

Richard Harkrader Oral History Interview
Returned Peace Corps Volunteer Collection
Administrative Information

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Biographical Note

Richard Harkrader served as a Peace Corps volunteer in Tunisia from 1969 to 1971 as a tourism development and urban planning specialist.

Access

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Oral History Interview

with

Richard Harkrader

October 21, 2019
Durham, North Carolina

By Robert T. K. Scully

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

SCULLY: [00:00:02] Well, I'll introduce quickly, this is Robert Scully from Raleigh, North Carolina, returned Peace Corps volunteer from Kenya. The date is October 21, 2019, and I'm interviewing Richard Harkrader in at his home in Durham, North Carolina. Richard was a Peace Corps volunteer in Tunisia beginning in July 1969 and ending in 1970.

HARKRADER: One.

SCULLY: 1971. And his project was in the architectural field, tourism and urban planning. And Richard, I'm going to let you give us your Peace Corps story.

HARKRADER: [00:00:48] Thank you, Bob. My name is Richard Harkrader. Soon after, very soon after graduating architecture at Cornell, I joined the

Peace Corps and did for a tour in Tunisia, North Africa. We were a group of 15 architects and we had an extraordinary training program in Estes Park, Colorado, where we all showed up at a small dude ranch and did intensive French and cultured cross-cultural things for, I think, six or eight weeks. The program is run by an extraordinary Peace Corps legend, Lee Jennings, and we were very fortunate to have had a long relationship with Lee, he's a wonderful person. And we did training. And then we flew to New York. And as we were passing through New York, I had happened to be that weekend of Woodstock and there were quite a few people that wanted to take a break and go to Woodstock. And luckily that didn't happen because we have been stuck there for a week and we flew on we were flying on to Tunisia through Rome. We got to Rome late and we couldn't land in Tunis. The plane, I guess the connecting flight had already left. And so we got to spend the night in Rome. And I my mother's Italian and I had been to Rome several times and I was able to we checked into a hotel, but none of us stayed in the hotel.

HARKRADER: [00:02:26] We walked around the city all night long and I was there. The guide for all these architects who had, you know, studied the amazing urban planning and buildings in Rome. And we had a wonderful time. We arrived in Tunis the next day totally exhausted because we hadn't slept all night and continued our our training. And we went to at that point, we weren't doing individual training in country with families. We toured around Tunisia with current volunteers and looked at the different job opportunities. And we then pretty much self selected what we wanted to do. Half the group went to the call, the bazaar, the University and Tunis National University in the architecture school and taught for the two year period. And they lived in and around Tunis, which is in the far north of the country. I selected a post and I'm very far away from the capital, and it was a program and there were three participants. One was Peace Corps, the other was USAID, and the third was the Ministry of Tourism and Planning and Aid provided equipment and a vehicle and office equipment especially. And we, the volunteers in that program,

established new planning and tourism offices. And I think for parts of the country, it was a phenomenal opportunity.

SCULLY: [00:04:04] What was the city or town where you were?

HARKRADER: [00:04:06] I was in a town. I was in an oasis town on the Mediterranean. Name is Gabès, G-A-B-E-S, with an accent. And other people were in other locations and we all shared the same job and we frequently talked with each other. It was a remarkable opportunity. We had initially we were housed in the Public Works Office and then later moved out and had an independent office. And we had several Tunisian people working with us. And our job was to train them to take over the responsibility of urban planning and tourism in the states that we were working in. I stayed there in that job until February of two, almost a little over a year and a half, and in that time we worked with remarkable technicians and they really took to the to the job of planning. I'd always been interested in planning, even though I studied architecture. I spent a lot of time in the planning school and taking courses there. And the other fascinating part, in addition to planning extensions of towns, water and sewer, transportation and the electrical grid, I just kind of nitty gritty of planning, was working with the tourism office and our office in particular was asked at one time to help establish tourism circuits in the south of the country, in the Sahel, in the desert in the south of the country visiting oasis sites. And these are remarkable places that you can imagine. It was sand dunes, palm trees, date palms and water coming out of the ground, but nothing around it for miles and miles.

