

**Theodore Cheslak Oral History Interview**  
Returned Peace Corps Volunteer Collection  
Administrative Information

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**Biographical Note**

Theodore Cheslak served as a Peace Corps volunteer in Kenya from 1975 to 1977 as a teacher.

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Oral History Interview

with

Theodore Cheslak

August 26, 2004  
Ann Arbor, Michigan

By Ernest Zaremba

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

ZAREMBA: [00:00:06] This is Ernie Zaremba interviewing Ted Cheslak.

CHESLAK: [00:00:15] I was a Peace Corps volunteer in Kenya as a teacher and. I was there from 1975 to 1977.

ZAREMBA: [00:00:23] Ok, let's start with the present, maybe talk a little bit about where you live, a little bit about your family career interests, just a little bit about the present.

CHESLAK: [00:00:30] I live in Ann Arbor, Michigan. 13 or so years. My wife, Elizabeth, and I have three sons, all boys, they're all boys. They are coming to be a college age. So they're going on. Sorry, what else did you want?

ZAREMBA: [00:00:58] Oh, interests, work.

CHESLAK: [00:00:59] Work. Oh, I'm an attorney, I do international business transactions on state. Practice international law certified arbitrator. And do miscellaneous things worked out at my home. Which is satisfactory for me.

ZAREMBA: [00:01:23] OK. Now, moving back to the past, like, to think about the year before you joined the Peace Corps, why did you join, what kinds of things were happening, the process of joining the Peace Corps.

CHESLAK: [00:01:38] In 1974, I was working for my congressman then. New York State. He and I had had a number of discussions of career paths and opportunities and things of that nature. He was a strong advocate of acquiring foreign experience. And so he suggested that I look at the Peace Corps, which I did, and went through the process and several things were offered to me. I remember one specifically in Ethiopia, but it just got too unsettled, too chaotic, so they actually scratched that mission. So we went to Kenya.

ZAREMBA: [00:02:38] What was your reaction, your reaction when you found out you're going to Kenya, your family, your friends?

CHESLAK: [00:02:47] My family was. They were of mixed minds about it. They don't they didn't know anything about Africa. For all they knew, they still ate people. But they don't know what they you know, they recognize that the bird had to leave the nest.

ZAREMBA: So where did you go to train?

CHESLAK: [00:03:16] We started. Well, training is actually at Philadelphia and got a lot of shots and then flew to Nairobi. That was a long flight because it was first to Monrovia, Lagos, Abuja then Nairobi. That's a long flight.

ZAREMBA: [00:03:49] So no trek stateside training, just simply getting a chance.

CHESLAK: When we got to Kenya, to Nairobi, they immediately took us to Mombasa, where we spent seven to eight weeks on language and cultural sensitivity training.

ZAREMBA: [00:04:07] How big of a group was it?

CHESLAK: [00:04:09] If I recall, it was about 40 people, but it's very.

ZAREMBA: [00:04:16] And so the training consisted of language, cultural training, any kind of physical activity, like running in the morning?

CHESLAK: [00:04:26] No, I was just go down to the beach and stick my feet in the water. There you go to the sunshine and.

ZAREMBA: It sounds like a pretty exotic place to train your quarters, like

CHESLAK: We were in a motel that was somewhat isolated. So you weren't we weren't in town or we were really on the edge of the city of Mombasa. More or less. And so it was it was kind of secluded and every day was busy with classes, all that, and it was immersion classes and going on field trips to the market and to start practicing what you learned.

ZAREMBA: Any other field trips that you took?

CHESLAK: [00:05:14] I can't. I don't think so. I don't remember.

ZAREMBA: [00:05:24] Any particular anecdotes from training that come to mind, interactions with other volunteers or the people?

CHESLAK: [00:05:26] Well, the only thing that comes to mind is I was accused of being a CIA. Which was untrue. I was there to steal secrets.

ZAREMBA: [00:05:47] This in training?

