbulent time and I had just left graduate school. My father was an immigrant to the country and I had the international bug. I did not have the international bug strong enough to go to Vietnam. And so I found that I had applied to the Peace Corps for French Africa. And naturally, they sent me to Afghanistan, where not a lot of French was spoken, which I hope to to learn. And instead I learned the lingua franca of Afghanistan, which is very much better than I ever learn French.

BING: [00:01:34] So it was in a way, a continuation of my international and cross-cultural interest that started off by observing my parents, my father coming from Germany and being very much to the German temperament culture, the leader of the family and my mother, who was Irish English descent, who'd been over here for a long time, her family, and she was expected to be the house awhile. So I noticed that initially some strong cross-cultural differences and my role in the family as the oldest was to heal up all those cross-cultural differences. So very early I got involved in in that field. My mother's idea of child rearing was to say that everything that the child does is wonderful and could do no wrong. And my father was the opposite, that this guy is a dummkopf and couldn't do anything right. So I saw these differences from a very early time. And the Peace Corps was a way of testing myself in international waters.

GANZGLASS: [00:03:02] And Vietnam was still going on at that point?

BING: [00:03:06] And was still going on at that point. So when I got there,

GANZGLASS: [00:03:15] When you got to Afghanistan.

BING: [00:03:17] Yeah, I immediately learned of a strong cultural difference. When I went up to buy some oranges and decided to try out my Dari, was called Farsi then, a variation of Iranian Persian. And so I went up and I, I knew that you negotiated. And so I started to negotiate and I said, how much is this orange? And he said, It's one Afghani. And I said, well, If I buy two, how much will it be to Afghani? And I said, well, I think I'll take all 10. And he said, I'm not selling any to you. And the reason was because he was horrified. He was even though he was only a street seller of fruit, he was an older man with great dignity. And I had insulted him by over negotiating the. So I learned very early on about that cultural differences were more subtle than I had learned.

BING: [00:04:34] Speaking of the training, learning about Afghanistan, there were two important things that that were an upshot of their training.

One was that I met a lifelong friend first there, one of the language teachers who became Dr Isohn Intisar, and whose funeral I went to two months ago in Lodi, California. So we know knew each other. Much of our lives and had great affinity and friendship and affection for each other. The other was a Kennedy was assassinated during that time. And so it was it was really quite in a way, a difficult period. So I found myself in Afghanistan after the training and began my work as an English teacher.

GANZGLASS: [00:05:38] Ok, we're going to back up a little bit. But I also want to go back and just talk about the experience of being in Afghanistan when the president was killed. So you applied. Where did you grow up?

BING: [00:05:56] All over the country, the eastern part of the country, New York City, Connecticut, Alabama, Missouri, Michigan.

GANZGLASS: [00:06:03] And you got your master's degree when you applied?

BING: [00:06:08] When I applied, I applied from graduate school, which I actually left without completing it. Later when I returned, I got my doctorate from the University of Massachusetts in international education.

GANZGLASS: [00:06:21] What had you been studying before?

BING: [00:06:24] I was thinking about going into journalism, and it just it just I just didn't know what I want to do. So I decided to give myself a couple of years and, you know, see what I was like two and three years from now.

GANZGLASS: [00:06:44] And where were you in school?

BING: [00:06:45] Well, I went to did my undergraduate work at Harvard in English Lit and then went to the University of Michigan.

GANZGLASS: [00:06:55] The home of Peace Corps.

BING: [00:06:59] And that's right. At least that's where the idea was brooded about,

GANZGLASS: [00:07:02] Where it was discussed at first. So how did you know about Peace Corps?

BING: [00:07:10] I was very much devoted follower of of Kennedy And one and I knew of the fact that he'd taken up the Peace Corps as one of his signature signature approaches to foreign international work.

GANZGLASS: [00:07:32] Ok, so you applied and you were clearly accepted.

BING: Yes. And different part of the world.

GANZGLASS: Different part of the world. Were you happy about being accepted to Afghanistan or did you look back and complain about that?

BING: [00:07:47] No, no, I, I think I knew enough about the federal government to know that complaining wouldn't get you very far.

GANZGLASS: [00:07:53] So some people complained and shifted.

BING: [00:07:55] Well, really? And then I didn't know as much as I thought I did. In any event, I quickly I was quickly brought to a training program at the experiment in International Living in Brattleboro.

GANZGLASS: [00:08:10] That's where the in country training was.

BING: [00:08:12] That's right. At that time, all of the training was in country within the U.S., I should say. And they it was quite an excellent program. And I got to know all the Afghan instructors very well, and I like them. One incident from that period I remember well is that I was invited to play a game of chess with an Afghan. And there were two

surprising cultural differences. The first one was that there were certain moves that were made by the knight and the king, which worked the same as Western chess. And I think I believe that it's an earlier form of chess. It was the way chess developed from. And for example, when you brought the pawn down to the final rank, you didn't get a choice of pieces. You got the piece on which the pawn landed. Oh, that was one of the differences. The other more interesting difference was that instead of having one opponent, there were four opponents and they were all helping the original opponent. There were all the Afghans who are helping this guy.