HARKRADER: [00:06:18] So we were there at the time was tourism was just starting in Tunisia and the island of Djerba was part of our planning area. And that island exists right at the border between Libya and Tunisia, right in where the coastline turns, becomes east west and becomes Libya. And there where they were building a big airport to group tourism, which was starting and the hotels were being built. And our job was to find interesting things that people could do away from the beaches

on the Mediterranean. And we established these tours out to these ancient towns and and activities for people to do camping in the desert on camels and visiting date palm oases. And remarkably, those those tours are still going on and they've really embellished it. There's now a camel festival in January of the year and it's become quite popular. As a volunteer, I had to work in French and I had studied French in high school, never, not in college, and but I spent a lot of time learning, communicating in French and learning French and also reading and writing French because we had to write reports. And that, unfortunately kept me from learning very much Arabic. Other volunteers in the country were in public health and teaching and so on, and they their training was all in Arabic. I learned street Arabic and I would spend times in the souks, especially with the drug dealers and just on weekends or whatever, just hang out.

HARKRADER: [00:08:25] And that's how I learned what Arabic I did know it was back then because of my Italian background, I could easily pass for a Tunisian. I had curly dark hair and a tan very easily. And so I would one problem I had if I started speaking Arabic, people would not believe me when I said, that's all I know. Again, I had to switch to French and it was because of terrorism in the country. It was there was often also discrimination against Tunisians at the beach resorts. And so at times I would go to the beach resorts with other volunteers and they yeah, the doorman would come back and yank me out of line or take me out of the group and said, I'm sorry, you can't come in here. And my friends would have to vouch for me. I even once coming back into the country at the airport, I had the police come over and drag me out of the foreigners line and said, no, you have to be over here in the in the Nationals line. And they didn't believe my passport, but I got around that. But anyway, the job was remarkable. We did a lot of great work on town extension's water and sewer, and the tourism work was was just really icing on the cake. And the fact that it's still a lasting project and that the Tunisians took over is really remarkable.

HARKRADER: [00:10:00] I haven't been back since 1965, 1995, but I did go back twice after leaving and visited some of the offices and met with some of the Tunisians I had worked with. We were all young then, and the last time I went back, they all had families and I brought my daughters with me and we got together. It was really a wonderful time and I would like to go back soon. One thing I tried in training the Tunisian staff we had in the office because planning work is so tied with the real estate and real estate investment, I really made a big effort to talk to them about the ethics of the work they were doing and the potential for corruption. And when I went back, one of the remarkable things is they told me, you know, many years later, 15, 20 years later, that they are still remember those discussions and took them to heart. And they saw it happening. They saw how easily you could become corrupted in that field. So that was that was very gratifying. One of the remarkable experiences I had is there is a town near gabbers, and it just happens to be the town where the young man five years ago burned himself and started the Arab Spring. And the mayor of that town had called us to help plan a lot what he said was a logical road system because the and water and sewer, mainly water, they didn't have sewer water extension of the town.

HARKRADER: [00:11:56] And so I went out there and that was a hodgepodge of property ownership that had been divided and subdivided. I mean, as you could see anywhere over time, including here in North Carolina, and what to do to it to get a street system through that would be fair to everyone involved. And so I came up with a way to handle this. But the interesting thing was the mayor happened to be the former U.N. ambassador from Tunisia. He was. And he, of course, spoke great English and. I was a grandfatherly figure, and when I got there, he was wearing a traditional robe and he said he invited me to walk around the town with me and he said, I know this is not usual for you, but, you know, we walked around the town holding hands and he explained to me that traditions of the town and, you know, the different problems they were facing because some some parcels had palm trees and others didn't. But nobody could get to their houses

with any with with a vehicle because the streets were narrow and and people were complaining all the time. And there was neighbor neighboring feuds. And so we were able to pretty much solve that problem and be equitable to to the people involved. But that experience was one of the highlights of my my time there to interact with the person that really had played on the world stage. And we talked about politics.

SCULLY: [00:13:40] Now this was near the town of Gabès?

