

Stanley Laser Oral History Interview
Returned Peace Corps Volunteer Collection
Administrative Information

Creator: Stanley Laser
Interviewer: Candice Wiggum
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Biographical Note

Stanley (Stan) Laser served as a Peace Corps volunteer in Ecuador from 1962 to 1965 as an engineer and surveyor.

Access

Open.

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Oral History Interview

with

Stanley Laser

December 10, 2018
Ringo, New Jersey

By Candice Wiggum

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

WIGGUM: [00:00:03] OK. Today is December 10, 2018. This is Candice Wiggum, and I am interviewing Stan Laser.

LASER: [00:00:09] Laser.

WIGGUM: [00:00:09] Laser, who was a Peace Corps volunteer in Ecuador from August or September in 1962 to July 1965 as an engineer.

LASER: [00:00:22] Right.

WIGGUM: [00:00:24] So first question is always why did you join Peace Corps?

LASER: [00:00:27] Well, I had graduated college in 1961. I had an engineering degree and I grew up in the Bronx, in New York City, and I wanted to travel. So I got a job pretty much as far away as I could get in Seattle, Washington. I was working for Boeing, the Boeing Company, and around

that time, John F. Kennedy had made that famous speech. You know, ask not what your country can do for you. And I had worked for about six months there, and then I came to the realization that I could always come back and do this job that I was doing. And I was at a certain age where I was free. I didn't have any, anybody, any responsibilities, anybody tying me down. I wanted to travel. And I thought it would be a good opportunity to do some service for the country.

LASER: [00:01:25] And so I sent in my application, and lo and behold, they accepted me to Ecuador. I did not speak any Spanish, except a few curse words that I learned in the neighborhood, but that was it. And so I immediately looked to see where Ecuador was and whatever it was, I guess that's where I was needed. So that's where I ended up going. So it was basically traveling, getting an opportunity to see different parts of the world, meet different people, and also to do some service for the country.

WIGGUM: [00:02:01] What was the reaction of your family and friends?

LASER: [00:02:04] Well, a lot of them thought I was a little crazy because at that time, nobody really knew what the Peace Corps was. I really wasn't sure what it was. My parents thought I was a little also a little crazy, but I was the one who was always more or less the adventuresome one in the family. So it wasn't that I didn't receive any support because people didn't know what it was, but they thought I was a little, a little odd, I might say. I wouldn't use the word odd, but a little different at that time, for the times.

WIGGUM: [00:02:39] Were you nervous at all?

LASER: [00:02:42] No, I was really looking forward to it. It was an adventure. That's how I looked at, you know, being 23 years old. I was looking for, you know, a chance to do something while I was still able to, while I had no ties.

WIGGUM: [00:02:59] What was it like leaving home or leaving Seattle, probably at that time? Did you meet other volunteers someplace and have some training in the United States? What was the process in between being accepted and going to country?

LASER: [00:03:17] At that point, I was still living in Seattle, so I had sent in my resignation and then I traveled home and stayed with my parents for a week or so. And then we flew out of, at that point, it's Kennedy Airport, we flew out of an airport called Idlewild Airport, which was Kennedy Airport. And the training ironically was in Washington state. So I flew back, in Washington State University in Pullman, Washington. And we were there, I don't know, maybe a month, three weeks or a month. And they gave us all kinds of training, everything from language training, intensive language training, to cultural background, the economy and the political situation in Ecuador. They taught us how to ride horses, we did swimming. So it's a little bit of everything because they really didn't know what we were getting into.

LASER: [00:04:18] There hadn't been, there were other groups that just started in Ecuador, but they really weren't sure what we'd be doing. And after that, we went down to Puerto Rico for another three months or so, for language training, and we traveled around the country working with the agencies of the local government, the public work agencies. And we worked. We didn't really do any work, but we were more or less observers and worked on, it was a good opportunity for us to practice Spanish in Puerto Rico. In the main cities, you can get by in English, but once you get out in the countryside, you really have to rely on your Spanish. So that was really a good opportunity. We didn't really become proficient in Spanish. There were some people that had a Spanish background that had sort of a head start. But for most of us, we were still in the learning stages after about two months of language training.

WIGGUM: [00:05:16] And where did you live when you were in Puerto Rico? Did you all live together? Were you with the host families?

LASER: [00:05:23] There were no host families at that time. We stayed. Actually, I stayed and a couple of others, we were more or less on our own, and I stayed at the San Juan YMCA along with a couple of other people. We just found a room and then they made arrangements for us. And on weekends, we were free to do whatever we wanted, to travel around. But then during the week, they had pretty much a schedule with us for us and

broke us down into small groups. Somebody would, I don't know, I don't remember how we meet them, and then we'd go around in one of their cars and they would stop at various construction sites because that's what we were going to be doing. We didn't know exactly what we were doing, but things like roads and irrigation canals, that type of project that the local agencies would get involved in. And then we had free time on the weekends. We traveled, you know, two or three of us would get together and we would hitchhike, or we would take the busses and we just travel, travel around the country meeting different people.

