

**Bruce Thompson Oral History Interview**  
Returned Peace Corps Volunteer Collection  
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**Biographical Note**

Bruce Thompson served as a Peace Corps volunteer in Bolivia from June 1963 to June 1965 as a university teacher.

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Oral History Interview

with

Bruce Thompson

April 5, 2011

By Paul Kinsley

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

KINSLEY: [00:00:04] Ok, this is April 5, 2011. This is Paul Kinsley and I'm interviewing Bruce Thompson who was a Peace Corps volunteer in Bolivia from June 1963 to June 1965 as a university teacher. Ok, kind of describe your present family, work, current residence, and interests.

THOMPSON: [00:00:37] I'm a professor at the Wharton School of Engineering and I teach mostly management courses and statistics and supply chain management, operations management. I'm married to Kathleen O. Miller, who's an attorney. We have a daughter, Laura, who's a master's degree student.

KINSLEY: [00:01:06] Kind of try to think back to the year before you joined the Peace Corps. Talk about life then. You can include your childhood education, experiences relevant to becoming a volunteer.

THOMPSON: [00:01:14] I went to Peace Corps directly out of college. I finished up in 1963 with a bachelor's in physics in Amherst College in Amherst, Massachusetts. I grew up all over the country. While I was going to college, my parents were moving to California.

KINSLEY: [00:01:49] Why did you join the Peace Corps?

THOMPSON: It seemed like more of an adventure than anything else. I wasn't really set on what I wanted to do in graduate school. The kind of jobs, I'd worked summer jobs in the lab. I didn't find that terribly exciting.

KINSLEY: [00:02:24] How did you hear about the Peace Corps? What made you decide to apply?

THOMPSON: [00:02:31] There was a lot of publicity about the Peace Corps at the time. It had been formed about two years earlier and it was fairly easy to apply. Got the application. [inaudible] There was information all around.

KINSLEY: [00:03:02] But what was the process in the time? Did you have a specific country in mind?

THOMPSON: I didn't. I had taken Spanish in high school. They were looking for people with a background in science and math because there was a new university.

KINSLEY: [00:03:33] Did you teach any English or?

THOMPSON: In Spanish. I did teacher a couple of English courses. Mostly with the Japanese companies. That was the language they used.

KINSLEY: [00:03:54] What were your friends and families' reactions when you were accepted? Were they any, is there any hesitation or reservation?

THOMPSON: No, they were very supportive. About the time I left, my parents moved to Turkey to teach.

KINSLEY: What did they teach there?

THOMPSON: [00:04:22] Well my father was an engineer, so he taught engineering courses.

KINSLEY: [00:04:37] What project were you invited to join in?

THOMPSON: Well, it was, I'm not sure what the title was, but we all meant to teach. And I think most in universities in Bolivia, mostly at this new university.

KINSLEY: [00:05:05] How did you prepare yourself and others for this location entering the two years of service? Did you have to make any special preparations or anything?

THOMPSON: [00:05:17] I don't think so. You know, I would have had to move anyway to go to college, so I didn't have an awful lot of possessions. You know, it was a little more complicated, because my parents were moving out of the country.

KINSLEY: [00:05:38] Ok, now I want you to talk about your training. Where it was and what was the faculty like. So syllabus those technical studies, reaction to the training

THOMPSON: [00:05:44] It took place at UCLA. And we had a number of well, we have courses in Spanish, conversational Spanish, based on the State Department. We had some history and culture of Bolivia. Some psychological.

KINSLEY: [00:06:36] How many people were in the group?

THOMPSON: [00:06:37] I think there were only about 20 of us for Bolivia. We trained with a group that was going to Peru as well. There were a few more of them.

KINSLEY: [00:06:58] What about the selection process? Were there surprises, disappointments? Did you all pretty much make it?

THOMPSON: [00:07:12] I don't really remember. I couldn't guarantee it but I think everyone made it overseas.

KINSLEY: Because that is very different from our group. We started out with 100. We trained for one month and then left with 50.

THOMPSON: [00:07:33] So, yeah, well, they decided that I wasn't outgoing enough to be a teacher, so there was an astronomical laboratory up above La Paz because it is very high. The Peace Corps people at UCLA decided I was going to go there. When I arrived in the country, the country directors said why don't I teach at the university.

KINSLEY: [00:08:02] Do you feel that the training prepared you and was it useful to your Peace Corps service?