HARKRADER: Very near the town of Gabès.

SCULLY: What was the name of that town?

HARKRADER: [00:13:44] I am trying to remember the name of that town. I do have a carpet from that town. I cannot remember it right now. But it is the town where this is where the Arab Spring, the spark that started the Arab Spring, when this young man who had who had had a college education came back to his town, couldn't get a job and was selling fruit on the streets. And the police were hassling him and wanting wanting a bribe and kickback to protect him. And that was what happened. And actually, when I was there, there was an uprising, not not violent, but protests and against the current government, which had been in power for 30, 40 years, and the corruption that had spawned, especially in economics, in the economic area and the whole country shot down. People just withheld their money. They didn't go to the bank. They closed their stores and shut down the economy and forced the government from power.

SCULLY: [00:13:49] When was this?

HARKRADER: That was 19, must have been early 1970 against the Bourguiba regime. And then Ali, who came into power, he was related to the Bourguibas and he was then the same thing happened maybe 10 years ago when he was pushed from power and the Brotherhood

came in. And but you can tell from the history of Tunisia that it's, you know, civil war, as in Algeria or Tunisia or in Libya next door was not really anything that would have been adopted by the Tunisians.

HARKRADER: [00:15:31] They were they were able to handle political change and discord by pretty pretty much peaceful means. I mean, not that there weren't, quote unquote, riots. And and the police came out and a few people died, but there was never a civil war in Tunisia. It's really remarkable place. And the elders are respected and the merchants, it's a it's a country of small merchants are hold a lot of power and use it. So my that's pretty much my story. Peace Corps. I came back and met my wife, who's also was a Peace Corps volunteer, and we hit it off immediately as many people that have that experience in common. And we've been married now for 47 years. She was a she was a volunteer in Ethiopia and Ghana. We went back actually when I came back from Peace Corps, I did it. I was asked by Peace Corps to do some recruiting. And I went to the American Planning Association meeting in New Orleans soon after I got back and actually recruited a couple that went down and took over the office that I had just left. And I recruited on several campuses, planning, planning schools. And a lot of and that resulted in quite a few people joining the Peace Corps and going to Tunisia.

SCULLY: Go ahead.

HARKRADER: [00:17:15] Yeah, years, years after Peace Corps, we had a two year old, my wife and I had a two year old daughter and we signed up with Peace Corps to do a training program in Togo. We were building contractors and home builders at that time in Durham, North Carolina. And we signed up to go to Togo and teach volunteers, many of whom were not experienced in construction, how to build schools. And so Lorna was fluent in French. She taught French. I ran the program and taught the volunteers construction techniques. And we built a school and in the center of the country, way north of the capital, Lomé. And those volunteers built rural schools and dug wells.

And that was a great experience for an experience teaching. And that was 1970. Oh, boy, 79?

SCULLY: [00:18:14] Was that a Peace Corps project?

HARKRADER: [00:18:16] That was Peace Corps. Yeah, I was. I was running the training program. Another famous long-term Peace Corps person, Carl Beck, was head of Peace Corps Togo at that time and got to know him and his family. We then much later in 1990, starting in 1990, 1993, started a Peace Corps like program in Nicaragua. And we and our family learned Spanish, went to Nicaragua, established a nonprofit in this rural county. And we have worked quite often with Peace Corps volunteers there.

SCULLY: [00:18:58] What was the name of the nonprofit?

HARKRADER: [00:19:00] The name of the nonprofit is Sister Communities of San Ramon Nicaragua. And we're we just celebrated our 25th anniversary. And the current head of our program in Nicaragua is a former Peace Corps volunteer. She married what's married in Nicaragua. Yeah, Angie Price, who is Peace Corps Nicaragua. Let's see, she's been out five years or so, probably. And she served for three years, probably 2005-08 or maybe 08-11, somewhere in that time. And she's been a wonderful asset to our organization. And she taught at the university level education. And we've done quite a few projects, rural education programs. We've built schools. When I say we build schools, we organize communities to build their own school, and we provide the materials. And an expert experience mason contractor and the community donates the land. They provide all the labor in the sand and water and security. And we have built a dozen two room school houses around this large county that's very much like Appalachia with very poor roads. And even though geographically it's not gigantic, it still takes over two hours to drive across it because of the roads conditions. So we've been going down there for the last 25 years and running a Peace Corps program type