LASER: [00:06:29] And they did a lot of, in Puerto Rico, they did a lot of the physical training. We stayed in, like it was like an army barracks and they would wake us up with reveille in the morning. We'd go for a run in the morning and they would have us do physical exercises in addition to the language training and the other training. And then they had a psychiatrist that would evaluate the people to see, because they were evaluating. While we were in this process, they were evaluating us the whole time and they had a psychiatrist there or a psychologist. And he would, they would pick out certain people and some were what they called, I don't know what they call it now. They were deselected. They were sent home.

WIGGUM: [00:07:15] Yeah, yeah.

LASER: [00:07:16] And then from there we flew to Quito, to Ecuador, and in Quito took a little while. The altitude, it's about eight or nine thousand feet. It took a little time to acclimate to that. And from there they spread the whole group throughout different parts of the country, according to whatever their needs were. And I ended up in a town called Cuenca, which is the third largest city in Ecuador. It wasn't a large city. It's a small, relatively small, not a small town, but a provincial, provincial town. It's also in the Andes mountains.

WIGGUM: [00:07:59] Was that even higher?

LASER: [00:08:00] No. It was lower. And at that point, I think we came out at about 8,000 feet. I think Quito is somewhere around 10,000. So at that point we

were already a little acclimated to the altitude and didn't become a problem anymore.

WIGGUM: [00:08:16] Yeah, great. And when you arrived in in Cuenca, who greeted you? How did you get integrated into the town?

LASER: [00:08:25] Well, when we first started, they had us housed with local families. They had local families and we stayed with local families. The idea was sort of an immersion process in Spanish, and so we would stay with the local families. We'd eat with them and then they would have us. There must have been about maybe 20 of us in Cuenca spread out with different families. And then they had actually, because it was a fairly large city, they had a Peace Corps office there. They had somebody there, director or he wasn't the director for the whole country, but I guess one of the local offices. So he was there and we would meet with him. They had a doctor there and there were enough people, maybe because not there were other people that were there before us. We were the Ecuador IV. We were the fourth group. The other ones had come fairly recently before us, but there were enough people in the area that they had somebody there that we would sort of communicate with them and they were supposed to find us physicians or things to do. So here you had, you know, enough, 15, 20 of the engineers. You had other people and the local people there, they weren't really sure what they were going to do with us.

WIGGUM: [00:09:45] So the jobs weren't set up ahead of time. You arrived and then they had to find a job.

LASER: [00:09:50] You had to find a job. And so we floundered around a little bit. Everybody eventually, I think four of us, we rented an apartment and we left the local family. And we just, I would say, we spent maybe two, three months just really visiting, finding out what's doing. We taught some English classes, but there was really nothing for us to do. And it turns out it was, we had some contacts. But what you ended up doing at that point really depended on you taking the initiative to find something.

LASER: [00:10:30] So we were working for, it was called the Centro, and that was a like a public service. They would do. Not public service. They would do

road repair. They would do construction projects. I'm not sure what we call it here in New Jersey, but they had an office and they would send people out, and they did a lot of work on roads. They did work on, because it's an agricultural community, work on irrigation canals. And those were the two main things that we worked with. And then a group of us would go out with them, visit different sites, and they were trying to find a spot for each one of us, because that was our main, that was our main contact. And then eventually, what happened is I'd gone out on a different number of sites. My Spanish had improved, you know, a little bit to the point where I could communicate.

LASER: [00:11:30] So one day the director calls me and he says, look, we have a job for you if you're willing to take it. It's way up in the mountains, in the Andes Mountains. We're building an irrigation canal. And they could use somebody else to help with the surveying party. What they were doing, they were doing a sort of survey to run an irrigation canal from some river someplace to some area where there were farms and they had to know what the terrain was like, whether it was feasible to do it or not. And so they were doing a survey party. So I said, OK. So they took me up. I took my whatever I had, sleeping bag and my clothes. And a guy drove me up in a Land Rover to an old schoolhouse, small, small building way up in the mountains. And he says, all right, wait here. In the morning, somebody will come for you. And then the guy just disappeared.

LASER: [00:12:29] And so the next morning, sure enough, a guy appears with a horse. And sorry, let's go. The horses in Ecuador, and they're very sure footed, but they're only a little bit bigger than ponies. And I'm about, I was about six foot one at that point. And so my feet would almost touch the ground when I got on a horse, so it really wasn't practical. So we ended up using a horse sort of like a pack horse. But we went up and down mountains, rivers, whatever. And finally I ended up at this camp, engineering, the camp where the surveying party was. And they were about 25 people, so I was the only what they call gringo at that point, the only non-Ecuadorian. So they had an engineer, a surveyor, and then they had other people there, everything from cooks to what they call *macheteros*, people that would be cutting the. Because we would be going in a straight line and whatever was in front of us, we would have to go

through. So there was sometimes brush and trees and shrubs, so they would go with the machetes and the axes, and they would clear the path.

LASER: [00:13:41] So they had me, after they showed me more or less what to do, and I had some experience using the surveying equipment because of the training. So they show me more or less what to do. And the next thing you know, I was in the front of the surveying party and they would be following along with me. And we would work for three weeks in a row, seven days a week. And then somehow, mysteriously, at the end of three weeks, we would go to some little town and a big dump truck would come and we'd all pile in the back of the dump truck and we'd head back to Cuenca and we'd have a week to take a shower, eat some different food, and rest up. And then it would continue. And I did that, I would say for maybe six months, or six months to a year, just working on these construction projects. We finished that project.