BING: [00:09:37] And I didn't understand. And I got a little bit hot under the collar and I said, why are you helping my opponent? And they said, well, he's a friend of ours. Would you help a friend? So I learned what later would become the first dimension. Of Hofstede's original four dimensions of cultural differences, Geert, who was the leading researcher in the field of cross-cultural differences, and that's the difference between individualism and collectivism. And I being very individualistic American thought everybody was, especially at that point in my life. And I learned immediately at that just table that there was quite a different approach that I was about to walk into. And I like that because that meant I was learning and I was interested in that. So so.

GANZGLASS: [00:10:45] So you learned Dari, I mean, you started learning cultural differences. What was so the Dari instruction, I assume, was pretty straightforward. What was your cultural?

BING: [00:10:56] Well, actually, the language was not straightforward because they didn't have a language manual at that time. And during that time, the man who became my friend, Dr. Intisar, wrote the manual and hand because we were friendly. He wrote me into it. So all the dialogs were between all of us, which is very hard for Americans to say because of the guttural sound and John being so, you know, one dialog would say problem. Well, says John, being, can you lead with your hands because Afghanistan ends. And now, you know, John

being meat swallowed was his friend and so on and so forth. And about 10 years ago, I got a postcard in the mail from some poor volunteer, had to go through all this dialog saying, can John being still eat with his hands? And it was anonymous. It wasn't signed anyway.

GANZGLASS: [00:11:55] So so you're immortalized?

BING: [00:11:58] In a very odd way. That's a very odd way. So but that was the beginning of this lifelong friendship that ended two months ago. It was at his graveside. And I was the only non-Muslim at that at that event and his and with his family the day before. And it it was probably one of the strongest friendships that I've had. So so it started back pre my service in the Peace Corps. And now the cross-cultural question that you just asked me, it was a time of trance's transition between the various studies approach where people gave you a bunch of lectures about the soil types of various things in Afghanistan or the history of the place and much more of a how do you get along in another culture with these characteristics. And so it was in that transition period when I got a little bit of of each, but it started me a long life of work in the cross-cultural field when I came back.

BING: [00:13:22] Just jump ahead to explain that. When I came back, I trained a lot of Peace Corps volunteers from a group called the Center for Research and Education in Estes Park, Colorado. That was just just after I came back, I came back and became a member of the Washington staff and I was a training officer. And then in their wisdom, the Peace Corps abolished the office of training one day. So I went out and joined a group that I had some admiration for. The leader of that Center for Research and Education was Pauline Burki. Pauline Burki had done some of the initial work on developing the Peace Corps in Pakistan, and she was a remarkable woman who mentored me in the cross-cultural field. And I was a coauthor of the first draft of the Peace Corps Manual on cross-cultural training. And so I was interested in all these new techniques of helping people work through these cultural differences. And from that point on, I got my degree in international

education from the. The Massachusetts Center for International Education and then started my own firm with my former Peace Corps director, Bob Steiner. We started a firm that was in the language training field for people coming to the United States and who are going to go to college here. And so we set up a training program for them and we worked together on that for four or five years until I started my own firm, which is still around called I Tap International, was originally in the National Training Associates to Princeton.

GANZGLASS: [00:15:46] But OK, you're jumping way ahead. OK, so we're going to try to do this somewhat not not totally linear, but a little linear.

BING: Logic is different in different cultures.

GANZGLASS: I totally understand that. But I think that all. So you were trained in Brattleboro. How many people were in your your group?

BING: [00:16:14] About 45.

GANZGLASS: [00:16:16] And all in and in training and education, where they all

BING: [00:16:22] No, all kinds of different fields. We had a beekeeper. I think we had a warehouse warehouse people who knew how to,

GANZGLASS: [00:16:32] But all going to Afghanistan?

BING: [00:16:34] All going to Afghanistan, various forms of educators, probably the largest group was the English as a second language group. And that's what I was in.

GANZGLASS: [00:16:44] So anything else you want to say about the training at the time and but family, the friendships you made. But do you think the training now that you've become a professional over all the years in this field, do you think the training adequately prepared you for the Peace Corps?

BING: [00:17:04] It did a fairly good job. I, I think I was fortunate to have very competent people running that program. And certainly the language training was excellent. The cross-cultural training was good. And then, you know, I picked up a lot of my own through my friendships with the Afghans as the chess game was an example of. So I think it you know, I had no complaints at any time about that program. So. Yeah, yeah.

GANZGLASS: [00:17:41] So you then flew from somewhere from Boston or somewhere?

BING: [00:17:46] I think it was JFK, but not sure.

GANZGLASS: [00:17:49] OK, whatever. To where? To Kabul?

BING: [00:17:51] Well we, we overnighted in Tehran and then took what later we called the, the Afghan airlines what we call the Insha'Allah Airlines.