CHESLAK: [00:05:49] Consists of guys who were just sitting around. But this was in Africa. Which I found to be amusing. Since we were I mean, the two governments with cooperative and we sold a lot of what they had. And so we actually knew. Me to call for him to. So any effort that was put that, you know, that that was actually. But this could happen because it would sensitized to the fact that here are these Westerners, these resembles Europeans who are coming here, you know, what are they doing here, helping this poor Africans? You know, we really need these people kind of thing, they have a certain amount of pride in their culture and they're not without some sort of. I think there were some resentment from that standpoint. They were accepting of our offer of help.

ZAREMBA: And how was the language training? Very effective or not?

CHESLAK: [00:07:16] I think it was pretty good. We were learning Swahili. Which I found to be useful on the coast of Africa and in Newark.

ZAREMBA: How in Newark?

CHESLAK: I'm being facetious. I could say Oakland.

ZAREMBA: [00:07:26] And what about your site? How did you how did that feel about traveling to your site?

CHESLAK: [00:07:38] And I ended up being around the school, which is a local commuter school, parents from and it is not far. Is just outside of Nairobi. So it's not about. We're coming back to Nairobi and then, I've forgotten, I probably took the bus out there. Found the place.

ZAREMBA: [00:08:11] So you went out there on your own?

CHESLAK: [00:08:12] No, I was fine.

ZAREMBA: [00:08:17] Were there any other Peace Corps volunteers at that school?

CHESLAK: Not at that school. It was another school, a private school. Much better endowed. That was down the road. Two volunteers there and actually ended up living with them and then going to my school. Because they did it the block building. Two teachers. The bear next to.

ZAREMBA: And how far down do you have a bicycle to get around?

CHESLAK: [00:08:58] I know I actually ended up buying a car. My Peace Corps experience was not altogether typical. So. Diplomatic channels, and so I one, I lived somewhat differently, and two, I acquired a much different perspective from. And you would require just in the bush somewhere was one particular tribe of people. I don't think anybody else had that kind of perspective.

ZAREMBA: About how far outside of Nairobi did you live?

CHESLAK: About 10 miles.

ZAREMBA: And the diplomatic families lived in Nairobi I assume?

CHESLAK: [00:09:44] Yes. And in fact, I, you know, probably spent half, two weeks sleeping at their house and eating their house and looking like a diplomat like me, the banquet. But it's nice to.

ZAREMBA: [00:10:07] So how far into your service were you before you got the car?

CHESLAK: [00:10:10] I don't recall. I was probably about four months, maybe not four, I don't remember. But I went and talked to the assistant director about that.

ZAREMBA: [00:10:19] Because it seems like to visit these other families and you need it somewhere, you know. Yeah. OK, any particular anecdotes and from school is a typical school?

CHESLAK: [00:10:45] Well, I wanted to teach English language and literature. And ended up teaching English language, literature, health science and African history, of which I knew nothing but I could read the book faster than they could. The day was pretty cool. You know, it was a full teaching day. You have a you know, a class off now and then day, but basically you're in the classroom. I also raised some money for the school, not to toot my horn. I talked about a laboratory for the school since they didn't have one. This was basically a high school, so they came up with some money. You know, I went to science supply store and bought skeletons and all kinds of stuff. As this was happening, was talking to one of the directors. Told them what was happening. You are getting materials or you are getting cold cash. So there will be no cold cash getting materials on rabbit skeleton. You have the rabbit skeleton. Really, it was a full day and the kids were great. It was one reason that about. Oftentimes, I would get these kids and I wouldn't reading and writing assignment this mean 15 minutes of class or something like that, and sometimes I took the occasion to read my mail while we're doing this, because the mail came to the school. I get a letter from my mother with a newspaper clipping in it. The headlines, which are Kissinger to deliver Orange man's shoes. So what it was, I had these special shoes. I left them home. Henry Kissinger was coming to speak at the conference in Nairobi United Nations mission. Like the congressman that I worked for set it up so that my parents would send shoes to the State Department and, you know, I mean, his public relations people were apparently pretty good. He brought my shoes when he came to Africa. So, you know, there's this article about, you know, I read it to the kids.

