

Pamella Cavanna Oral History Interview
Returned Peace Corps Volunteer Collection
Administrative Information

Creator: Pamella Cavanna
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Biographical Note

Pamella Cavanna served as a Peace Corps volunteer in Iran from 1969 to 1971 on health and education projects.

Access

Open.

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Oral History Interview

with

Pamella Cavanna

October 14, 2007
Oregon House, California

By Susan Luccini

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

LUCCINI: [00:00:01] Today is October 14, 2007. This is Susan Luccini and I am interviewing Pamella Cavanna, who was a Peace Corps volunteer in Iran from 1969 to 1971 in nursing and ag extension. So maybe we could begin by speaking about what you were doing, let's say, the year before you entered the Peace Corps and how that led to or may have led to your entering the Peace Corps.

CAVANNA: [00:00:35] The year before I went into the Peace Corps, I was working in nursing in an intensive care unit in San Mateo, California. Mills Memorial Hospital. And then I started a program on interdisciplinary studies at San Francisco State. And I was married and my husband and I were looking for some adventure or something that we could do together and the Peace Corps was very, very exciting kind of concept that I was really interested in. And I, I know, I had applied to San Francisco or University of UC Santa Cruz that had just opened and I was accepted. But my husband wasn't. So then we decided that we

would apply to the Peace Corps and we were both accepted. So that's how that happened.

LUCCINI: [00:01:50] And, um, I have heard and I don't know if this is true, that everyone who went to Iran, at least in this period, had to be a married couple. Was that true in your group?

CAVANNA: [00:02:02] No.

LUCCINI: [00:02:03] No?

CAVANNA: [00:02:03] No. I think that might have been true, if the rumors were correct, the first group that went to Iran, there was actually a young woman killed by the mullahs in a village who. It was before we really knew about the culture there, what was appropriate dress. And she was wearing Bermuda shorts and sleeveless blouses and a single woman. And the mullahs just didn't know what to do with it. So I don't know if that was actually, you know, a true event. But that's what we were told and we were very well trained in appropriate dress and demeanor. But there were single women in my group.

LUCCINI: [00:02:50] I see. So essentially, you and your husband were accepted as individuals rather than because you were a couple.

CAVANNA: [00:02:57] Yes, exactly.

LUCCINI: [00:02:59] Okay, I understand. Now, you talked a little bit about training, so about the cultural mores and standards that they taught you to expect. And could you tell me more about your training, where it was, how long it took, what other aspects it involved, what you remember about it.

CAVANNA: [00:03:17] It was in Fresno, California. It was, um, part of the agricultural program that we were housed kind of in small trailers in the agricultural aspect of the university. And I think they chose it because of the, it was very flat there. And the sunsets I remember were incredible. I think it mimicked some of the climates in Iran. So that's

why they chose it. I believe it was 12 weeks. We had oral Farsi training where we spoke and responded. They spoke to us and responded. Very little written work. Some, but mostly just all oral.

LUCCINI: [00:04:09] Did you have native speakers?

CAVANNA: [00:04:12] Yes. Yeah, we did. Not every single one of our trainers was native Persian, but I think all of our language trainers were native Persian. We had returned volunteers who told us a lot of sort of intimate details that you would need to know about toileting and that they had learned kind of the hard way.

LUCCINI: [00:04:42] Hard way.

CAVANNA: [00:04:42] And so they were passing that on. Um, but not much about the Muslim or the Islamic traditions, but more about the cultural aspects of Islam and the chador and women being covered. We were advised to wear dark raincoats with scarves, especially if you were blond and all that. [phone rings]

LUCCINI: [00:05:08] And so we paused the tape to answer a phone call. And now we're continuing with the interview speaking about the training for Iran.

CAVANNA: [00:05:22] So I think I was saying we were trained on how to dress, you know, with the women. You know, long raincoats. We also had a lot of Persian food while we were there. And because our program was divided, most of the women were nurses and we didn't have any male nurses. So the women were nurses and the men were ag extension agents. So we incubated eggs and hatched the eggs and raised the chicks. At six weeks, we slaughtered the chicks and barbecued them. And we had a dean from the university come out and do a, teach us how to make chicken coops and judge the chickens. Here are some hilarious stories of how these chickens got judged. And one crazy guy in our group painted their combs that with liquor chrome to make them redder.

LUCCINI: [00:06:31] And do they win?

CAVANNA: [00:06:32] Actually, he won. But the dean didn't really even look of the chickens. He kind of lifted at them up, felt them, and, you know, then kind of put them down. But yeah, he did win.

LUCCINI: [00:06:43] Was that hard to kill the chickens after?

CAVANNA: [00:06:46] Yeah, yeah. And it felt like it was part of our being trained to let go and let go of a lot of our conditioning. And I had been raised, though, in Ohio in a city, but my grandparents had a small farm. I saw my grandmother kill chickens, you know, chop up their heads and pluck them. So it wasn't so foreign for me. It wasn't like such a shock. I think for some of the New Yorkers or the city people, it was pretty shocking.

LUCCINI: [00:07:25] How large was your group when you went into training?

CAVANNA: [00:07:30] I have no idea. I'm going to guess, just because I'm thinking of our housing situation, we were, the single people lived in converted chicken coops and the couples had these little like Airstream trailers.