GANZGLASS: [00:18:05] Because there were numerous Insha'Allah airlines, you know, we had the same airline in Somalia.

BING: [00:18:13] So Ariana was took us into into Kabul, where I first met Bob Snyder, who would later become my business partner. And Stiner was a legend among Peace Corps directors because he had grown up in Iran and spoke perfect Farsi and impress the Afghans. No end, because not only did he speak their language, but he spoke had better, quote unquote, better than they because it was more formal Irani.

GANZGLASS: [00:18:49] Yeah, interesting. All right. So you got to Kabul and then immediately assigned to different places, or was there further training?

BING: [00:19:00] No, there was no further training, which brings up the whole matter of Peace Corps training. It started off all in the U.S. or I think Puerto Rico had a Peace Corps center, but basically it was in the U.S.

And then by the time I got into providing Peace Corps training, we did it half and half, half in the U.S. And

GANZGLASS: [00:19:25] Now it's totally overseas.

BING: [00:19:27] And now it's totally overseas, which I think I think the half and half model was the best preparation because you can do certain things from here that you can't do there and you can do a lot there. You can't do here. So in any event, yeah, that was.

GANZGLASS: [00:19:45] All right. So where you got to Kabul, let me ask what happened when you got off the plane? Were you shocked?

BING: [00:19:52] No, I was I was intensely interested in what I would find. And so. Did all kinds of sort of experiment experimental theories, but one characteristic I had again, related to this cross-cultural area is that I was really a type A personality. I was always trying to meet the Afghans I was supposed to meet to set up classes or to do this or that or whatever, and they would never be there. And I was I was confused by this. And and then if an Afghan guy took me, said, well, we're going to go to a teahouse together. I said, why? I got things to do, important things to do. And he said, we're going to together. So he sat me down and four hours later we were still sitting there and I had calmed down. I had not only calmed down, but I but he taught me a lesson which was in Afghanistan, there's you must take time for contemplation. And you must take time for things other than meetings. We had tea poured into teapots from some of ours, and in the beginning you put five or six spoonful of sugar into a cup. The tea was over sweetened, but by the tenth cup with bitter. And my friend said, Well, that's life. That's sweet now. But you get older, gets a little more bitter. So there were a lot of those kinds of

GANZGLASS: [00:21:36] Wise statements.

BING: [00:21:38] There were a lot of those kinds of learnings. I within the first three weeks, I found myself invited to a dinner where the lamb was served and I was served the lamb's eyes as being a guest and so on. So I dutifully consumed it. There were the first assignment I had was at the University of Kabul. Doing what? Teaching English. And for three months after the university was supposed to open, it was still locked up tight. And the reason for that was that the book, the chapter of the people who kept the classrooms and the offices clean, were also docked their pay, if any anything was missing from the rooms. So they discovered the best way to keep the room safe was to keep it locked, which they did so nobody could get into the university. That was the story we tell. Looking back on it, I can't imagine it's true, but it might be. We were three months and during that cold Kabul winter when it got down to many, many degrees below zero, we had nothing to do but to tend these fires in our rooms which were made. This was a Peace Corps innovation made out of sawdust, and they were tin can, big tent camp with sawdust in the middle and you put a pipe down top of it and then you lit you took the pipe out act and took the pipe out, and then you lit it from the middle out. And the theoretically, it was supposed to burn from the middle out to the ends that provide heat and sawdust was very, very cheap and otherwise unused. And so the Peace Corps saw. But the problem was it wasn't designed properly and sawdust kept falling in the middle, in which case you'd have the smoke coming out into your room. And this would happen two or three times.

GANZGLASS: [00:23:50] Not a great design.

BING: [00:23:51] No, no, it wasn't a great invention. But we waited two or three months and finally the place opened and I taught there for a year.

GANZGLASS: [00:23:59] Then it was at the college level?

BING: [00:24:02] Yes, this was at the college level.

GANZGLASS: [00:24:04] Men, women?

BING: [00:24:07] There were a few women. And this was a very odd time in Afghanistan in terms of women's rights, because Zahir Shah, the king, had decided that they needed where the Shah there anymore. And you saw actually saw Afghan women in miniskirts. And during those times it was very strange interim time when women had more freedom, I think, than either before or since. And so they joined their fellow students in classes and so on. And this all fell apart when the Taliban came in.

GANZGLASS: [00:24:50] So just going, so where did you live? Did you live at the university?

BING: [00:24:55] No, no. We had a Peace Corps rented houses for all the volunteers all over the city.

GANZGLASS: [00:25:02] In Kabul?

BING: In Kabul.

GANZGLASS: So there were lots of volunteers in Kabul.

BING: [00:25:04] Lots of volunteers in Kabul. The Afghans.

GANZGLASS: [00:25:08] And you shared a house with or an apartment?