LASER: [00:14:42] We ended up working on another project. So by then I was, I would say, maybe a year and a half into my term in the Peace Corps. And then we had finished a project and they called me into office and they said, listen, we have a project, a little town way out at the end of the road and it was really the end of the road. The road ended then after that and went up the Andes Mountains and it crossed into the Amazon. And these people, they wanted an irrigation canal and they're going to build it themselves. They have a process there, instead of hiring people to do it. These people, the farmers, they would do the work, but they needed somebody to lay out the irrigation canal to show them where to do it. So they say, do you want to go out there and take a look? So I went out there. I met with the mayor of the town. I met with the local people and they showed me what had to be done.

LASER: [00:15:41] And I went back and I gave him the report. I told them what they want to do. And I said, well, you know, it's not going to cost them anything, because I was free through labor and they didn't have anything for me to do. He says, all right. Go out there. We'll have a worker go along with you because you can't do the work by yourself. When you operate the surveying equipment, you need at least two people. And then the local people would provide the other assistance and they would provide me a

house to stay in. And then I made arrangements for food. So I ended up going out there. You'd take, there was no bus service. Maybe once a week or so there was a bus. So I took the bus and I ended up in the town where the road ended. And from there they met me from this little town. They met me with a horse and a guide. And so I went out to the town and then we started doing surveying. And then they, the Peace Corps, decided they didn't want me out there alone or by myself. So they found somebody else who had been part of our group and they sent him out to work with me so that there were two of us there at the same time.

LASER: [00:16:57] So we spent a couple of months. It was a question because what we were doing is the town was like in a valley and it was a big mountain right next to it. At the top of the mountain, a little further back in it, was a river and the river went actually to the east, a small river and uninhabited land, and it traveled to the, eventually it ended up in the Amazon. And what they were going to do, they were going to divert some of the water. Instead of going east to the Amazon, they were going to take it down to the west, where their farms were. And the question was because it was way up in the mountains, they had no way of knowing if it was high enough to get around whatever turns they had to get to where they were. So we had to do the study to find out actually if it would work.

WIGGUM: [00:17:48] Yeah, if it was feasible.

LASER: [00:17:49] It was feasible to do it. So we did that it. It was about 20 kilometers, about 15 miles, that we actually did the surveying. And we did it. We finished it. We said, yes, it'll work, you know, it'll do the work. There were some passes that had to go through was a question, whether it would go through it and where we would end up in the river. So this is all uninhabited land. It was up in the mountains. Nobody, nobody lived there.

WIGGUM: [00:18:17] So would you go up there and just camp out?

LASER: [00:18:19] We would go camp out because what we would do is we would do the surveying and we'd have a little camp. And then as we got further along, it became we had to change camps because we would be too far from where we were. So we had a tent. And it was myself, the other

engineer, and we had one worker from the Centro and then the local people. The mayor would send out local people to help us to cut the shrubs and put stakes in the ground, hammer them into the ground and mark them.

WIGGUM: [00:18:51] And what did you do for food?

LASER: [00:18:53] We would take food up with us for about, you know, we were in the tent. When we ran out of food, we would go back to Cuenca and we'd buy peanut butter and, you know, whatever canned food and things like that. We didn't do much cooking. When we were closer to the town, we would have meals. They didn't work on Sundays or Saturdays, if so we were closer to the town on the weekends, we'd walk back to the town. We did a lot of walking.

WIGGUM: [00:19:22] Yes, it sounds like it.

LASER: [00:19:24] We also had a horse that they gave us. We had a horse to carry the supplies. And actually, we had one little. There was one person, and we called him a mountain man, who lived up in the mountains. And when we were close enough when we were doing surveying, he'd let us stay. We built a tent right outside his house and we would get meals with him and his family. And so eventually we went back and I told him, I said, look, you know, I think the project will work. I would say it'll take about two years to complete, not knowing. I had never built a canal myself. I mean, I grew up in the Bronx. There were no irrigation canals in New York.

WIGGUM: [00:20:09] And then worked for Boeing.

LASER: [00:20:09] And worked for Boeing, had no irrigation. But I had spent time working with the irrigation canals for about a year, but I'd never done one by myself. I'd always worked under the supervision of somebody else. So they said, OK, well, you can keep this worker. We don't, we can spare him right now, and I have the other engineer. And then my time was up. We're just getting ready to start. So at that point, I felt, gee, I'm just getting ready to start. I finally got my teeth into something. So I decided to extend for another year. The person working with me, he had finished his two years

because we came at the same time, so they sent me somebody else to work with. So there were always two of us there.

LASER: [00:20:57] And then for the next year, basically what we did is, we started, they would have these things called *mingas*, that the people would come out. Depending on how much land they owned, they had to dig a certain amount of the canal. Every 10 meters I believe it was, every 10 meters there'd be a stake. And so the mayor would assign. Look, you have this much land. You have to dig this much of the canal, if you want to use the water later on. And sometimes the people would show up. Sometimes the people wouldn't. Sometimes the weather was bad. So it just took a while. So we got off to a fairly good start digging, digging the canal. I'll show you some pictures of it later. But I realized at that point we were not going to finish at the end. So I ended up leaving after another year. Gary stayed there, that was my replacement, and they sent another volunteer. It ended up, it took, I believe there were six volunteers. It took maybe nine, no, six or seven years to actually complete.