ZAREMBA: [00:13:50] Do you have a copy of that?

CHESLAK: I don't have a copy of it anymore. It was in Orange County Record, 1975. Last time that was published, it was. When my mom, my mother sent the shoes, of course, she put in tuna fish, maple syrup, everything else. She gets a package back in the mail, just the shoes, that's all they were taking. So, yeah.

ZAREMBA: So you've got your picture taken with Kissinger?

CHESLAK: No, no, no, no. Come pick it up at the embassy.

ZAREMBA: Did you meet Kissinger?

CHESLAK: [00:14:35] No, they just dropped off the shoes.

ZAREMBA: [00:14:42] So you had your regular teaching and then you got some funding for this laboratory and any other kind of side projects that came.

CHESLAK: [00:14:57] You know I just wrote to people in the States, had books sent. I remember I don't remember all that I do remember getting about 120 cephalosporins. So.

ZAREMBA: [00:15:13] How large were your classes?

CHESLAK: [00:15:17] Twenty five, twenty six, but they're pretty well behaved. If nothing else is really noteworthy school experience, one thing I did like about the teachers off several months a year at least twice a year because it was planning and harvesting time in the field. And so you go on safari and that was great. And we went all over. And one of the nice things, of course, is that, you know, a lot of places you can go, there'd be volunteers there. So you always know somebody can move your way around. You had a place to stay.

ZAREMBA: Any safari stories, and I assume that you took the car?

CHESLAK: [00:16:06] No, a Land Rover. It was way too rough for the car.

ZAREMBA: [00:16:13] So you rented a Land Rover?

CHESLAK: I met some Brit who, you know, he took people out and so several people got together and went out. Well, that was one time, you know, there were other times when I went on my own with just another volunteer. You know, for example, going to Tanzania we took the bus down. That's. We fooled

around there. It was the place where Africans were brought from the interior were held so they could be transported to Zanzibar and sold into slavery. It's kind of rundown now, as you would expect, but, you know, they're still pillars there, which had six chains on various sides high up. Ten people to a pole or something to change a bunch of them out of the building with the endless surrounded by wall. You see it, you know, you wouldn't think anything of it if you didn't know its history. But knowing its history, it's really quite moving. Walk in the field in Gettysburg, you didn't know there was a battle. There would mean anything to you. Know what went on there you'd be tremendously transported.

ZAREMBA: [00:18:15] Any other anecdotes from your safaris. Breakdowns, animals, strange surprises.

CHESLAK: [00:18:29] You come on all kinds of different things. It's an important. And quarterfinalist and. What we saw is this is my second. Saw this Masai guy. A village guy now watches. Like most of us. That was then he walked right up. They pierce their earlobes and stretch them. He had done that, of course, he had a Dole pineapple in there. It was beautiful. You know, like a flat can like a tuna fish can. But, you know. It's teeming with them in certain places. Know where I was going. I didn't go to Crater or the Serengeti for reasons that escape me. But with the Land Rover we went to a number of places.

CHESLAK: [00:20:28] One thing that occurred. It was very hot, so I was riding on top of the Land Rover, on top of the land of the carrier rack, and so your sleeping bags and whatnot up there, covered with canvas, and it's actually quite comfortable lying up there. So that's what I was doing. So we're driving around Masai Mara, the game park. I got off the Land Rover and I'm walking, I came around this turn, I was still very close to the Land Rover and it was a female lion lying across a mound and her boyfriend who was not interested in having anybody who wasn't him. So there I am probably thirty feet away. It would take a lion about a half a second. He began to make a series of false charges, you know, so I, of course, skedaddle, told the guy who was driving, let's get out of here. And he had

turned the engine off to get gas, so you know there I am, I mean, I was up on top of that Land Rover, you know, quick as you could blink, because, you know, the adrenaline was flowing.

ZAREMBA: [00:22:43] Tell me about your leisure time.