LUCCINI: [00:07:49] Uh huh.

CAVANNA: [00:07:50] And I'm thinking somewhere around 30 to 40. Something like that.

LUCCINI: [00:07:57] What, when you were in. I'm coming back to the clothes now because this is interesting. Wasn't it too hot to wear a raincoat?

CAVANNA: [00:08:05] Yeah.

LUCCINI: [00:08:06] So you had no alternative, like a long cotton smock or something like that too?

CAVANNA: [00:08:12] Well, you know, we just dressed, I mean, modestly, you know, or never, never wore sleeveless, you know, kind of dresses with

sleeves. And no neckline showing that, we just dressed modestly. We were aware of it.

LUCCINI: [00:08:34] And did you cover your head all the time?

CAVANNA: [00:08:36] No, I didn't. I didn't. I think it was more a question of not flaunting.

LUCCINI: [00:08:43] Yes.

CAVANNA: [00:08:43] You know, you're just becoming aware that this was like a totally different culture that you were entering and they had different mores and values. And it was difficult being a woman there. I mean, it was, it was just challenging. Fortunately, because, and I spoke fair Farsi at the time. I mean.

LUCCINI: [00:09:12] Good.

CAVANNA: [00:09:12] I never got as fluent as Roger did, but I really could manage. And that was a big protection because you could communicate with these men that had been, you know, kind of aggressive.

LUCCINI: [00:09:27] Mm hmm.

CAVANNA: [00:09:29] And then they would be, whoa, you speak Farsi. It would be like a total turnaround.

LUCCINI: [00:09:34] Yeah. You're not a tourist.

CAVANNA: [00:09:36] Right.

LUCCINI: [00:09:36] So someone, you know, I mean, we may not know what you are, but you're not, you're not here as a tourist.

CAVANNA: [00:09:43] Right. Yeah. You have some interest or some connection to our culture, to our language, to our history. Yeah.

LUCCINI: [00:09:50] When you applied to the Peace Corps, did you have it in mind to go to the Middle East or?

CAVANNA: [00:09:56] No.

LUCCINI: [00:09:56] No, you didn't. You were quite open to whatever?

CAVANNA: [00:10:01] Oh, I think so. I wanted to go to Africa. That was my first choice. But they didn't have any programs that matched our skill set.

LUCCINI: [00:10:11] I see.

CAVANNA: [00:10:12] So, and that was, uh, then they sent back the, you know, possibility that Iran was available. And so I just said yes and went. Not really, not having any idea what it was going to be, having no prior interest in Iran, no knowledge about it. Just open minded going.

LUCCINI: [00:10:47] Had you had a chance to travel a lot before you joined the Peace Corps? Or was this also a new experience for you to be in a different culture?

CAVANNA: [00:10:58] It was a totally new experience to be in a foreign country. I had traveled a lot with my family as a child in America.

LUCCINI: [00:11:08] I see.

CAVANNA: [00:11:09] We had a cabin in Michigan, we lived in Ohio, so we would travel up there. My grandmother had a place in Florida. We'd travel down there. I traveled back and forth across the states with my mother. So. And I traveled from Ohio to California. So I'd traveled inside the United States and I was familiar with that and with traveling, but domestically. So it was a totally new thing. And as a child, I used to sing that song Faraway Places with Strange Sounding Names.

LUCCINI: [00:11:47] Me too.

CAVANNA: [00:11:49] Oh, the same?

LUCCINI: [00:11:52] Yes. I really, really wanted to experience the world.

CAVANNA: [00:11:55] Yes, right. Me too.

LUCCINI: [00:11:58] I think it's one of the reasons that, it's one of the reasons that people frequently give for joining the Peace Corps, that they wanted a broader experience of the world. And this gives the opportunity to serve along with that.

CAVANNA: [00:12:15] Right.

LUCCINI: [00:12:15] And there are other reasons but.

CAVANNA: [00:12:17] Yes. No, but I think that was a big reason. Also I think it wasn't something I was looking for, but it was the perspective of looking at America from outside America, looking back in it.

LUCCINI: [00:12:32] Yes. Yes. I sometimes wonder if maybe we didn't get much more than we gave.

CAVANNA: [00:12:39] And that's almost every Peace Corps volunteer's, you know, you think you're going there to help and to teach and it's like what you learn and what you receive is so much more.

LUCCINI: [00:12:52] Yes. Yes, it is. When you were in training, did you have like a regular schedule, five days a week, seven days a week? Did you have from 8:00 to 5:00 and then free time, or was it pretty much training, training, training all the time? How did that go? Do you remember?

CAVANNA: [00:13:17] Not a lot. I think we were, I know we had a regular schedule and I know it was intense. And, um. You know, I can't remember how we spent our evenings, whether we were in training then as well. I know there were some nights we went out to the, it's called the Aspis Feed, the White Horse pool bar that was close by.

LUCCINI: [00:13:45] Mm hmm.

CAVANNA: [00:13:48] I know, I know it was at least five days a week. I remember one thing was cooking, because we couldn't cook in our hotel, and I had cooked ever since I was a child, so I missed just being a cook. We go from our place where we were at the chicken coops down to the cafeteria at the university, it was down.