program in and with some with many of the lessons we learned in Peace Corps of helping people to help themselves be successful. And the other goal of our program, of our project in Nicaragua is to take North Americans to the Third World and give them a short Peace Corps experience of a week long. And we developed an ecotourism lodge up in the mountains, a coffee farm, ecotourism lodge that we thought at the time was just going to be available for people, groups we brought down and we were organizing groups of 10 to 15 people, several each year.

HARKRADER: [00:21:28] That's one way our nonprofit made income. And then this project got in some of the guidebooks, one of them in particular Moon Handbook, which is started by Peace Corps volunteer, former Peace Corps volunteers. And then more people started coming and we started running international awards at this eco-tourism lodge. And one year we even won the Virgin Atlantic Best Eco-Lodge in the World award. So here we were in Durham, North Carolina, running a fire, a coffee farm, an eco-tourism lodge, hotel and restaurant. It was over an hour from the supply places and had meals and had twenty five employees. And we had and two of the managers of that farm were former Peace Corps volunteers. And so we continue with that project. It's kind of gone on hiatus right now because of the political situation in Nicaragua, which is very unfortunate. But we're going to try to weather it and but our relation with Peace Corps and the third goal of Peace Corps, of bringing it home and introducing an American population to the third world and and why people how people live and why they might want to come to the United States. And the whole immigration issue is one of our big goals. And I think we've been quite successful.

SCULLY: [00:23:06] I think mentioned something about coffee production as well as part of the San Ramon. How does that work?

HARKRADER: [00:23:12] This project is the name of the farm is Finca Esperanza Verde, which means Green Hope Farm. Finca Esperanza Verde, and

it was an abandoned coffee farm when we bought it, the intention of buying this was to bring groups down, but also to work with a local farming cooperative to build a model farm and training facility. The farmers, we were there and we had an agreement with them to do this and we left. And a couple of months later, they contacted us and said they found this piece of land and we could buy it for very little. So we sent them the money, we bought the land, and then we started this project. Well, it turned out that these are corn and bean farmers and who live in and around San Ramon, which is at 2500 feet elevation in the farm, is at 4000 feet. It's it's not cloud forest, but it's it's definitely tropical rainforest and much, much cooler. Yes. And great for coffee. And so after a while, it became clear that this was not an appropriate training facility for them. But we were taken with the beauty of this place. It's on a mountain.

HARKRADER: [00:24:37] We ended up owning the whole watershed of 250 acres that we bought little by little over time. And it has a 100 mile view with no lights at night. And we were off grid and had solar and small hydro running the place. So one thing led to another. And as I say, we eventually tried to run this place from Durham and which was only possible by the Internet having the Internet available. And then we entered and it turned into a hotel and restaurant facility. So we had to train Nicaraguans to who in the countryside were used to working from 6:00 in the morning to 1:00 in the afternoon, six days a week. And that was it. Well, you can't run a tourism facility on those kind of hours. So we had to train people and ended up with a two team approach where people work three and a half days, 12 hours a day. And then another team came in and did the same. And that was very popular, especially with women who could leave their kids for three and a half days with their sister or something and have all that time off.

SCULLY: [00:25:50] And has solar energy been readily adapted by adopted down there?

HARKRADER: [00:25:58] Well, Nicaragua has a lot of wind available wind power, and they've done a good job on that. And they have hydro Costa Rica right next door. Who they're in or tied with is mainly hydro driven. So in terms of renewables there, they have at times 60, 70 percent of their energy is from renewables that they have not done much solar. They have phenomenal solar resources. And I have a good friend I work with in León, Nicaragua have pretty much financed his company and he does solar projects around the country. But on the on a smaller scale, not a utility scale. And we've we tried it one time, but we're not successful. But it's got an enormous solar resource. And we have done small projects with a with a group here in Chapel Hill called United Solar Initiative, many of whom are former Peace Corps volunteers. And we've done solar on some of the rural schools which were off grid. So it has enormous potential and it is doing a good job with wind power, they have an incredible wind resource down on the lakes between the Pacific Ocean and the lakes.