CHESLAK: [00:22:50] Oh just hang around the hotels. I spent time with some Swedes, you know, I'd be over there and we'd have dinner and talk.

ZAREMBA: Many volunteers often have someone to do laundry and that type of thing.

CHESLAK: Everything to do with this is I got it from.

ZAREMBA: [00:23:19] Any overall impressions of the Kenyans you were around?

CHESLAK: [00:23:20] They're like anybody else in certain ways, I mean, some of them are a piece of your life and some of them aren't. And you know, it just depends. My experience is that city culture has many similarities. No matter what city, whether it's in Africa, Latin America and North America, it doesn't matter. So that's not really interesting. The tribes of the different cultures, different attitudes towards things. It's actually, if you want to see racism, Africa is the place to see it. The differences between tribes, you know, you and I wouldn't know what they know, and it's can be really quite painful, the darts. It's like an ant walking into the wrong anthill, they'll take them apart.

ZAREMBA: Back then you were there, Kenyatta was still president. Is that right?

CHESLAK: Yes.

ZAREMBA: [00:24:42] Now, today, Nairobi has quite a reputation for crime, was it like that back then?

CHESLAK: [00:24:50] No. Well, yeah, but they didn't have, you know, machine guns and everything else that they would have now.

ZAREMBA: So would you be out at night?

CHESLAK: [00:24:58] It's not fair to say that we were. I mean, if you were in the center of town, which was filled up with modern. Yeah, that's where tourists were. And we're official visitors were and the police were pleasant. We were pretty safe. But I mean, something was up and it didn't matter whether we had any place else. But, you know, we went to the wrong part of town. I feel just like if you go to the wrong part of Detroit to take your life in your hands.

ZAREMBA: [00:25:41] What about reflecting on differences between the first year and second? Is there much of a transition for you and if you come together for the first year because that was you know, that didn't.

CHESLAK: [00:25:54] I didn't notice. I don't recall.

ZAREMBA: Any health problems?

CHESLAK: [00:26:03] Yeah, actually. One was malaria parasites, which is also transmitted by the students which are contracted. But, you know, I got over that trying to get back to Nairobi, to the position of the Americans with. Ed. Especially since he said he wasn't sure, which was quite good, but I was, you know, this kind of thing where, you know, you couldn't get out of bed, you couldn't walk. I remember having to crawl or something like that on the floor to the bathroom, but they pulled back because it was just like in the movies. I could do it for them because, you know, you got your answer for him. Yes. You got sort of hit you when he was down there. Yes. I think I got a. They slept on the beach. And then in 1998, I had esophageal hemorrhage, and it turns out I had to pay. Well, you know, not exclusively acquired in Africa and that is pretty clever. The kind of place to really manifest itself is 20 to 25 years. Surmises that this was quiet and now I've gotten rid of the presence of cirrhosis. But I think it's the most. And where I got that my wife thinks that at the time you're still using mechanical needles, that the sterilized and used again. She thinks that is

probably the source, but. So don't think it like a big shot of damage that they have to pay for a or something, but they didn't even know about. See, for a long time, I didn't start screening for it until probably nine months or so. You know, insurance companies are going to go get the life insurance policy they need to screen for. They didn't know about it, but it's it's actually actually quite important. And some people don't know because it doesn't it takes a long time before, you know, you've got it. The with the symptoms of symptoms that you get cirrhosis and then you they go through all kinds. Everybody's different. You know, ultimately, you could require a liver transplant. I don't require now.

ZAREMBA: [00:29:54] OK, any other unexpected events or relationships that come to mind. What about your sense of achievement and failure anywhere between?