LUCCINI: [00:14:18] Mm hmm.

CAVANNA: [00:14:18] And we would walk down from the hills three times a day.

LUCCINI: [00:14:21] Yes.

CAVANNA: [00:14:23] So. But honestly, I can't remember if we had weekends free. I don't remember going away on the weekends. I don't know. I'm thinking but I just don't remember.

LUCCINI: [00:14:43] Was it part of your training to be taught about particular local diseases? I don't know, I mean, anything that might be particular to the region that you might not have known about before? Or did they assume that because you had nursing training that you didn't need that kind of information?

CAVANNA: [00:15:04] Oh, no. I think they taught all of us, not just the nurses, about the hygiene. And I remember purifying water, either teaching us we had these drops to put in water to soak our vegetables.

LUCCINI: [00:15:21] So you could eat vegetables there, but you had to soak them.

CAVANNA: [00:15:25] Yeah, mm hmm.

LUCCINI: [00:15:25] I see. [tape break]

CAVANNA: [00:15:29] Particular diseases. I do know that there was a disease in Iran that I hadn't ever seen before and a lot of the people had scars

that were circular scars, like on their faces, and it was some particular parasite or insect that would lay eggs and it would create like a lesion. And a lot of the population had that.

LUCCINI: [00:16:01] Did you also have a lot of shots before you leave?

CAVANNA: [00:16:05] Mm hmm.

LUCCINI: [00:16:05] Did you have to take malaria tablets or malaria?

CAVANNA: [00:16:08] No.

LUCCINI: [00:16:09] It's not a problem there?

CAVANNA: [00:16:11] Apparently not. Or if we did, I don't remember that specifically.

LUCCINI: [00:16:17] Okay. Did you think your training was effective?

CAVANNA: [00:16:21] I felt prepared in terms of Farsi. Um, however, I was sent to a Turkish speaking area, so, which I am sure that sounds familiar.

LUCCINI: [00:16:37] It is.

CAVANNA: [00:16:39] So the only people that spoke Farsi there were really the culturally educated people.

LUCCINI: [00:16:47] I see.

CAVANNA: [00:16:51] I don't know if there's any way to really. It's sort of like trying to prepare somebody for childbirth. You know, you can tell about that. You can teach them techniques of breathing and. But it's like the event itself just completely takes over. I know for Roger and I, it was a lot like being reborn. You know, you had to eat in a different way, totally different food. And I remember when I was first served my first portion of rice and kabob. It was like they brought the plate out and it's just piled up in a cone. And there was this gigantic piece of butter on top

and a big kabob. And I thought that was for the whole table. And then everybody got this enormous portion of rice and butter. And so you, you know, you had to learn to eat in a different way, a new language, go to the bathroom in a different way.

CAVANNA: [00:17:50] And we're going to the grocery stores and seeing strawberry jam mixed with mustard and thinking, what kind of a mind would put those two together? And thinking like, this isn't bad. This is just different. It's just so different. And so I think they did the best that they could to prepare you for the experience. But everybody talks about culture shock, and I don't think there is a way to really avoid it.

LUCCINI: [00:18:27] I agree. Yeah. So let's talk a little bit now more particularly about where you were stationed. Did you stay in the same place for the two years?

CAVANNA: [00:18:37] No, actually, um. We were sent to Rezaiyeh [now called Orumiyeh], which is, they call it the Paris of the Middle East. It's in, uh, near Tabriz, near Lake Rezaiyeh [now Urmia], which is the Great Salt Lake, saltier than the Salt Lake in Utah. And it was very primordial looking. I remember it was kind of stalagmite kind of forms coming out of the water. So but the town of Rezaiyeh was, uh, I think the reason they called it that was because there were Turks, Armenians, the Syrians, Persians. It was near the Turkish border. So there was just a lot of different people and languages in that area.

CAVANNA: [00:19:36] And actually, my husband and I separated there after about ten months, almost a year. And we went to the Peace Corps office and, you know, talked to them about it and we wanted to be reassigned. And they wouldn't reassign us. And I couldn't go back to Rezaiyeh even though I had a very active project going on there. They wouldn't let me go back as a single woman after having been there as a married couple. So I chose to stay in Iran another year. I taught English at the [inaudible] Iran American Society in Tehran.

LUCCINI: [00:20:34] Uh huh.

CAVANNA: [00:20:34] And, you know, spent time with my Peace Corps volunteer friends in different parts of the country, traveled to different parts of the country. But my actual Peace Corps time wasn't there, just because this separation occurred and I couldn't get another assignment.

LUCCINI: [00:20:54] Mm hmm. And Roger went back?

CAVANNA: [00:20:57] No, Roger was not my husband then.

LUCCINI: [00:20:59] Oh, I see.

CAVANNA: [00:21:00] I was married to someone else.

LUCCINI: [00:21:01] I see.

CAVANNA: [00:21:03] He was the ag extension. Uh, Roger's group came over in '68. They were, um, architects and engineers. It was an all, it was the first all architect that they had. So I met him in Tehran after my husband and I had separated.

LUCCINI: [00:21:30] I've made an assumption that because you both were there, that you were married already at that time. I didn't realize that.