BING: [00:25:11] With two others. Yeah, and we got along sometimes well and sometimes not well. But I remembered that nobody changed. We got electricity occasionally and then the lights would come on. But when they blew out, nobody changed the light bulbs. But yeah, it was a waiting time. The second year I went to Baghlan in the north to teach at a middle school there. And that was a much lovelier experience.

GANZGLASS: [00:25:54] Well, let me point to that. But so you taught English at the university level and they were were they starting students?

BING: [00:26:02] So, yeah.

GANZGLASS: [00:26:04] They know some English. What was they like?

BING: [00:26:07] There were a variety of of abilities in the class. And I remember one tall Pashtun guy, the Pushtuns, that's basically came from the southern and western part of Afghanistan. And he was from Kandahar. And he I was sick one day and I was in bed and he came to visit me with a bunch of oranges. And he said to me, you know, I have to pass my exams because my family would be they spent all this money to send me to Kabul. And if I don't pass, they will have a sense of shame. And they are they do a lot of mischief. My family, they they they happen to take gold and drugs from one part of the border to the other. So anyway, I just hope you get well and I do well. So he left and I the the Afghan fellow who worked for me because I did the house cleaning and stuff, he he started to laugh and he said, you better watch out for that guy. He's one tough guy. And so that set up a kind of a conundrum for me, you know, whether I was going to follow the precepts of good teaching and and flunk the guy or.

GANZGLASS: [00:27:51] It was that bad? He was not going to do well.

BING: [00:27:52] And or whether I would pass him and and my life would be safe. So the passing grade at that time at the University of Kabul was 35 out of 100. The guy got 38 out of 100. I gave him this paper back and he said to me, my family will do anything for you. You will come. We will give you a feast in Kandahar. I said, you did it all by yourself. I did all. We understand all that.

GANZGLASS: [00:28:25] Take credit, why not?

BING: [00:28:29] Well, so, anyway, it was there was so much about Afghanistan then. That was 13th century. That was the way things had been done. And I remember speaking with the farmer in in Babylon

and asking him how his crops were doing. And he said that we're doing very well for for some time. I said, what's the problem? And he said, well, Genghis Khan destroyed all our underground water supplies. And things have been tough ever since. So it was you know, the memories went back that far. And and it was it was very much a 13th century kingdom.

GANZGLASS: [00:29:21] So in caste and class or in other ways as well?

BING: [00:29:29] Well, my friend Dr. Intisar once broke them down, according to various broke down the social structure, according to various affinities which included gender, wealth or class religion, since there were two parts of Islamic, the Sunnis and the Shias and then the other subsections of the of the Sunnis and Shias, according to what you saw, how much land you own, whether you're a government official or not, and three or four other categories, all of which were affinities. And it all depended how much that affinity group could provide as to which one you decided to join.

GANZGLASS: [00:30:23] And so you had choices.

BING: [00:30:27] You within limits. There were choices. Yes, you could you could stick with the Shias if you were a Hazara, as they were called, and the Shias were in the central part of the country. And if they went outside that they were discriminated against. So you could just stay where you were instead of going out there, or you could join the government and, you know, become a government affinity group. There were all kinds of.

GANZGLASS: [00:31:00] But there was a way was there a way of escaping the poor, or you know.

BING: [00:31:09] Limited. Now, once again, my friend, Dr. Intisar was born a poor child in a village in the central south part of Afghanistan, and he managed to do that. But through dint of extraordinary hard work.

GANZGLASS: [00:31:30] And usually you're stuck.

BING: [00:31:32] Well, there was a lot of stratification. Yeah.

GANZGLASS: [00:31:35] Yeah. So why did you decide to leave? Did you decide you wanted to leave Kabul or was it?

BING: [00:31:42] I think it was a joint decision with the with with Bob Steinar.

GANZGLASS: [00:31:47] Then why did you do it?

BING: [00:31:50] Well, we were stuck in this university that opened three months late and was not really organized well at all. And I was interested in going to the provinces and seeing what it was like outside Kabul. And he said, go for it.

GANZGLASS: [00:32:10] So just before we leave Kabul, who did you interact with? Did you interact with your teachers, with your fellow teachers, with students, with neighbors, the volunteers, all of the above?

BING: [00:32:25] All, pretty much all of the above. By the time I had been there for a year, I was speaking fairly good Farsi so I could get around quite a bit. And so I met with fellow teachers. We would go off, we'd have parties with them. There were Peace Corps parties. So there was there was a social life. There was also a bit of the how to put it. Afghanistan has always been the crossroads of many civilizations, cultures. And also of adversaries and the Russians and the Americans at that time were vying for influence, and so occasionally we'd go to volunteers to go to parties where there were clearly Afghans from the government who are asking interesting questions about why the American government was supporting certain person and the government. And do you support him or you know, so it was fairly clear that this was kind of a job that we were being watched closely. And that added a little a little taste of

GANZGLASS: [00:33:51] Did you meet any Russian American spies while you were there?