WIGGUM: [00:22:16] Get it done.

LASER: [00:22:16] To get the whole thing done. So I stayed sort of in touch with them. I got sort of progress reports from Gary. Then I didn't know the next people, but apparently they, you know, the Peace Corps and the Centro, they stayed with it and the people of the town stayed with it, and they actually completed the canal, according to the reports that I that I got. And that was my, that was my major experience.

WIGGUM: [00:22:45] What was the weather like when you were up there?

LASER: [00:22:48] Well, the weather is, you know, we're on the, we're very close to the equator, but we're up in the Andes Mountains. So it's very nice weather. Except when you go from the town in the valley, you go up in the mountains, it's rainy weather, it's almost constant rain. If you get a nice day, you're lucky, but it's almost like a rain forest. So we spent a lot of time, a lot of time in the rain.

WIGGUM: [00:23:15] Did you have any medical issues while you were way out there?

LASER: [00:23:17] Fortunately, no. You know, you had to be young and healthy to do that. The local people, they were not always young, but they, because they were farmers, they lived. That was their life. They were very sturdy. They were very rugged, rugged people. There were no doctors in the town. The town was a small town, very small town. The only time, because they were all busy in their little farms outside of town, the only time you would see people is on a Sunday, when they would come into town. There was a church in the town and there was a market in the town. That would be the only time you would see people, on Sunday morning after church. You can get a haircut, you could buy food, you can get a shave, you can do whatever you want. But that was the only time that you would see people in the town. Most of the time the people were out busy doing whatever they were, whatever they were doing.

WIGGUM: [00:24:14] Did you ever wonder what the heck is a boy from the Bronx doing here?

LASER: [00:24:19] I sure did. But you know, it's a matter of circumstances. You know, you don't choose where you grow up, you don't choose where you end up. It's just a matter of circumstances. I enjoyed it. To me it was, you know, a completely different kind of experience. And it was great, I mean, there were a lot of ups and downs. People didn't show up for work. They have the, sometimes you have what they call the manana attitude. Well, won't do it today. You know, we're supposed to meet at 10:00. Oh, maybe we'll do it tomorrow, you know, so. There were a lot of things like that. It was frustrating. But in the end, we stuck it. We stuck it out.

LASER: [00:25:05] And, you know, we had time. They would give us time for a little vacation. I think we had maybe two or three weeks every year or something like that. I don't know what they do now. And so four or five of us found time and we traveled all over South America on our way down to Chile and Bolivia and Peru and Argentina. So we did a lot of traveling. We had a lot of.

WIGGUM: [00:25:35] How did you travel?

LASER: [00:25:38] Well, we traveled, we traveled like locals. We hitchhiked. We took boats, ferries. We rode the local trains, the local busses. It was not a tour. We were on our own. We started with five of us. Eventually, just two of us ended up coming back together. The other people said, that's enough. And they went back on their own. So as a sequel to that, 40 years later. I finished in '66. 2006, I had just retired, and one of the other people that worked with me, his name was Gary. He sent me something from the internet that in the mountains where we were doing the canal, he read something. He liked to do a lot of research on the internet and follow what was going on. In the area, a Canadian company was mining for gold in the mountains right where the canal was.

LASER: [00:26:48] So I took it as a sign, you know. Now I was free. I have been working for 40 years. I was a teacher and an assistant principal in the city, and I had run a learning center. And after 40 years of working, in 2006, I was free again. So we got in touch with the mining company and we said, you know, we're planning to come down. Is there any way, is there any place we could stay with you people? And sure enough, the guy wrote back. Oh sure, we have a camp there and you're welcome to come down. And it'd be good for you to come down because, you know, we're digging on land from the government and it'd be good to have good public relations between us and the Canadian government and the Canadians and the local people and the, you know, the people. Because I don't really know who owned the land where we were doing the canal. There was just this big mountain.

WIGGUM: [00:27:51] Probably didn't have much concept of owning land.

LASER: [00:27:54] Yeah, I mean, it was just because nobody would live there. It was just, you know, mountains. So they said, sure, come down. So the two of us, we packed up and we set up a whole itinerary and we flew down to Ecuador 40 years later. And we did a little traveling around, and then we drove back to the town, and once a year, we try to time it. They have a festival, a religious festival, where people come from neighboring towns and they would all get together. And see that would be a great time

to go. We didn't have any communication between us and the local people. At that time, there were computers then. But when we left, the only way we could communicate from the town, they had a telegraph. It was a telegraph. That was the way, there were no phones there. But anyhow, so we try to time. We ended up, we were a week off in our timing.

WIGGUM: [00:28:51] Oh no.

LASER: [00:28:53] But we got there and we met with the mayor. Most of the people that we had known had either passed away or moved away. We only met one person who was 16 at the time. He was a young kid, and he sort of remembered helping his father at that point. And so we went and we took a little walk. We walked the whole length of the canal just to see how it was working. And sure enough, the canal was still there. They were still using the water. You know, when I left it, I said, you know, I started, this is going to ever be finished? I had no.

WIGGUM: [00:29:31] And would it really work?