CAVANNA: [00:21:37] Yeah, we met.

LUCCINI: [00:21:38] Okay, so that's clear. Yeah.

CAVANNA: [00:21:40] We actually met in Tehran at the Peace Corps office.

LUCCINI: [00:21:46] So the Peace Corps has many romances to its credit.

CAVANNA: [00:21:50] It does. And it has a lot of dissolutions of marriage to its credit too.

LUCCINI: [00:21:55] Yes, I'm sure.

CAVANNA: [00:21:55] And a lot of marriages that didn't withstand it. But it brought our, it brought us together.

LUCCINI: [00:22:07] We did talk a little bit about the cultural shock. And part of it, obviously, was the difference between the way women live in America and the way women lived there. And I don't know if you want to elaborate on that anymore, but maybe also there were other, and the food, the quantity of food, maybe there are other aspects that you would like to include in the?

CAVANNA: [00:22:32] I found the way women were treated really challenging, as a woman. I remember one time traveling with Roger and him asking if there was a way for me to go into the mosque. [speaks Farsi] Is there a way for this women to go into this mosque? And I was so outraged that there would have to be special permission granted because I was a woman.

LUCCINI: [00:23:00] Yes.

CAVANNA: [00:23:01] And Roger, on the other hand, had a really different experience of the culture. I think he was really coming back home in a way. I mean, I feel that there were, he had a lot of past lives, Persian past lives. But I feel like I was there to.

LUCCINI: [00:23:25] Yes.

CAVANNA: [00:23:27] Not, not necessarily to connect so deeply with the Persian culture. Because I could speak the language, I felt like I got more respect. Another one thing I really noticed that when you were feeling strong you kind of got that same energy back and people were more respectful. If you were feeling down, sad, or kind of down, then you would get picked on. And it was just really obvious.

LUCCINI: [00:24:09] Kind of like an instinctive sense that they had about your vulnerability.

CAVANNA: [00:24:14] Yes, right. And there is a saying in Farsi, *zaik ahkush*, which means to kill weakness. That there is something, I don't know if it's an Islamic, Muslim thing. But you have to, like, just be big. You have to be strong and have to be putting it out all the time and if you're not there's [inaudible]. They don't like weakness.

LUCCINI: [00:24:41] Sounds kind of tiring.

CAVANNA: [00:24:45] Yeah, I know. And I have to say that I think that sisterhood that there, that whole, because women are treated in the way that they are. I mean the men shopped, for instance, the men shopped for the family. There were no women shopkeepers. If they were, you could be sure that they were not Muslim. They were either Armenian or Syrian or Jewish. Um. If you went to a restaurant, there was a separate cordoned off place where the women would sit, for the women with their husbands and family. In movie theaters, there was a whole separate section for women. There were separate mosques, entire mosques, or there were sections within the mosque where the women sat. And so there was a lot of segregation that you don't have here.

LUCCINI: [00:25:46] Yes. In the schools as well? Were the schools also?

CAVANNA: [00:25:51] Yes, I'm sure they were. Yeah. I'm sure that, yes, that the girls. At least at that time. Although that was when the Shah was in power. The Shah they knew was really doing a lot, you know, with the Shah to de-chador and to let them be without chadors. In some ways, some older women who had been in a chador their whole life, that was not a freedom. You know, that was like something being whipped away.

LUCCINI: [00:26:27] Protection.

CAVANNA: [00:26:27] And, you know, I've actually come to see things from both sides at this, you know, point in my life. You know, whereas we can have one attitude towards it, there is definitely another side of things where women were protected and seen as something special. And there was a huge sisterhood which I can't say I really penetrated. I

penetrated that more through books, you know, that I read about. Wish I could remember the names of some of them, which were really excellent.

CAVANNA: [00:27:07] But my, I had a wonderful project. As I said, I started out in a, uh, nursing, home health nursing. And I went to the public health office. But I couldn't get the nurses there or, the Persian nurses, my counterpart, to go out to make home visits. It was like they just, they wanted to sit in the office and drink tea and they couldn't figure out why I wanted to do that. Now I had the American work ethic and was very gung ho to do this. And it just wasn't working. They thought I wanted to see what the inside of a Persian home was like. I remember I had long blond hair that was put up in a twist and they wanted me to take my hair down and they just wanted to pet my hair. And they would put their hand right on your chest and they would stand like two inches away from you and they would pet me and say these endearments. And it was like.

LUCCINI: [00:28:10] Wait.

CAVANNA: [00:28:10] It was like, what? And, and I think that's like, I can't insult the host country nationals. And then, of course, when you get very used to that kind of intimacy and in their conversations, they begin their conversations with the kind of sharing that we may never get to the West, where you only get two or three and have a conversation and they start out with information about the relationship with their husband or children or even their sexual life. And they're just very open. And that was, I remember, really shocking. But then coming back into America, it's like I really missed that.

LUCCINI: [00:28:57] Yes.

CAVANNA: [00:28:57] Kind of interconnectedness and intimacy.

LUCCINI: [00:29:01] Yes.