THOMPSON: Certainly the language practice was useful. Some of the other stuff made me more nervous about going overseas.

KINSLEY: [00:08:28] Was that the psychological stuff?

THOMPSON: [00:08:30] I thought it was more thinking about all the mistakes you can make, faux pas. The people there were much more forgiving than Americans in the States.

KINSLEY: [00:08:50] What was your initial entry into and reaction to the country?

THOMPSON: [00:08:59] Not an awful lot, you know, sort of seemed to me we were thrown into teaching fairly quickly. We lived with families the whole time.

KINSLEY: [00:09:21] And how long was your training at UCLA?

THOMPSON: [00:09:22] And I think it was three, three months or so, you trained there. They started.

KINSLEY: [00:09:35] Can you describe your project, Peace Corps staff, impression of the local people?

THOMPSON: [00:09:38] Well, I was in the capital city, so I didn't have the same hardships as some people living in the countryside with local families. Seemed like that was a little isolated.

KINSLEY: [00:10:02] Did you have electricity?

THOMPSON: We had electricity most of the time. We had rolling black outs. As price controls so long that the local electric company. Water was somewhat uncertain.

KINSLEY: [00:10:28] Did you have to boil your water?

THOMPSON: Yeah. It would come down from the mountains. Hiking along and people washing their clothes.

KINSLEY: [00:10:44] What about your assignment? What were the specifics of assigned living conditions, typical day? You said you lived with a family, did you choose that or did they pick you? How did that work?

THOMPSON: [00:11:03] I'm not. I think they sort of you know, they had just gotten volunteers. At some point, I've forgotten what it was, but I met another family, I decided I preferred to live with them.

KINSLEY: [00:11:32] Some of the specifics of your job, living conditions, typical day.

THOMPSON: [00:11:33] I would take the local bus to the university or walk. I was sort of in charge of starting the physics department at the university.

KINSLEY: So it was a pretty typical job.

THOMPSON: Yeah. We didn't have a lot of books, copying American textbooks.

KINSLEY: [00:12:23] What about the Peace Corps staff? Did you have much interaction with them at all?

THOMPSON: [00:12:27] They were in the same city so they would stop by. I do remember hearing the time, going by the office and hearing that Kennedy had been shot. That's how I learned about that. That was a real shock, he was very popular.

KINSLEY: In Turkey he was too. They have, like in hotels and restaurants, there would be a picture of Ataturk and at that time they also had a picture of Kennedy.

THOMPSON: Renamed their headquarters.

KINSLEY: [00:13:16] He was better liked over there than he was here. What about your impression of the local people, physical environment?

THOMPSON: [00:13:22] But they're basically friendly people. They would have anti-American demonstrations sometimes 10,000 people is a demonstration. I think they started protesting the Vietnam War.

KINSLEY: What about the physical environment?

THOMPSON: Well, La Paz is very high so it was cold up in the mountains and it didn't have much heating.

KINSLEY: What kind of heat did they have?

THOMPSON: Electric, those little space heaters. I had a space heater in my office but everything was cold.

KINSLEY: [00:14:23] Could you talk about any individuals that you encountered there?

THOMPSON: [00:14:25] Well, I was living with local families, and they were by our standards, they were pretty poor. In many cases there had been a land reform, so some people that had owned land had been taken over. There were all sorts of restrictions, for example, on where you could farm. Some Bolivian colleagues.

KINSLEY: [00:15:27] But what about other Peace Corps Volunteers? Did you have contact with them?

THOMPSON: [00:15:28] Yeah, there was a group of us at the university. And there were a number of nurses in the small towns and villages but they would come into La Paz on their breaks.

KINSLEY: [00:15:55] What about the role of language? Did you use Spanish primarily?

THOMPSON: [00:16:03] Well for teaching I used it. I actually didn't find that too hard because I was teaching technical subjects. The grammar was fairly straight forward. I don't think I really became, you know, when you start to think in the language. I don't think I ever got to that point.

KINSLEY: [00:16:30] What about your work time versus your leisure time?

THOMPSON: [00:16:44] It's hard to remember. More or less, you know, I was teaching classes when classes were there. I did do a fair amount of

travelling by myself when I had breaks. Hikes up in the mountains.  
Backpacking trips.

KINSLEY: [00:17:10] Did you do those with the other volunteers?

THOMPSON: [00:17:16] Sometimes, yeah, mostly other volunteers, but sometimes with locals.