BING: [00:33:56] I'm sure I did. And I'm glad the Russians were a little bit they hadn't come in and in great numbers. The Americans had built the university. They had built roads over the country. The Russians built the road north, which went to the highest tunnel, this low lying pass in the world, I think at the time that it was built and which they later used to invade the country. And the Americans built an airport in Kandahar on the supposition that this is USAID and the supposition that planes would have to stop there to refuel on the way to India, which was entirely false, that they had could carry enough fuel that need to stop there. And even if they had, they wouldn't have been any fuel because there was no fuel in the country anyway. This perfect airport, millions and millions and millions of dollars just sat there. Pretty much unused plane is full later. Yes. To the Russian pilots. We're bombing Afghanistan. Yeah, well, OK.

GANZGLASS: [00:35:08] So you left Kabul and you moved to the north.

BING: [00:35:12] To the north.

GANZGALSS: To a middle school.

BING: [00:35:15] To Baghlan. B-A-G-H-L-A-N. And by that time I had married and so my wife and I, who was another, she was a Peace Corps volunteer in group one. Oh, we were there and she.

GANZGLASS: [00:35:35] You missed a whole moment. I mean, you just kind of jumped over all that.

BING: [00:35:40] Well, just.

GANZGLASS: [00:35:41] Spend two minutes on meeting your future wife.

BING: [00:35:45] Suffice it to say that we had our wedding party at the ambassador's house because he had fallen for her because she had been an actress in Oklahoma, Laurie, and she'd overcome the ambassador. So he gave us to the party at the ambassador. It also happened that we, in fact, weren't married because the American chargé at the time didn't know U.S. law. U.S. law states you have to be married by a country official, a country in which you reside. He didn't know that. So there were about twenty couples married at that time who turned out not to married.

GANZGLASS: [00:36:32] But the embassy is an American, embassies are always considered the property of.

BING: [00:36:39] We weren't married at the embassy. We just had the party there. OK, so so it turned out that when we were back to train volunteers later on, we found out we weren't married at that time. My my living lady friend kept saying, what are we going to get married? So we're pretty busy now let's wait until we finally went to a police station and with my friend Dr. Intisar's help, who was translator, we got married by the police department and of course I had to give a bride price. And so I offered twenty dollars.

GANZGLASS: [00:37:23] She still married you for that little money?

BING: [00:37:28] The policeman looked at me and said, twenty dollars. That's not very much. I said we know each other. Anyway.

GANZGLASS: [00:37:41] Ok, so after that diversion so talk a little bit about the middle school where you taught or Baghlan. What is Baghlan like?

BING: [00:37:51] Baghlan was small, was a large town, not a city on the way to Kunduz, which is the northernmost city in Afghanistan. And it was primarily agriculture at that time, and this was an agricultural school that I taught at and I had to, I watched the Afghan teachers, how they

disciplined the kids and and they they were harsh and how they discipline the kids. And I said, well, you know, I don't know why you're doing that. And I said, well, the kids won't learn unless they're listening and they won't listen if they're talking and you don't.

GANZGLASS: [00:38:45] But they used to switch.

BING: [00:38:47] Yeah. And so one day I taught all my classes outdoors next to the Julie that Julie is the canal which runs by the road in which which is both washing and sewer line for the town. And there was one kid who was really acting up. And so I decided I would swat him in the Afghan manner. But there was something in me that didn't quite allow me to do that. So instead of hitting him, I knocked off his Karakul cap, I hit his cap. Now the Karakul caps are the most important possession of young of young men and older men. Actually, at that time, they're pretty expensive. And they can landed in this water line. Yes. And started floating downstream. And the little boy started crying. And I ran after the hat, brushed it off like and gave it back to him. I never touched the child. That was a good lesson for me. And so, you know, I taught on my way and the Afghans taught in their way. The other incident that occurred there, which is of I think importance, was that when I arrived at the school, the principal gave a little talk about, you know, about me just saying hello, welcome. And then the mullah, the religious leader, gave a talk and which he said, this is a person who come a long way to teach you. And if I hear any problems with between you and him, it's going to fall on you very badly. Now, that incident and then later he asked me for a copy of the Bible and in person, which I was able to find for him and gave to him. So we had a distant relationship. And obviously he was very helpful. And I took that incident once at an American cross much later, maybe 20 years ago, which would make it around the turn of the 20th century, 21st century.

BING: [00:41:17] And and gave three options about what the mullah would have said to me, to a group that were cross-cultural types, one of which was that one, one of which is in which he said, this American is

our enemy. You know, don't help him in any way or this American is here. Treat him any way you like. And they never chose the actual event, because I think Americans have been conditioned to believe that if you have if you're with muslims, they will treat you badly with the opposite case was true.

GANZGLASS: [00:41:59] So for us in a totally Muslim country as well. Yeah. So you taught middle school English, is that right?