CAVANNA: [00:29:03] Personal sharing. So then I went. There was a Peace Corps volunteer there from the previous group who was an artist who was working in the orphanage. And she said, why don't you come over here? So I did. And she and I, she would do the artwork and I would do presentations on germ theory, and she would draw those pictures of the germs and then teach hand washing techniques. I had a Farsi, a Turkish teacher, and he would help me translate from the Farsi to the Turkish. And then give these presentations. And I did a preventative health care program where we did vaccinations and dental care, preventative dental care. And then these hygiene classes. And I got the buy in from the mayor's wife. And there was, yeah.

LUCCINI: [00:30:05] Very good.

CAVANNA: [00:30:05] We would have meetings and there was a dentist there from, a Persian dentist, a woman who had been trained in America. She was very interested in, and then the head of the orphanage. And we would, you know, we created this program.

LUCCINI: [00:30:19] That's wonderful.

CAVANNA: [00:30:21] It was, actually, something that, you know, worked. But I had to leave that project.

LUCCINI: [00:30:31] Did you have an opportunity to travel much in your, when you were there?

CAVANNA: [00:30:36] I did. Yeah. The second year I traveled to Rasht on the Caspian Sea and to Hamadan and, uh, Kermanshah. And then later I traveled to, um, can't remember the name of that. It was an oasis down in the southern part of Iran. And then Mashhad, took a train ride, bus ride through. So yeah.

LUCCINI: [00:31:14] That's great.

CAVANNA: [00:31:15] I went around and back and forth from Rezaiyeh too. [tape break]

LUCCINI: [00:31:24] [inaudible]

CAVANNA: [00:31:24] Did they provide you with this?

LUCCINI: [00:31:25] No. I have this it for another purpose. Yeah.

CAVANNA: [00:31:31] Where were you?

LUCCINI: [00:31:32] I was in Ghana, in West Africa.

CAVANNA: [00:31:36] Oh, in Africa. You were where I wanted to be. What was your program?

LUCCINI: [00:31:40] I was an English teacher. Yes.

CAVANNA: [00:31:43] Yeah.

LUCCINI: [00:31:44] Um. And also we were rather well paid.

CAVANNA: [00:31:53] Oh, we were paid \$100 a month, which, um, from what I understood at that time, was more than a lot of Peace Corps volunteers in different countries were paid.

LUCCINI: [00:32:09] Yes.

CAVANNA: [00:32:10] So I guess it was adequate. I mean, I think we just adjusted our lifestyle, and I'm sure that we probably had personal resources that we brought. I know the Peace Corps did a lot. They gave us like a book locker that they sent us over with that had books for reading, paperbacks.

LUCCINI: [00:32:33] How nice.

CAVANNA: [00:32:35] Yeah, it was lovely. I read, uh, the comparative religions by Huston J. Smith. I remember that.

LUCCINI: [00:32:45] Yes.

CAVANNA: [00:32:46] And, and then we had all of our health benefits.

LUCCINI: [00:32:52] Of course, yes. And you must have had a doctor attached to your Peace Corps office in Tehran.

CAVANNA: [00:32:59] Yes. We had a secretary there. And, um. You know, I would say this is the most curious thing. When I was leaving the Peace Corps, my TB test, you know, my TB test was negative. I mean, it was turning, my skin test was turning positive and they just were really reassuring us that this happens to a lot of Peace Corps volunteers. They get, they're exposed to TB and they develop the antibodies. Once you develop antibodies, your skin test turns positive. However, I actually had TB.

LUCCINI: [00:33:45] Oh, really?

CAVANNA: [00:33:46] Yeah.

LUCCINI: [00:33:47] Which you got in Iran?

CAVANNA: [00:33:49] Well, I don't, I'm not positive because I spent another year in Iran after I got out of Peace Corps teaching English.

LUCCINI: [00:34:00] Mm hmm.

CAVANNA: [00:34:00] And then Roger and I went to India. We lived in India for a year. And Conrad, my oldest son, was born there. And then when I came back to America, uh, he was 21 months old. I went to get a job in nursing and was told I had TB. Chest X-ray. So I don't know exactly where I got it, whether it was an Iran or whether it was in India. Or got in Iran and incubated in India. It was not a bad case of it. I had lost a lot of weight and I was emotionally, uh, distraught, I think. I mean, ascribe some of that to my relationship with Roger, which was challenging. But I was treated by a doctor who had been on the Good Ship Hope.

LUCCINI: [00:35:04] Oh, I see.

CAVANNA: [00:35:06] And he had had the same thing happen to him. He had TB. They discovered it through an x-ray on his lungs. So he was wonderful. He treated me for two weeks before he reported it to the public health department, so I didn't have to be separated from my family for two weeks. Roger and Conrad were tested and they were negative. I went on antibiotics just for six months. And then just basically did a lot of health practices. I was doing yoga, eating really healthfully, uh, did homeopathic remedies. So I don't know where it came from.

LUCCINI: [00:36:01] Interesting, though.

CAVANNA: [00:36:02] Yeah.

LUCCINI: [00:36:03] I had two bouts of malaria, which were devastating for years.

CAVANNA: [00:36:09] Wow.

LUCCINI: [00:36:09] But I think now finally it's out of my system.

CAVANNA: [00:36:12] Yeah.

LUCCINI: [00:36:15] Um, were you, you were in the Iran during that large earthquake, were you not?