CHESLAK: [00:30:24] Well, I think that the individuals that I had in class, the students, I thought that they learned a lot about Westerners. I learned a lot about them. But, you know, in the larger scheme of things, I would be hard pressed to be that much difference, but within their particular lives, but socially speaking to the broader society, unless one and. A senior official. You know, I don't think he really made that much of a difference. I've always thought that the value of a piece of. Was wild, sure. Getting value is for your own profit for. So people who are not as well off as you are. Our values in that regard, perhaps questionable. But be that as it may be, the other value of the. Sensitizer. Americans should be watching for Americans has always been. It's called. But Americans themselves don't know much about the rest of the world. And so this was the way to I think introduce them to globalism. I became friends with them, some Africans and I met a lot of Americans, one guys in northern Michigan and I was up there last weekend. He was. We were in country together. In fact, that's where we met. So it makes it more.

ZAREMBA: [00:32:45] Any regrets or any satisfaction?

CHESLAK: [00:32:55] I mean, it was satisfying, essentially. Very straight. And, you know, I met a lot of good people. In terms of regret, before I left, I had the opportunity. He's offered to to work in paleoanthropology and the. He's in. I will be gets to. Lucas. And the envelope which was there. And anyhow, I was given the opportunity to do that. Things will be different when they had three boys and so the wonderful wife. So it's OK, you never know. Otherwise I would have probably had African babies.

ZAREMBA: [00:34:10] Can you overall evaluate your service in light of the three goals, at least for the first one, providing technical assistance?

CHESLAK: [00:34:20] To me, that's, you know, really been as a teacher in a technical school in a way. Educating in that sense. I did that. Modest success.

ZAREMBA: How about the second one, to have a better understanding of Americans by the people served?

CHESLAK: Oh, I think so. I know I spent a lot of time with the kids when they were so happy with what I was, you know, after school, go up to the village have a cup of tea with them in their hut. But you know, they liked that.

ZAREMBA: And the third, to help promote better understanding of other peoples by Americans.

CHESLAK: Well I think I've spoken to that.

ZAREMBA: [00:35:10] And finally, about the effect on you of your Peace Corps service. Was there any immediate effect? Including things like culture shock when you came back.

CHESLAK: [00:35:22] Well, you know. I was, you know, the first smell I had, walking out of JFK, was garbage. It was very unpleasant. Plenty of garbage and unpleasant smells that. You know, the materialism just seemed to me overwhelming and overworked, on this treadmill to acquire more and more

and more. Of course the good side of that is it gives people work. The bad side is that you trade your life for this stuff.

ZAREMBA: How about the long term effects of the Peace Corps experience?

CHESLAK: Well, it's hard to sort out the effects that come from that particular experience. Certainly it's there. Perspective on. I think it probably heightened my interest in international relations, but I was interested in that anyhow. So, you know, to what extent the boost to the, I don't know. That used to be. I was talking about the contrast between rural society, which is basically what Kenya is, and New York City, the center of the material side. And I remember speaking to Africans and telling them, look, we really are better off planning your cities so that in the morning everybody lives over here, in the morning, everybody goes this way and in the evening everybody goes that way. So you don't have these, you know, horrendous traffic jams with people trying, you know, like Los Angeles. The only reply I got was, ah, you are just trying to hold us back. But it's hard to tell them.

ZAREMBA: Now this was discussions with ordinary people.

CHESLAK: Yeah, ordinary people, but, you know, adults or, you know, people in their early 20s.

ZAREMBA: So remember any other discussions like that.

CHESLAK: Not specifically.

ZAREMBA: [00:38:36] Any other stories from any part of Peace Corps?

CHESLAK: [00:38:45] I guess being chased by an elephant. I was in the Aberdares, mountains in central Kenya. We were up there fishing, looking for game and stuff.

ZAREMBA: Fly fishing for trout?

CHESLAK: So we saw this elephant. It actually had one tusk broken off. But I began to approach him taking his picture. Well, you know, his ears flatten, and he's catching me. So we had a car at that time, so we're running to the car, the car is of course starting to move. I had to jump into the car on the run, you know, because it was not far away. Yeah. Said to myself, that probably wasn't a good idea. I got some good pictures.

ZAREMBA: [00:40:05] You don't have those pictures available now I assume?

CHESLAK: I have no idea where they are.

[END OF INTERVIEW]