LASER: [00:29:32] And it really worked. I mean, the main thing was when you build a canal, you have to make it go downhill. But you can't make it go down too fast and you don't want it to go uphill. So you're laying out a line that's about, you know, 20, 15 miles long, and it has to have a certain pitch to it. And it has to be a certain size. And there are places where it'll collapse, there'll be falling rocks and things like that. But they had a guy whose job was every week he would walk the whole length just to inspect. So we went up with him and we walked the whole length and sure enough, the canal was still there.

WIGGUM: [00:30:16] Oh, that must have made you feel wonderful.

LASER: [00:30:17] Yeah. So that was a nice experience.

WIGGUM: [00:30:20] And bless your heart. How old were you when you did this walk again up the mountains at that height?

LASER: [00:30:25] In my 60s.

WIGGUM: [00:30:26] Yeah.

LASER: [00:30:28] So I said, you know, if I don't do it now, I wouldn't be able to. I'm in my 70s now. I would never be able to do it.

WIGGUM: [00:30:33] Well, then you had to reacclimate to the altitude.

LASER: [00:30:36] Yeah, right. We stayed in Quito for, you know, we made a vacation out of it. We stayed in Quito. That was a higher, higher altitude. We stayed there first and then we went down there. The highway was already paved to get there. They had bus service to it, they had. I mean, the whole place had changed, there were cars. There were no cars in that town when we were there. And then the people, some people had cars. There was electricity.

WIGGUM: [00:31:01] Luxury.

LASER: [00:31:02] Yeah, really. It had really changed a lot. The people were on the internet. They were now growing, because of the climate there, they had a hot house and they were growing plants that they were exporting. So there were some, there was some.

WIGGUM: [00:31:17] So it wasn't just subsistence anymore.

LASER: [00:31:20] Right. So it had changed. You know, it's still the end of the road. When you hit that town, if you want to go to the other side of the Andes Mountains, there's no highway. You have to go by foot. So.

WIGGUM: [00:31:36] So you've kept in touch with Gary all these years?

LASER: [00:31:38] Gary, yeah, we still get. We still talk to each other. He lived in Indiana. We went to visit him there once. We spent a couple of days together there. And we communicate now with the internet. And there was a third fellow who lives now, Dave Driscoll, who lives in. He was from Massachusetts originally. He lives now in Oregon, and I'm in touch with him. I haven't been out to see him. We haven't seen each other for many

years. But I, you know, those are the people that I stay in touch with, the ones that I spent time actually with, you know, living in close quarters. We were living in a tent together for a decent amount of time.

WIGGUM: [00:32:28] How did you communicate back with your family?

LASER: [00:32:32] Well, we did mail. And interestingly enough, in the town of Cuenca, I met a family and they would invite me. I don't know why. They would invite me over for dinner every once in a while. And the guy was a ham radio operator. So when I would go over there, maybe that's how I met him, at some function or something. I met him and he mentioned he was a ham operator and he invited me to come over. So what we would do. I would go to his house and what he would do. He would call another ham operator in the U.S. and then that operator would patch, what they called patching it. He would call my parents on the phone and then my parents could speak to me through the ham operator. So that took place a couple times.

WIGGUM: [00:33:27] Yeah, that must have been nice for them.

LASER: [00:33:28] Yeah. Yeah. You're still alive.

WIGGUM: [00:33:30] Yeah, I was going to say, they must've been worried about you out in the mountains in Ecuador.

LASER: [00:33:36] I mean, I didn't tell them all the gory details. You know, try and didn't worry them, but they knew I was still alive. And we would write letters and I would send, sometimes I would send little cassette tapes about what was going on.

WIGGUM: [00:33:52] Were there ever any times that you were frightened?

LASER: [00:33:58] Uh, not really frightened. I had a couple of events that occurred. I wouldn't say frightened. One was I was in a bus in Cuenca at the time John F. Kennedy was assassinated. And I was just riding in a bus. I forget where I was going in the town. And then a person came up and said, you know, in Spanish, your president was just killed tonight. I looked at him. I

said, you know, what are you talking about? And then that's how we got the news. And then whatever volunteers were around, we all got together. It was like a shock to us when he was assassinated. And I had a few close calls. I wasn't frightened, I had a few close calls. The roads there are not too good. So I had a few close calls driving. But fortunately, I, you know, I survived.

LASER: [00:34:53] Almost everybody there had, the drinking water was a problem, and almost everybody that was out in the mountains had problems and had intestinal worms, you know, that was part of. So you'd get sick. And that was the only time I really got sick I would say. And it happened, you know, it happened almost regularly because we would have these little pills to purify the water. But sometimes you were there and you didn't have the pills with you and there was a nice stream that looked so nice and clear and you drank the water.

WIGGUM: [00:35:31] Giardia everywhere.

LASER: [00:35:31] Right. So but I would never use the word frightened. Maybe one time we were digging a canal and we crossed. We were digging it, and apparently somebody else claimed rights for that area. So about four or five guys came and they had these, everybody there carried a machete, like people carry here a wallet. People there carried machetes. So these four or five guys, they looked a little. I wasn't there by myself. I was with some of the, you know, the local people. So they came up and they got into a big dispute with us. And they were, you know, I was wondering what's going to happen with the machetes, because they looked like they were pretty rough characters, but they sort of, you know, diffused it. All right, look, we're not going to, we'll take care of this, we're not going to. We'll stop what we're doing. We'll take care of it. I wouldn't say I was frightened.