SCULLY: [00:27:22] Do you see yourself continuing these projects?

HARKRADER: [00:27:25] Yeah, we're well, you know, certainly we my wife and I, you know, been the founders of this nonprofit and the we the two of us in the name of the nonprofit develop this farm and supplied a lot of the capital and were later paid back by the tourism. So the but the development, the farm itself, all the buildings in the solar system and so on has worked that line. And I did with with local people. And the nonprofit concentrated on the school's projects, the handicapped kids projects providing markets to artists here by buying their stuff and selling it in the U.S. a lot. And at one time when we first got there, I designed the baseball stadium for the town, which is now become one of the nicest baseball stadiums in the in the whole region. And a lot of play offs and stuff happens there, which brings money into the town and people and visitors. So that was very gratifying. You know, so we our whole family is is fluent. Being in San Ramon and going to San Ramon has been a real blessing to our family. Our kids are

totally bilingual, even trilingual. And they would they hop on a plane any time and go down there and have lots of friends,

SCULLY: [00:28:58] Has the nonprofit to find an American or U.S. market for coffee?

HARKRADER: [00:29:05] Well, we never raised that much coffee at the coffee farm. We have worked over the years, pretty much since the beginning with counterculture coffee here in Durham, North Carolina, on both the importing. And we were and still are. Well, since we stole the farm project five years ago, up until that time, we were one of the few businesses I know of that actually grew the coffee, imported it roasted and sold at retail. We still sell in cooperation with counterculture coffee. We still sell coffee at retail once a month to our customers to raise money to pretty much cover our administrative expenses so that donations and money we earn in tourism goes into projects. So that I learned a lot about the coffee business. It's a remarkable business. It's actually the second most traded project product in the world next to petroleum.

SCULLY: [00:30:07] Now in Tunisia, your local host country participants basically took over all the various tourism and so on that you were you were working on. Have the Hondurans also, not Hondurans I mean Nicaraguans, also pretty much replicated your work and taken over the management zone?

HARKRADER: [00:30:30] Well, the we trained the tourism that we did in Nicaragua, which had two parts to it. One was when we took groups down for a one week Peace Corps experience, we went took people to the farm for three or four nights. That was a real ecoterrorism experience with birding, hiking, going to rivers and waterfalls and things like that. Monkeys is a remarkable place and picking coffee and learning about coffee and the other three or four nights was staying with families in town and so on, especially trained families to host. Two people in their homes got their train them to improve their bathrooms, you

know, have a decent room, decent beds, we loan money for people to buy beds. We train these these families. And a lot of them are women led households and provided them with significant income. You know, during the times usually January, February, March, when our groups would come to the coffee farm aspect was really, as I say, ecotourism. And the main goal of eco tourism is that local people profit from and learn from and run. They run their organization and learn how to deal with the international tourists. And so we train. We had to train everybody, guides, cooks, servers, everybody. And we got lots of help from different people. We people that would come down on our trips would have lots of different skills. They would teach people, especially in food and preparation and and running a hotel, you know, with the linens, you name it. It's in. And we had. The guides were trained by the people at the Museum of Natural History here in North Carolina, and they would go down all the time and they would also take their own birding groups down there and they would train the guides in birding and hiking and how to build trails, how to maintain trails. And those people are still all working there.

SCULLY: So it is ongoing as well.

HARKRADER: Yeah, yeah.

SCULLY: [00:33:07] Is that component of tourism something that would perpetuate itself?

HARKRADER: [00:33:12] Well it was doing phenomenally well. We sold it five years ago. We, meaning the nonprofits to think of five years ago, privatized it because it was become such a business that John and I were trying to run from here and they were doing very well. They invested a lot of money in the in the Finca. And they were going to be full all this past summer until the political upheaval, upheaval happened in the summer of 2018. And they are really in dire straits now. Tourism went to zero.