CAVANNA: [00:36:21] Um, yes. However, I had almost nothing to do with that. It was over in Mashhad on the exact opposite side of the country from where I was. Iran to me looks a little like Ohio.

LUCCINI: [00:36:36] Yes. Yes.

CAVANNA: [00:36:38] And Mashhad is over in the northeast corner and Rezaiyeh is in the northwest.

LUCCINI: [00:36:46] Mm hmm. So that occurred during your first year there, the earthquake, I mean?

CAVANNA: [00:36:53] It did, yes. Yeah. And Roger however was very, very involved. He went to, uh, was it [inaudible]. And helped pull out bodies. They were redesigning, his office was redesigning a new town [inaudible]. And then we, two years later, when we left Iran we went through there and nothing had been done.

LUCCINI: [00:37:26] Really?

CAVANNA: [00:37:26] Yeah, it was really disappointing. However, a lot of parks, restaurants, houses, things that he designed. But so. It was, they had the five year plans at that time. They were giving money to different, and his province received all this money and they didn't spend it.

LUCCINI: [00:37:48] They didn't keep it.

CAVANNA: [00:37:50] Keep it, so they spent it.

LUCCINI: [00:37:53] Good thinking.

CAVANNA: [00:37:55] There was a restaurant across from the shrine to [inaudible]. We had lunch at that restaurant when we left.

LUCCINI: [00:38:04] Very nice.

CAVANNA: [00:38:05] And the mayor came to meet us. Yeah.

LUCCINI: [00:38:07] It must be gratifying to be an architect because it's a more permanent mark that you can leave.

CAVANNA: [00:38:16] Right.

LUCCINI: [00:38:16] Than some other professions, so to speak.

CAVANNA: [00:38:20] Right. Yes. I think healing professions. So yeah, I think it was very gratifying for him. He said he could die to being an architect, or that when he came back to graduate school, he was in landscape architecture, city and regional planning.

LUCCINI: [00:38:37] You returned then to California when you came back from India?

CAVANNA: [00:38:41] Right. He had a fellowship at U.C. Berkeley that they had held for a year, in city and regional planning and landscape architecture. So we lived in Berkeley.

LUCCINI: [00:38:57] But eventually the Iranian experience became his life, didn't it?

CAVANNA: [00:39:02] It did.

LUCCINI: [00:39:02] With that, the carpets.

CAVANNA: [00:39:05] Yes. Yeah. And he had had an inkling as before that, that he had some debt to repay to Iran. So. When we were in Iran, it was, the Shah was in power, it was really kind of the golden age, I think, for the whole planet. It was the summer of love in California and flower children, power to love. So that, that whole kind of burgeoning psychology was happening globally. And we just happened to be in Iran and we missed a lot of Vietnam, the experience here that people who returned home.

LUCCINI: [00:39:57] Yes.

CAVANNA: [00:39:59] Roger turned 26 in Iran so he avoided the draft. And there was a big celebration. I remember being questioned about that and why we were at war. I had no answer for that. I still have no answer.

LUCCINI: [00:40:19] We still have no answer for that.

CAVANNA: [00:40:25] They are warriors and they want wars and they often get in power. What can I say.

LUCCINI: [00:40:38] Did you yourself ever become interested in the, I mean, the carpet side, that, the kind of that side of the culture that?

CAVANNA: [00:40:57] Um. Yes and no. I mean, I've lived with the carpets for more than 35 years. Because Roger was buying carpets when we were in Iran and bought them from the first family, so I was there at the very, very beginning when we were first looking at rugs. And I loved them. I had an affinity for certain types of rugs, and Roger had an affinity for different types. And he was the purchaser. So those were the ones that we purchased. And basically my role as that developed in '78 when Abraham sent us all these rugs to keep them safe because he was Jewish and he was afraid that they were going to burn down the shop, which is how the first carpet store started.

LUCCINI: [00:41:46] I see.

CAVANNA: [00:41:47] We received 150 rugs expecting 15, and they were put in the basement of our house. We couldn't insure them. And I said, what are we going to do with these rugs, Abraham? He said, open a shop. Put some money away for me and the rest is yours. And it was at a time the economy was strong and there was an interest in rugs and it just burgeoned.

LUCCINI: [00:42:17] Yes, wonderful.

CAVANNA: [00:42:19] So I always pursued my career in nursing. I was assistant director of nursing at a hospital in New Haven when we were there. So I was interested and supportive of the carpet business and was always did a lot of shows with Roger, helped him do openings and presentations at the gallery. But I was never a buyer and minimally a seller, so. And we just fell into those rules as time went on. And, um, he just kind of did the business of the store, it made sense to him, and I did this morale support. But I was always there.

LUCCINI: [00:43:19] It's a really interesting aspect, I think, of some of the Peace Corps experience that many people returned and, uh, with collectible items and started little antique shops or ethnic art shops or whatever.

CAVANNA: [00:43:34] Right. Well, I'm, I'm very much more interested in Tibetan culture and since Roger's passing I have actually been more free to follow that pursuit. And, and I'm interested in creating a niche or place in our family for Tibetan rugs, which Roger would never have.

LUCCINI: [00:44:01] Mm hmm.