BING: [00:42:10] The Columbia University Education Division had been for some years producing textbooks in Afghanistan, in Kabul, and they were distributed throughout the country. They're pretty, pretty good textbooks. I've been taught to teach English and in certain ways in training, which were reasonably successful. And so we use those books and and the aural-oral method, since there were 40 to 50 kids in every classroom, the oral method or the repeat after me in ingroup form was the best method to use at that time. Certainly you couldn't use individual attention.

GANZGLASS: [00:42:57] Did you get to know any of the kids?

BING: [00:43:00] To to know any of them? Oh, well, since they were ten, eight, nine, 10, 11. They weren't they were kids.

GANZGLASS: [00:43:10] They were kids. Was it a boarding school?

BING: [00:43:14] No, that came from the surrounding area. There were also nurses, volunteer nurses in the town. And but it was there. We didn't have a big presence. We were we were kind of isolated up there. But that was fine. We were part of the town.

GANZGLASS: [00:43:32] And did you become friends with any of the teachers there?

BING: [00:43:35] Yeah, we became friends with some of the teachers. The guy who worked with for me in Kabul came up with me to to bottom.

And I was began to be a gardener there. And I wanted to it was hard to get fresh, fresh vegetables. So I took some manure that was being sold. I bought some manure and put it on my garden. And this fellow came back who was who is a joker. He was he was always making jokes. And he looked at what I done and he said, did you pay for that? I said, Sure. How much did you pay? Five hundred Afghani or something. And he said only foreigners would pay for shit in Afghanistan. That's the only thing we have a lot of.

GANZGLASS: [00:44:38] So I was a married volunteer, and I've always questioned how different the experiences of a married volunteer and an unmarried volunteering since you were both. And you reflect a little bit about that.

BING: [00:44:54] Well, very much different, because as an unmarried volunteer, Afghans would ask, where is your family? How come they let you come so far alone? It doesn't make any sense to us. Again, this individual group difference where you were individuals from a family weren't really thought to be ready for any kind of independent living, maybe ever, really, because they lived in large compounds and so on and they weren't expected to leave town and so on. So this idea of somebody coming this far alone was strange. But as a married unit, you had a bit more of legitimacy in the cultural context and people could situate you in their own cultural and cultural approaches.

GANZGLASS: [00:45:57] So did you travel around Afghanistan?

BING: [00:46:04] I didn't. I did most of my traveling around Afghanistan after my Peace Corps service was done. My then wife went to Iraq to teach English for six months. And for six months, I became a staff member, kind of a writer around the country. So I travel all over the place, through the. I remember once carrying a heavy, heavy load from the U.S. embassy up to a volunteer in the north. And we were in a half ton pickup or two ton pickup. And every day the roads were just atrocious, just full of the potholes that could swallow you. And. And then when it rained, of course, we could go anywhere. And we broke a spring in the

truck every 50 miles. We did just break. And so we'd go to the next town and there would always be a blacksmith because there were blacksmiths in every town. So he just

GANZGLASS: [00:47:24] To fix those.

BING: [00:47:26] He'd fix this and we'd go another 50 miles and find another blacksmith and so on.

GANZGLASS: [00:47:29] And you are teaching you were helping with teaching?

BING: [00:47:32] No, at that point I was I was carrying mail and money and packages to volunteers when we reached the volunteer in the far north with these five heavy cases of material from the embassy. We brought them into his home and somehow he managed to finagle a refrigerator. You had a refrigerator. And I said, what? What in the heck is in these boxes? He said, well, let's open them and find out. Well, it turns out he had a girlfriend in the embassy and she was sending him cartons of beer. I have to confess that I was rather happy. So even though it was technically illegal.

GANZGLASS: [00:48:26] So you carted all that beer?

BING: [00:48:30] Yeah, and then made the circle right around Afghanistan and went to Mazar-i-Sharif and then Maymana and Herat and then Kandahar and then down below Kandahar into the desert where I got stuck. We got it was a trackless desert. So you sort of had to point your way towards the direction you went. And we got into a dry riverbed and got stuck at noon in the desert, the dusty Hollywood, which was called the empty desert. And there was a a guy who was an evaluator from the University of Texas who was with me. And the driver of the truck was an Afghan. And he and I just lifted the back end of that truck because we knew we'd be dead in about what we didn't. Yeah, well, so lift it up. Well, I mean, the desert would have killed us. It was lifted up, got to where we're going. And so it was was a very interesting trip to

see the whole country. The groups I trained later that we trained later at the Center for Research and Education were vaccinated smallpox vaccinations in Afghanistan as a film made out of that that time. Now they went everywhere because they vaccinated every human being in the country. They were remarkable people. Of all the Peace Corps volunteers I've never known or heard of, those were the ones who did the most. They just went everywhere by jeep, by horse, by camel, by mule, by whatever, by walking. And they were all women. They're all women. Because men couldn't vaccinate women, but women could vaccinate men and women.

GANZGLASS: [00:50:35] So we could vaccinate men. That's interesting.

BING: [00:50:39] Yeah, so anyway,

GANZGLASS: [00:50:42] Ok, so you you did your wife work while you were still a volunteer?