SCULLY: [00:33:53] So did Kenya after the bombings.

HARKRADER: [00:33:54] Yeah, tourism went to zero. And all the merchants guesthouse families in the town of San Ramon. And the artists are all suffering from a lack of people coming. We're going to try we're recruiting two groups of adults for this spring 2020, but we don't think it's possible to take high school groups, which is really one of the main groups we want to get down there, as is as high school groups and groups that have gone down. Many groups, I don't know how many, 25, 30 groups of high school students, often with a teacher. I mean, the reports we get back from those groups are just astounding. And many of those kids go on to Peace Corps.

SCULLY: [00:34:49] Have there been some security issues recently that have put a damper on it?

HARKRADER: [00:34:51] Well there was in the spring of 2018 and early summer. But since that time, there really hasn't been any issues for foreigners. I mean, there have been roadblocks and, you know, passport checks and things. But it's just, you know, the bad publicity that gets out. And, of course, the State Department has warnings out. So we hope we can get 20 to 30 people to go this year and to resume as soon as we can. The high school groups,

SCULLY: [00:35:28] Is this the group going down in February?

HARKRADER: [00:35:30] There are two groups to February, you know. Yeah, and we're recruiting for them right now. Yeah. Yeah, we hope that I don't get politically incorrect. There's no Peace Corps Peace Corps pulled out immediately, pretty much immediately, because there were there were paramilitaries and extrajudicial killings and riots and blockades going on around the country and Peace Corps pretty much within a week. Pull everybody back to the capital and take them out of the. Yeah, very sad. Very sad.

SCULLY: And they're not back in yet?

HARKRADER: No, there and there's I don't see there's just not even a line of sight for Peace Corps going back.

SCULLY: [00:36:20] So Kenya has, the Peace Corps is going back this next year. Which is good to hear.

HARKRADER: [00:36:25] Well, unfortunately, the government in Nicaragua is totally corrupt. And it's a real shame. They were one of the governments that had made most progress on that U.N. Millennium Goals reducing poverty. And but then they obviously made the decision that they were going to hold elections, but they were never going to lose another election.

SCULLY: [00:36:50] Has corruption been a major challenge for your program?

HARKRADER: [00:36:50] No, not really. Except we did have problems with people challenging the land titles we had from the former owners of some of the properties who during that after the revolution had properties confiscated. But we had we were on solid ground, but we did have to go all the way to the Supreme Court and spend a significant amount of money defending our titles. That was very stressful for all of us. But the Senate, the political corruption means that. We don't see that they're going to allow any significant candidate to run and there's 30 to 40,000, 50,000 Nicaraguans in exile in Costa Rica, political exile. So it's a very sad situation for a country of nine million.

SCULLY: [00:37:49] You do expect a fairly large group to go back in the next tourism, ecotourism trips?

HARKRADER: [00:37:55] Trips well to two groups of 10 to 15 people. But that's, we were doing 60 to 120 people.

SCULLY: [00:38:03] Oh really. So there was quite a cut back on that?

HARKRADER: [00:38:05] Yeah, which affects our incomes. And it's very hard to get a lot of our donations were coming from people that made those trips so are not or don't have an income we used to have. So we're trying to survive this period and see what happens.

SCULLY: [00:38:24] A great program employing people. Yeah, connecting American tourism with yeah, yeah.

HARKRADER: [00:38:36] So that's thank you for the opportunity, Bob, to speak about this.

SCULLY: [00:38:41] Well, thank you, Richard. And as I've indicated, this will be this interview will be forwarded on to the Kennedy Library at Harvard, and it will be eventually part of the archive, the Peace Corps Oral History Archive for future generations of researchers.

HARKRADER: Yeah, good.

SCULLY: Well, thank you again. It's been great to meet with you and your lovely wife, Lonna, and very well I wish you well with your with your ongoing Nicaragua program and maybe a couple of return trips to Tunisia as well.

HARKRADER: Yeah. Thank you.

SCULLY: Take it easy.

[END OF INTERVIEW]