CAVANNA: [00:44:01] And so we now have the antique rugs. We have a new production of Turkish rugs, a new production of Persian rugs, and I'd like to add Tibetan rugs.

LUCCINI: [00:44:16] And who is managing the gallery now?

CAVANNA: [00:44:18] Uh, [inaudible] and I.

LUCCINI: [00:44:22] So you're into the business.

CAVANNA: [00:44:24] Yeah, I really have to be because of all the things that Roger did, I'm needing to do.

LUCCINI: [00:44:35] I see.

CAVANNA: [00:44:35] And backing up the business. Conrad's there. He ran it the whole time Roger was sick. And he's still showing there every day now. So we're trying a lot of new marketing techniques and avenues.

LUCCINI: [00:44:58] Well, it sounds very interesting. It sounds fascinating, actually. Let me, um. So we're back on the tape now and talking about, uh, any continued kind of involvement either with the country of service, which of course we've described in the continuing work with the carpets and so on, or contact with people from that country or with the Peace Corps group. And maybe you'd like to comment on that.

CAVANNA: [00:45:32] We're obviously still connected to the Persian part of the Persian culture through the carpets. We've made a lot of good friends through that. And a family that we brought over basically, that the man that sent Roger the carpets. He and his wife came over, two children. Now they have two more. And our families have been very connected through the years. Um, the Peace Corps volunteers. After Roger died, I went to Florida to visit one of the architects that Roger went to college with and in the Peace Corps with. And another one of his group is in the planning department at San Francisco. And he comes to our gallery frequently and gets his rugs washed.

CAVANNA: [00:46:28] And then in my group, there's a woman in Colorado, a nurse that I'm still in contact with. At 20 years, we did have a reunion. And we had a lot of people from both of our groups that came.

LUCCINI: [00:46:48] Where did they have that? In what, what geographical place?

CAVANNA: [00:46:52] Well, we had it at our house in Larkspur.

LUCCINI: [00:46:53] Oh, I see.

CAVANNA: [00:46:55] And we had a barbecue. And then the next day we all went out to Point Reyes, just arranged transportation and took boxed lunches out there. And just, you know, walked on the earthquake trail and. [tape break] Connected to and not, sort of not on a daily basis and not the. But, you know, Christmas time or occasional calls or cards.

LUCCINI: [00:47:28] And after that 20 year reunion, you never had any other reunion?

CAVANNA: [00:47:33] No other reunions. There was a time when they were asking Peace Corps volunteers to come and assist at the Olympics. Did you get that?

LUCCINI: [00:47:42] No, I didn't.

CAVANNA: [00:47:43] Yeah. And I thought, oh my gosh, that would be so fun.

LUCCINI: [00:47:47] In Atlanta, was it? When it was in America or?

CAVANNA: [00:47:51] Um, I think it was when it was in America.

LUCCINI: [00:47:53] I think I was living in Italy then. So they probably couldn't find me.

CAVANNA: [00:47:58] Couldn't find you, right. Well, like we were involved with a family and a business and just couldn't, you know, create that kind of freedom to go do that, but I was thinking that would have been a nice thing to do, but. No, I've not, I haven't been connected. I did buy some Farsi CDs to kind of retrain myself in Farsi.

LUCCINI: [00:48:25] Well, that's good.

CAVANNA: [00:48:26] Yeah. I haven't done them. [to someone else] Would you mind opening those windows, I can't reach them.

LUCCINI: [00:48:43] You need a ladder to open the windows. Okay. So, um, the only, the only other question they, they asked that we maybe have talked about indirectly. Evaluating your service in the light of the three goals of the Peace Corps. And I think the technical assistance where requested, we already spoke about the program that you did that you were quite satisfied with. Um, to promote better understanding of other people by Americans. I think we've spoken about that. Do you think that, in your opinion, in your experience, there were any examples where you promoted better understanding of the U.S. just by your presence, by being a person rather than a country, so to speak?

CAVANNA: [00:49:34] Right. Well, I think that's really the beauty of the Peace Corps, and I wish that it were more supported. I wish we had the kind of support that the military gets. I wish we had the kind of follow-up support that the military personnel gets. Because I think we're doing work, that what Peace Corps volunteers did, what they stood for, is really the work on this planet. And we're not getting any of that kind of

financial support, any kind of follow-up support. Because on a people-to-people basis, that's where change occurs.

LUCCINI: [00:50:17] Yes.

CAVANNA: [00:50:18] And when you drop down into being the human being that is from another culture and the curiosity that you might have, and the personal connection that you might have. I mean, it's a principle in psychology. People will bond there and, you know, you will promote better understanding of your individual cultures. Although I must say, and this is on tape, that I'm having a very hard time understanding our culture right now. I'm having a very, I don't feel like the political views are representing me. It's not representing my values. And I used to feel that about America. And I was very proud to be an American. I'm very, very confused about the being an American now and I really don't know what to do about that or how to change it.

CAVANNA: [00:51:24] Because it doesn't seem like the administration is very responsive to people. It seems that we've gone away from our basic values. I mean, the whole concept, concept of the Constitution and interlocked national laws been thrashed, basically. And it's very confusing because we were raised to believe in those values and practice them.