KINSLEY: [00:17:25] How did life and work change over the first few months and the first year?

THOMPSON: [00:17:44] Well, the first year and a half was pretty much the same, you know. In La Paz, teaching at the university.

KINSLEY: [00:18:11] At the end of the first year, to kind of try to review in your mind the first year, what are some notable events and reflections after one year?

THOMPSON: [00:18:21] There's an increasing number of demonstrations against the government. That was kind of exciting. More of that happened in the second year.

KINSLEY: [00:18:43] What about some of your joys and woes? Unexpected events?

THOMPSON: [00:18:51] I just enjoyed exploring the countryside, it was spectacular. The high mountains of the Andes. Sometimes either take bus trips or foot trips around the country.

KINSLEY: [00:19:08] What about, did you have any health problems and what about your vacation or travels?

THOMPSON: [00:19:21] I think I got amoebas at one point. They treated them successfully. They were very common. Almost everybody had them. The water wasn't trustworthy.

KINSLEY: [00:19:45] So how did you treat those? Did they have a Peace Corps doctor?

THOMPSON: Yeah, there was a doctor in country. There was some pill that was supposed to starve out the amoebas.

KINSLEY: [00:20:01] What about vacation and travel?

THOMPSON: Biggest trip was one around to Chile and then Argentina and Brazil. And mostly it was by land. It was so slow getting around that I ran out of break time and had to fly back home.

KINSLEY: [00:20:25] Ok, what about at the end of the tour? How did your second year, you know vary?

THOMPSON: Well in the middle of the second year, there was a revolution. The school I was teaching at was one of the targets because it was formed by Bolivian engineers who had graduated from American universities. And they said that the local university felt it wasn't viable. So students from that. It was obvious that it would take a lot of time to fix. So I ended up moving to Sucre, which is another city in Bolivia. It's officially the second capital.

KINSLEY: How large is Sucre?

THOMPSON: I'm guessing 30 to 40,000 people.

KINSLEY: [00:21:37] So was your whole group moved there?

THOMPSON: No, I just I had a friend in the Peace Corps who was teaching there. I'm running out of time. It's likely I'm not going to be doing many things because they invited us to kind of teach. And once they got the school reopened.

KINSLEY: [00:22:06] And what about the other people who were teaching with you? Did they go to other places too?

THOMPSON: I'm not sure.

UNKNOWN: Tell them about your escape.

THOMPSON: Oh. When they were having a revolution, the Air Force turned against the government first. We just a few blocks from the military base. And then the people running up and down the street. People watched from the local police station. At some point they put out a white flag. But then all the local people hightailed it out of the school and I was kind of slow in closing up my office and by that time they were shooting in the streets. And then we discovered a group of students from the national university came up the street and came over the wall into the school. And we decided to get out of there. There was a courtyard with a cage in the back with jaguars in it. And the top of the cage was level with the roof. So we climbed up the jaguar cage and walked over the roofs. There was a skylight on one of the houses and the people there opened it up and let us come down. So that's how we escaped.

KINSLEY: [00:23:56] So how many people escaped?

THOMPSON: [00:23:59] There were three or four Peace Corps.

KINSLEY: [00:24:05] Everybody got away?

THOMPSON: Yeah, and I'm sure but probably if we had stayed, there would have been. So then the people who invited us in, then we were walking home and we ran into a demonstration. The vice president had split with the president, was riding on peoples' shoulders. I missed it, but apparently some in the crowds were saying where are the Americans, let's shoot them, but nobody took them up on it.

KINSLEY: [00:24:50] Did was there any thought of the Peace Corps pulling out during any of this uprising?

THOMPSON: [00:24:54] I don't think there was any discussion about it. You know, we weren't really the targets of this.

KINSLEY: The targets were who?

THOMPSON: Well, the existing government. There was a kind of a. School was a threat to.

KINSLEY: [00:25:29] OK, what about at the end of your tour? Did you have a sense of achievement, failure? What were some of the pluses and minuses? Relations and work with the people?

THOMPSON: [00:25:32] I think, you know, for me, it was an interesting experience. In the sense we filled in when they didn't have teachers. I don't think there was a great sense that we have instructed someone who would continue or improvement. Well, a certain sense, the institution itself ended. In the national university really emphasized, well, first, they didn't have books so I would write the whole course on the board and people would copy it down verbatim.