BING: [00:50:48] Yes, she was still.

GANZGLASS: [00:50:49] She was still a volunteer.

BING: She was also teaching.

GANZGLASS: Also teaching.

BING: Yes.

GANZGLASS: So you were assigned together.

BING: Right.

GANZGLASS: OK, so you you've worked a staff for a while in in Afghanistan. And then did you get home or what have you?

BING: [00:51:06] That that all that set me on my lifetime work? If before I had a tendency towards that set and I came back work in the Peace Corps as a regional training officer, training volunteers for all over the Middle East and spent a lot of time traveling in Northern Africa and other places. Then when they closed the Peace Corps training office is when I joined the Center for Research and Education and began training volunteers through the Center for Research and Education trained thousands and thousands and some of the

GANZGLASS: [00:51:53] So basically it was just outsourced. The training needs to be done by Peace Corps and then they used contractors?

BING: [00:51:58] Well, I think they use, with the exception of Puerto Rico, I believe they use contractors everywhere from the beginning.

GANZGLASS: [00:52:06] But you said you were in the training office?

BING: [00:52:09] So well, the training office when it existed was to supervise the contract trainers.

GANZGLASS: [00:52:14] OK.

BING: [00:52:16] And so we did the training for some of the vaccinators who went to Afghanistan. And we put them in the Four Corners area of New Mexico, Arizona, Utah and Colorado on reservations on Native American land. And they went around doing health work with those groups. And that was good training for them. There was it's hard to find rougher country than Afghanistan, but that comes close so that I did for a number of years, went back and got a degree in international education from University of Massachusetts, worked with Bob Steiner for a while with this language program. But Snyder was the Peace Corps director that I knew when I first met, when I went to Afghanistan as a volunteer. So we started a company and this company did training, language training. And then I decided it would make sense for me to resume my work in the cross-cultural field. And because I'd done

all the early cultural work in the Peace Corps and I knew that American businesses needed the same, a similar kind of training for them to be able to effectively work and market in other countries. And somehow that worked. That company that I set up in 1986 when I tap in Princeton, New Jersey, exists now to this day after having worked with all kinds of the larger companies, I worked for JMJ for 25 years as a consultant and and that in a way that got me into developing an application in which you could look at your own cultural proclivities and compare them with cultural dimensions of people from all over the world and therefore get a head start on knowing what the likely differences and similarities were that you had with other people from other cultures. And that was that was a application that we just sold to a group in Singapore. And then I also started developing something called a global team process questionnaire, which came out of my experience working in the Peace Corps and other places and

GANZGLASS: [00:55:15] Global team

BING: [00:55:16] Processes questionnaire. And that

GANZGLASS: What does that mean?

BING: [00:55:22] That is a application which people on a team take and they that gives them a sense of how. Effectively, they are working together where the gaps are, when they lack trust, when they lack a sense of what their objectives are, whether they lack a sense of whether they're learning anything from this experience or not, there there are a number of dimensions that are measured through it. And these and then you compare that group with similar groups across industries. So, you know, if you have an effective team or an ineffective team and what you need to do to make it more effective, and we're now reviving that instrument, which was dormant for a few years, and it's going to be used in Europe pretty soon. All of that comes from that Peace Corps cross-cultural sense, maybe just from sitting down and playing chess with Afghans.

GANZGLASS: [00:56:23] All of it clearly had a tremendous impact on your life.

BING: [00:56:27] Yeah, it's focused and delineated my professional life. Now, the circle is going to be closed, is closed now, because about four years ago I started with a group with four or five returned Peace Corps volunteers and three Afghan Americans, a group to support weavers in Bamiyan. Now Bamiyan, you may remember, is where the photos were and were destroyed by the Taliban and these families living and often live in caves around the town. And so one of our number is a fellow by the name of Phil Smith is a weaver who also was in Afghanistan, wove rugs in Herat, learned how to weave rugs there. I met this guy. I'm sure you have or you should. He's he's really remarkable, man. And he put together he determined that the looms that had been used for the last two millennia, which were earth looms, pounded into the earth. And then the women sat on each side and passed, shuttled back and forth, were rather limited because you couldn't use them in winter when it snowed, you couldn't use them when it rained, would mess up what you were weaving. And so sand, a counterbalance loom to the weavers in Afghanistan. We've raised now, I don't know, maybe thirty or forty thousand dollars for this group. There they are. They have the loom. They're producing better quality material and much more of it than they ever had before. And they went along and used the original loom and copied it. Now they have two looms up and going and they're very now much more productive than they've been before. Several of the families were able to come down from the from the caves and build a home in the Bamiyan proper. And yeah, so so we're still working on it.

GANZGLASS: [00:59:01] That that's that's wonderful. Do you so cool. It's had an impact on your life. What impact do you think Peace Corps has had? And I'll ask Afghanistan, but you've traveled around the world with your subsequent work. Do you think there's been an impact in developing countries a lot for what that impact might have been?