WIGGUM: [00:36:30] Your alarm bells were up.

LASER: [00:36:33] Yeah. So I mean, there are always things. Everything you did there was, not everything, but a lot of things you did. It was new. It was different. It was unexpected. You don't know. You don't know what to do. I

was riding in a bus once and between Cuenca, I went up to Quito. I forget what the reason was. And I'm sitting next to a guy and all of a sudden a gun falls out of his pocket, you know? Yeah. So I mean, there were lots of things that, you know, I was lucky I would say. I didn't really get that sick and my health was relatively good. So it sort of worked out. Yeah.

WIGGUM: [00:37:18] What was your most difficult time there?

LASER: [00:37:24] I think probably in the beginning, it was the most difficult part was being frustrated and they didn't have anything for us to do. And just sort of spinning our wheels, hanging out, trying to find. We didn't realize that we would be the ones that essentially had to find our own little jobs to do. So we were anxious to get started. And some of the other difficult times is when we started building the canal, workers didn't show up. The weather was bad. We ended up, at times, we ended up, because of the path, we laid out the path of the canal. Whatever was there, we had to go through. So there were some places that there were big rocks, you know, the mountain. It wasn't just digging in the ground. You had to go through a field of rocks. And the only way we could get through the rocks. We were up in the mountains. You couldn't take a vehicle up there or any kind of heavy equipment. We had to dynamite it out. And I didn't know anything about dynamiting.

LASER: [00:38:30] And so they had some of the workers that had worked in the gold mines, there were gold mines a couple of towns away, and they had experience working in the coal mines and they knew how to set the, use the dynamite. So they came up and for a week or so, they helped us. And we brought up dynamite on the, we had a packhorse, we would take the dynamite up there. So I was a little concerned about handling dynamite, I'd never had experience. But then they left and then the next week another group of workers came up that didn't have any experience working with dynamite. So I was the.

WIGGUM: [00:39:11] You were the expert after the training.

LASER: [00:39:14] Right. So I was the one. I say, look, this is what we do. They had a big steel bar and they would just pound the bar and it was like a

drill. It was all by hand with a sledgehammer and dig the hole and you'd have to put the dynamite stick into the hole and attach the fuse to it. And the way they did it is, there's a special. They have a fuse that goes into the blasting cap and the fuse goes into the blasting cap and that goes into the dynamite. And when you light the fuse, it sets off a little explosion inside the blasting cap and that sets the, cause dynamite by itself wouldn't explode. So you have to attach the wire into the blasting cap. And later on I learned, and then you have to crimp it closed. There's a special crimping tool to crimp the wire inside.

WIGGUM: [00:40:09] Yeah, because I imagine you'd have to be careful with the cap.

LASER: [00:40:11] Right. But the way they would do it, they would do it with their teeth. They would just put it in their mouth and crunch it with their teeth. And that's as far as I know, that's how you did it. So I was always a little apprehensive when I had to crunch the blasting cap and stick it in the dynamite. But fortunately, nothing, nothing happened. So it's.

WIGGUM: [00:40:33] Such adventures.

LASER: [00:40:34] Yeah, it was a lot of adventure. You know, I look back at it, you must have been crazy. And we were up in the mountains lots of times. One of us would, sometimes someone would go back to town to get something and you'd stay there by yourself and look around. You know, it's an eerie feeling. There's just nobody for miles, for miles and miles around. So there were a lot of adventures, I would say.

WIGGUM: [00:41:01] What are you most proud of?

LASER: [00:41:05] Well, I think probably that the one canal that we did finish. And then we would get other little jobs. Once they heard that we were doing the surveying, people from other towns would come into the town and speak with the mayor and say, look, we have a small canal. They can lay it out in one day. Could you come and would you mind lending us myself? And, you know, we'll give you the workers. And so I would go out and I would have these little side jobs, just going to the little towns, laying out the surveying. They would do all the construction stuff, and I would be like

the surveyor. And I think, you know, probably actually we actually are. Engineers are like that. We have goals. We like to finish things. But also the, you know, the relationships, the communication we had between. We have very good relations with the local people. We became very, very friendly with them.

LASER: [00:42:08] And it followed not only us, but the other five or six volunteers that came after us over the period of time. One of them married a local girl, actually, and you know. So I think we, you know, part of the goal of the Peace Corps is to promote the relationships between, you know, other people. And, you know, we didn't affect the government. But, you know, the local people, I think they had, you know, a good relation. They know what somebody from the United States is about. They met a lot of different, a lot of different people. And I learned Spanish, which came to be very handy working in New York City in the schools, and even today, wherever you go in New York, the Spanish is a big help. But it helped me in my career and it helped just in everyday situations.

WIGGUM: [00:43:12] What was it like for you when it came time for you to come home?

LASER: [00:43:20] Well, in a way, I was disappointed that I hadn't finished. My estimates, being a novice at it, my estimates of finishing in two or three years were way, way off. So I was disappointed, but I felt that it was in good hands, that the project would continue. And, you know, I felt, you know, at that point I was ready to leave. I'd spent, you know, three years and one extra year. I did what I had wanted to do. My goal was to get that project underway. I didn't think I would finish it and. What was the question again?