KINSLEY: [00:26:42] What were some of the pluses and minuses? Did you get homesick?

THOMPSON: A little bit of that.

UNKNOWN: Had your parents already left the country?

KINSLEY: Did they visit you at all?

THOMPSON: No, but I visited them a few years later.

KINSLEY: [00:27:37] What about you? Did you have any regrets or satisfactions, if you care to comment on that?

THOMPSON: [00:27:39] Oh, I think, you know, and just at the time I would have preferred to be in the development area. I probably would have done well. That seemed like the real Peace Corps experience. I think I got less envious I don't know about the frustrations of the people out in the villages.

KINSLEY: I was in two different villages and it was tough going. We didn't get invited out for like six months. I was living with another guy and we thought it was something that we had done, the way we've been, but they were just kind of cool with everybody. Hard to take at first, but we got on well.

THOMPSON: [00:28:39] I remember there was this author who wrote about frustration because they were trying to do some sanitation project and the local people had no interest.

KINSLEY: [00:28:54] I gave up pretty much all of that and became a human relations expert I guess. Did you have any plans for the future once you came back home?

THOMPSON: [00:29:03] Well, I decided I wanted to be an engineer. Also, I applied to the State Department for the Foreign Service but it took so long for them to respond that I.

KINSLEY: OK, overall, let's try to evaluate your service in light of the three goals of the Peace Corps. First one is to provide technical assistance where requested.

THOMPSON: [00:29:48] I think did it, if you're talking about education. In that sense it was useful.

KINSLEY: [00:30:05] What about to promote a better understanding of the United States?

THOMPSON: I think there were some moments of that, personal relations with people. I'm not sure that it matters.

KINSLEY: [00:30:32] Third goal is to promote a better understanding of other people by Americans.

THOMPSON: Yeah, that's probably the biggest. [inaudible]

KINSLEY: [00:30:47] Ok. Through the years, have you continued any kind of involvement in your country of service? Or contacted the people at all?

THOMPSON: I really haven't and I'm kind of disappointed in that.

KINSLEY: [00:31:05] Have you been back at all?

THOMPSON: [00:31:09] I've been back twice.

KINSLEY: Did you see some of the same people?

THOMPSON: Yeah, yeah.

KINSLEY: [00:31:27] You were talking about your involvement in the Peace Corps.

THOMPSON: [00:31:35] Yeah, yeah, I've been involved with some Peace Corps alumni groups, somewhat. Not intensively. It sort of comes and goes.

KINSLEY: [00:31:45] Have you done any presentations to classes or anything like that?

THOMPSON: [00:31:54] It's been a long time since I've done that. [inaudible]

KINSLEY: [00:32:15] Have you sort of along the same line, have you done anything to promote a better understanding of the people you worked with here in the U.S.?

THOMPSON: [00:32:23] I'm not sure. [inaudible] You know, the politics. I don't know if Bolivia has Peace Corps groups still. For a long time they didn't.

KINSLEY: [00:32:46] Ok, what about the effect on you of your Peace Corps service? How did that affect your areas of your life?

THOMPSON: [00:33:00] Well, it's my first experience of teaching. I thought it was a very valuable and a great adventure. But in terms of my career, a lot of people I went with pursued sort of the international relations area.

KINSLEY: [00:33:40] You see where there was any change in yourself?

THOMPSON: Probably less than I would like to think. [inaudible]

KINSLEY: [00:33:59] Ok, do you have any words of wisdom that you like to pass on to people listening to this tape?

THOMPSON: Well, I guess I encourage people to do it. You know, do it but not expect it to be a life transforming experience.

KINSLEY: [00:34:30] Is there anything else you'd like to say? Experiences that stick out or anything.

THOMPSON: [00:34:37] One thing I didn't mention was we basically drove back from border of Chile and Bolivia. That was delayed for a couple weeks because they had a strike in the port authority. So we could see our car out on the boat in the harbor.

KINSLEY: [00:34:57] Was this with other volunteers?

THOMPSON: Yeah, there was another volunteer and then there was a Bolivian couple. And so we drove north and when we got to the river port we had to put it on a boat. So that was most of the summer after I finished the Peace Corps.

KINSLEY: [00:35:35] Um, let's see. I think that's pretty much it. Unless you have anything you'd like to express.

THOMPSON: I can't think of anything.

KINSLEY: [00:35:50] Thank you very much for your time.

[END OF INTERVIEW]