BING: [00:59:30] Well, this is a big question. This is a big question. I don't know if anyone has ever studied in that kind of level of depth that would be necessary to give it a an answer. I was tremendously disappointed in what happened in Afghanistan. After 1969 or 79, I'd gone back in 74 as a USAID worker and begun to see. I mean, we did an evaluation of non formal education and I was beginning to see cracks and fissures in the society. But what happened there is it's awful. And it was set off by the Russian invasion. There's no question about that. The Russians made a terrible, stupid error. Would that more terrible, stupid? We mean Vietnam, but nevertheless, it set the country back 100 years anyway and is still struggling. And so in Afghanistan, you know, it's like dropping a stone in the ocean. The ripples only go so far. And the oceans, an angry place, I think in other countries where peace has prevailed, I suspect the Peace Corps has had much more of an impact than we managed to have there, though there are Afghans, of course, who still say, you know, X or Y who taught in my in my village. So they're individual Afghans who certainly were influenced by the Peace Corps. But at a societal level in Afghanistan, the other forces were too large, too crude for us to have a lasting one.

GANZGLASS: [01:01:33] When do people leave Afghanistan? When the Russians came? When when did the Peace Corps?

BING: [01:01:39] Yeah, just before the Russians invaded, the Russians had installed a government that was against any other Western group and they essentially kicked out the Peace Corps. I'm not sure of the exact year, but it was somewhere around 78. And, you know, I did seven, eight or nine. And so that's been a big disappointment. But it's also been behind the work that we're doing now to try to continue that work in the face of all these problems. And we know that if we can support we're doing this entirely different from USAID, from the Ford Foundation or anybody else, we just say your project, you tell us what you need. You tell us what your objectives are, and we will do our best to support it. But we don't tell them anything about what to do. We

don't tell them how to live their lives, how to make their projects, what to spend their money on. It's entirely up to them where we have that freedom because we're not a part of any larger institution.

GANZGLASS: [01:02:51] And we'll see if the outcome is better.

BING: [01:02:53] That the outcome so far has been very encouraging. They've got production, they've got productivity, they're making money. They've built a second loom. That they're going to establish a cooperative. I mean,

GANZGLASS: [01:03:08] How did you find out about them?

BING: [01:03:11] That's a story. There is a woman by the name of Mary McMeekin. She's 89 years old and she lives in Kabul and Bamiyan. About six, seven years ago, I read about her and sent her a note saying, you know, amazing stuff you're doing. She she set up two nonprofit. She'd been there since 1980, I think a little time back here, but mostly in Afghanistan. Last year, President Ghani gave her honorary Afghan citizenship and she informed us about this group that she thought had a lot of potential. And she is an advisor to them at 89. She doesn't get around as much as she used to, but she's in Baghlan right now, I believe. Well, I mean, in Bamiyan right now. And so she's she's someone who I don't think she identified that group. And now most of our communications are with the with Zahra, who is the head of that group. She has her own business there. She has her own marketing system and textiles and so on. So but she's the one who did that work. And one of our group went to Kabul a month and a half ago, met Zahra, met Mary. He's now married for 50 years because he was a student at the time. She lived there and met her daughter, who was a fellow student. So and so we do have these connections with them, even though we're far, far away.

GANZGLASS: [01:05:01] That's great. Well, let me ask about third goal of Peace Corps bringing the world back to the United States.

BING: [01:05:10] I think I was never I never taught in this country in a public school, but I taught hundreds, maybe thousands of American executives of the importance of understanding the culture of the, of the place they are going to and also international executives coming to the U.S., but there's the strange American story, how we would welcome them with open arms for three days and then forget them, expect them to sink or swim. It's a wonderful story. Yeah. And and, of course, I have to train a lot of Peace Corps volunteers. So I think there was a dispersion of that third goal into American corporate life. I mean, the old days, we were the ugly Americans, I guess more so than ever now, but within a different way. And and I think I think a lot of folks learned from that, from using the tools that we developed, like the application. I mean, most Americans didn't know they have the camera cultures with them. They have no idea what it is. And but when you show them these five or six cultural dimensions, they begin to say, oh, what do you mean, you could do it differently? Or, you know, we believe in a kind of equality, but in other places they may not or may have a different sense of what's equal, so on, so forth. So I think I hope I spread a few seeds, but the big angry ocean and

GANZGLASS: [01:07:12] Well, everybody just does what they can.

BING: [01:07:13] Everybody does what they can. Yeah.

GANZGLASS: [01:07:16] Yeah. Any other any other stories you'd like to tell that I didn't, that my questions didn't trigger.

BING: [01:07:27] No, I think you I think we've

GANZGLASS: [01:07:31] Covered the territory?

BING: [01:07:32] We've bored future generations to death.

GANZGLASS: [01:07:35] No, I don't think so. I thought it was very insightful. So thank you so much for the interview.

BING: [01:07:40] Well, it's been very enjoyable.

[END OF INTERVIEW]