WIGGUM: [00:44:01] Well, just when it came time to leave.

LASER: [00:44:03] Did I feel? No, I think I was ready to, I think I was ready to get on with my life. I was 26 years old. From what I gathered at that time, almost all my friends were married and I felt like an old man already. I was, you know, ready to start life back.

WIGGUM: [00:44:25] And how was reentry for you? Did you go back to New York?

LASER: [00:44:30] Yeah, I went back to New York. I got a job pretty much right away, working as an engineer. And within three months I met my future wife. A year later, we were married.

WIGGUM: [00:44:43] So you didn't have any sort of sensory shocks coming from the mountains and flying back to New York City?

LASER: [00:44:55] Well, I would say it was. When you come back, and I guess a lot of people have that reaction when they come back. You still want to talk about your experience, what you've been doing. And after a while, oh okay, that's nice. And you know, let's get on with regular life. So that was, you know, after a while you talk about it, after a while it's as if you hadn't been there. And so I had no problem readjusting and I thought, people, oh dear, everybody's going to want to hear about what I did. But for a while it was interesting. It was a novelty. But after that, it was just back to business.

WIGGUM: [00:45:39] And it sounds like you had a career change.

LASER: [00:45:42] Yes, I worked for a year, an engineering job in the city, and then I decided that I wanted to be a teacher. And so I ended up working in the city again. I took some, they were desperate at that time for math and science teachers. And so they took me right away without any formal training and they said, we'll hire you right away. You have to go back and you have to take these courses, but we'll give you a temporary license. So I ended up working in a high school in New York City. I worked there for 30 years. I worked in a what they call technical vocational high school. So I was teaching technical classes, math, science, electronics. And the Peace Corps training came in handy because in the beginning I had really no experience in managing the classroom, and the neighborhood I was in was not the greatest neighborhood. And the kids sort of took advantage of me at the very beginning.

LASER: [00:46:51] But after a while, you know, maybe some of the Peace Corps experience. I said I've been in worse situations than this. Let me get this

straight. Straighten these kids out and figure out what to do so. So the training came in, the training that I had. And maybe it's somewhat related, completely different experience. But the Peace Corps training, you have to be flexible, you have to adapt to new situations, and you have to make the best of the situation, figure out what you have to do, and sort of keep track, keep the, you know, whatever your goals are that you're going to work towards that end. You have to be resourceful. So you know, all these things that were part of the experience, they probably came in, they probably came in handy. Yeah.

WIGGUM: [00:47:44] How would you say that Peace Corps affected your life?

LASER: [00:47:49] Well, again, because of the experience, I would say I was able to adapt to different kinds of situations that were new situations, maybe stressful situations. That you had a certain confidence. You know, part of the training that we had was to build up the confidence because they really didn't know what we were going to be getting into. We had, you know, part of it was what they called the Outward Bound training where they would take us on a mountain and they would have us drop off the mountain with ropes on us. And do swimming and hiking and, you know, all kinds of things to develop, you know, self-confidence and being resourceful. So I think that probably helped a lot, the training and the experience that we had.

WIGGUM: [00:48:44] Were there any women that went to Ecuador with you or was it primarily men?

LASER: [00:48:49] Well, the group that we're in, we had one woman that was a, one woman engineer, and she only lasted about six months. She had some other personal problems. I don't think she could adapt to the environment there. And there were other women there that were part of the community development project that we knew from training. They were there and there were people from other groups that were there before us. So they were women there, but there wasn't really that much opportunity for contact for contact between because we were up in the mountains most of the part, most of the time.

WIGGUM: [00:49:29] So you didn't have a particularly active social life.

LASER: [00:49:32] No, you could say that. I mean, there was some when we had time off. You know, there was some holidays or whatever we would get together. And you know, there were one girl that I used to hit it off pretty good. But, you know, she had her schedule. I had my schedule. And so we really didn't, we didn't see each other that much.

WIGGUM: [00:49:59] Do you think your experience in Peace Corps had any bearing on you deciding to change careers?

LASER: [00:50:08] I'm not really sure about that. Peace Corps, again, I think it probably predated the Peace Corps. Probably had this idea of service I felt when I taught in the inner-city schools, I thought that was service. The Peace Corps was service. And I ended up with the job that I had in the city. That was the time of the Cold War and they had a lot of defense industry work that was available. And I was working for a company that was involved in the defense industry. So even when I left that job and I became a teacher, I took a big cut in salary, but they were working overtime on the weekend, so they called me back. So I was working for them for maybe a year or so or two, when I first started teaching, working for them part time. So I stayed in contact doing that kind of work for a while.

WIGGUM: [00:51:21] Mm hmm. Is there anything else you'd like people to know about your experience in the Peace Corps or Peace Corps in particular?

LASER: [00:51:38] I think I sort of, I mean, there were a lot of experiences that, you know, they were just like sidebars to the main experience. But you know, for me, it turned out to be a very meaningful experience. And if somebody wants to have some, likes different cultures, different foods, different, uh, different experiences. I also became the godfather to a child. One of the families that were living in Cuenca that we became very friendly with in our neighborhood, they wanted me to be the godfather. And I told him, I said, look, I can't really be a godfather. I said, I'm Jewish and they won't take me. They won't let me do that. And they insisted that I do it.