LUCCINI: [00:51:48] Right. And be proud of them.

CAVANNA: [00:51:49] To be proud of them, yeah. I was proud to be American. I was proud to go to over there. And I did feel that people were very responsive to America. And, you know, Roger's had some experiences of going back to Iran. I have never gone back. But he's gone back at least three times. And even after the times, you know, after 9/11 and they were considering America, they called Big Satan.

LUCCINI: [00:52:24] Mm hmm.

CAVANNA: [00:52:25] And he would, you know, he told the story of cleaning tables in a chai shop to help this. He was on a tour group of rug dealers and

they wanted to, um, he was talking to these kids and getting them to work faster, and so he was talking to them in Farsi. And they said, where are you from? You know, in Farsi. He said, I'm from the Big Satan, you know, which is what they. And, no. That can't be. You know, you're such a nice guy. You're such a personable person. So that's really, I feel like where the change occurs.

LUCCINI: [00:53:06] Exactly.

CAVANNA: [00:53:06] That person to person. You can't rely on the media's presentation basically.

LUCCINI: [00:53:15] You know, speaking of that, I am a little surprised that the Peace Corps still exists. I mean, that is a positive thing.

CAVANNA: [00:53:23] It is a positive thing. Even though we're not getting health benefits, returned volunteers, and you know, it is still going on.

LUCCINI: [00:53:30] Yes.

CAVANNA: [00:53:31] Yeah. I think we need a Department of Peace.

LUCCINI: [00:53:34] Not a Department of War. Yeah. That's a great idea.

CAVANNA: [00:53:39] Oh, there are, there are a lot of people on, those new bumper stickers. Create a Department of Peace.

LUCCINI: [00:53:45] Sounds like a great idea to me.

CAVANNA: [00:53:47] Great idea. And returned volunteers.

LUCCINI: [00:53:49] You know, we've talked a lot, and you've answered a lot of questions. I just wonder whether there is anything that I missed out asking you that you really wanted to explain or tell about.

CAVANNA: [00:54:03] There is one thing I'd like to say, is that in terms of the realm of personal change and personal development that I think that there's a

freedom to go through personal transformations in another culture that you don't necessarily have in your own culture, where you're very kind of bounded by your family, friends, neighborhood or city or region, that when you are in another culture and you can't speak and very often you can't even read the signs. You can get very deeply into a personal process.

LUCCINI: [00:54:44] Mm hmm.

CAVANNA: [00:54:50] That I think is very profound and that then informs the rest of your life.

LUCCINI: [00:54:52] And you feel that that was possible for you?

CAVANNA: [00:54:55] I definitely feel that that happened.

LUCCINI: [00:54:57] So for you, it was a, it was a key moment in your life.

CAVANNA: [00:55:03] Yeah, it was the beginning of waking up and to really, you know, re, reinventing, re, just reawakening, awakening to a larger possibility that could hold a bigger picture, bigger understanding.

LUCCINI: [00:55:23] It could be with cultural relativity comes personal relativity. Also, you get more options. You see more options. You see more possibilities.

CAVANNA: [00:55:32] Exactly.

LUCCINI: [00:55:33] That's, that's lovely. Did you have any culture shock when you came back to America?

CAVANNA: [00:55:38] Oh my gosh.

LUCCINI: [00:55:38] Oh my gosh.

CAVANNA: [00:55:44] Everything was so fast. Missing turns on the freeway.

LUCCINI: [00:55:51] Hold on a second. [tape break] So you were saying that everything was so fast when you came back, it's something you noticed.

CAVANNA: [00:55:56] Missing freeway exits. And, uh, and the other thing was, where were the people? You know, everything was so beautiful here. But there were no people. You know, and I had come after Iran, spent a year in India where there are throngs and hordes and just millions and masses of people. And I would be in these gorgeous neighborhoods with beautiful lawns and no people.

LUCCINI: [00:56:27] What an interesting observation.

CAVANNA: [00:56:29] It was so strange. It was really.

LUCCINI: [00:56:31] It's still true, isn't it?

CAVANNA: [00:56:34] Mm hmm. I remember the Dalai Lama coming to America and his impression was like, it was a Buddha land. That it was just a land of such majestic beauty. And, um, and he thought, of course, that that was how it was psychologically. Because in Tibetan culture, it's really your psychology that is dealt with. You know, where beauty is, the outside is not very attractive, but the people's spirits are beautiful and joyful in spite of everything they'd been through. And he said he felt that until he saw medicine cabinets with people taking sleeping pills and anti-depressants and that it's almost sort of a mirage. It's sort of a facade, that they look so beautiful.

LUCCINI: [00:57:23] Maybe partly because people don't have contact with the natural beauty, they. I read that more and more people spend time indoors in their offices or in their homes.

CAVANNA: [00:57:35] Right.

LUCCINI: [00:57:35] And they're not outside, so they don't get the feeling of the majesty, the majestic beauty here.

CAVANNA: [00:57:45] Right. That's interesting. It's very healthy to go outside.

LUCCINI: [00:57:49] Yes. Okay. So, um, great. Thank you very much. It's a pleasure.

CAVANNA: [00:58:00] It's wonderful.

[END OF INTERVIEW]