LASER: [00:52:42] And so I went to the church and I was standing out like a sore thumb because a lot of the people there are not very tall. And I'm standing there and holding the baby and the priest. This really has nothing to do with it. So the priest is looking, is making a speech, and I'm holding the baby and I'm saying, look, I said, look, I can't. I can't do this. He said, no, you're going to do this. Said, I want you to be the godfather. So then it looked like a priest was looking directly at me. And he says, is there anybody here that should not be here that doesn't have the right to be here. Because they were naming, they were having a big baby naming ceremony. Anybody here that doesn't really belong should not be here. And I felt he was looking directly at me and I'm ready to put the baby away and he wouldn't let me, he grabbed it. So I couldn't. I couldn't do anything. So that was a crazy experience, but that was not your question.

WIGGUM: [00:53:47] No, no. I mean, that's a great, that's a great answer, because I was wondering if your religion, because it's all Roman Catholic there, had any impact while you were there.

LASER: [00:53:59] Well, a lot of the, we had, some of the volunteers were Catholic and some of them as I've said were some Protestant group. And the only religious issues that would happen when we were in a small town. Every Sunday, everybody would come to church in the morning. And even the ones that were Catholic didn't go inside the church because it was a different kind of service and whatever. And when I explained, they would ask me what my religion was, they really didn't understand. It was hard to explain, you know, what it was. So it was never, I don't think it was ever, ever an issue as far as I was concerned. You know, I was there to work. I was helping them.

WIGGUM: [00:54:52] And they were happy.

LASER: [00:54:54] They were happy, right. So that was not. Only a few people would approach that subject. You know, somebody if they got to know them very well or sometimes you know, people are in different cultures, they're different. Some, you know, right away to, you know, meet you and you work, say how much money do you make? You know, and they start asking, you know, all kinds of personal, or what religion are you? Start

asking you. So after a while, I realized, you know, I don't have to. I don't have to tell them how much money. I say I make enough to get by here, some answer like that. So that, you know, they get into all the particulars about that.

WIGGUM: [00:55:34] Did anybody think you were a spy?

LASER: [00:55:36] I don't think so because we were with people that were.

WIGGUM: [00:55:42] You were so far out.

LASER: [00:55:43] So far we were not involved in politics. Some people maybe were a little resentful that when we were there, we were free work, free labor. They felt maybe we would take their jobs away. They could have us do the job and then they would replace one of them. But I don't think that really happened, because it ended up that the main job that I ended up with was this big irrigation canal. Nobody wanted the job because they would have had to spend time away from their family. And that was a little bit more severe than the jobs that they worked on regularly, you know, they get to go home. And it wasn't quite as far away and as isolated. So in the end, it worked out. It worked out OK.

WIGGUM: [00:56:35] Anything else you want to share with us?

LASER: [00:56:40] I think that pretty much summed it up. Well, when we were there, we went back after 40 years, we met. They invited us to meet the mayor, the current mayor. We bought back a little plaque with us, you know, friendship between the United States and Ecuador. And then they invited us. I went back with Gary Richardson, the guy that was from who was in Colorado, originally from Indiana, who had a farming background. And so they invited us to a small group of the schoolteachers and their families, and we went over there. We had some, we ate together, and we were chatting. And that's where I met the boy who is now in his 50s, who had been a teenager working there. And of course, he looked quite different from a teenager. You know, he's a man now already. And so we met him, Don [name].

LASER: [00:57:43] And he says, oh, my son is in the United States. I said, all right, well, you know, if I can do anything, here's my phone number or my email and he can get in touch with me. So I go back. I forget about it. Sure enough, I get a phone call one day from [name], who was living in the United States, and he's not there legally. And he wants, you know. We got together, we talked, we met him once or twice, and he tells me his girlfriend, who he wants to marry, wants to come from Ecuador and be with him. And so he gives me the details, you know. She's traveling from Ecuador, now she's in Colombia, now she's in Panama, and now she's here, now she's there. Finally, she ends up, I don't know how she got across the border. And finally, she got across the border and they ended up. She got together with him and they were living in New York, outside of New York.

LASER: [00:58:59] And then one day he calls me, he says, we want to get married, but we're not legal. How do we do that? So I checked into it, and it turns out there's a, if you live in one state, if you live in. I was living in New Jersey at that point. If you live in New York, you can get married in New Jersey. They don't ask anything about your citizenship. So I went to the mayor of the town and I explained what the situation is. Can you perform a wedding ceremony? He said sure. I told them what the circumstances were. And so we had a wedding between. They invited myself, my wife, and we met a local Ecuadorian family that I had met in my town and he had some friends. So we had a wedding ceremony by the city hall. Nice outside, nice sunny day and nice wedding. So they got married.

WIGGUM: [01:00:04] So your connection with Ecuador has never stopped.

LASER: [01:00:07] No, it never has. And I'm on Facebook with Don [name] from Ecuador.

WIGGUM: [01:00:13] Nice.

LASER: [01:00:13] Yeah. So, you know, it doesn't end is right.

WIGGUM: [01:00:17] Yeah. So it lasts a lifetime.

LASER: [01:00:18] Yeah.

WIGGUM: [01:00:19] Well, thank you so much for coming down.

[END OF INTERVIEW]