

David Driscoll Oral History Interview
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Biographical Note

David Driscoll served as a Peace Corps volunteer in Ecuador from 1964 to 1966 on a rural community action project.

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Oral History Interview

with

David Driscoll

October 31, 2019

Tigard, Oregon

By Stanley Laser

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

LASER: [00:00:08] Today is October 31st, 2019. This is Stan Laser, and I am interviewing David Driscoll, who was a Peace Corps volunteer in Ecuador from June 1964 to June 1966 as a rural community action volunteer. Dave was 23 years old when he joined the Peace Corps and is now 79 years old. Dave, please tell us a little bit about your background before you joined the Peace Corps and then tell us why you joined the Peace Corps.

DRISCOLL: [00:00:43] Well, I grew up in Concord, Massachusetts, was the third child of a family of seven. Lived with my grandparents and parents. So there was 11 of us in the house. I went to Northeastern University, majored in physics and mathematics and was September of 1963 entering my senior year. Recognizing that I had to do something about the military when I graduated, I had taken the naval officers candidate school and qualified for NCS. While walking out of school one day I came across a recruiter, a Peace Corps recruiter, who was signing up people to take a

language exam for the Peace Corps, and I decided that I'd rather do that, then join the Navy if I was given the choice. So I took the language exam and didn't hear anything until June of 1964 when they gave me a week to make up my mind of what I wanted to do. I wanted to go to Latin America and I accepted the offer to go to training in Columbia, Missouri. Long pause.

LASER: [00:02:10] What was your training like?

DRISCOLL: [00:02:14] It was very comprehensive. It was their first training group. But we had four hours of language a day. And various other topics, Latin American culture, Ecuadorian culture. Sort of the norms of the land.

LASER: [00:02:51] And after Missouri, what was your next step?

DRISCOLL: [00:02:55] Came home for two weeks, got packed up, went to Puerto Rico for a month, to Arecibo to the Outward Bound camp. And then we went from there directly to Ecuador.

LASER: [00:03:10] What was the reaction of your friends and family when they found out that you were joining Peace Corps?

DRISCOLL: [00:03:17] It was kind of a mixed bag. Some people were excited for me. Other people were kind of disappointed. I think my dad thought that after I'd finally finished a degree in physics, it took six years to do a five-year program, that I ought to go to work in the field of physics. I just had no interest. As I told somebody, I got him his degree, but I was going to do something for myself.

LASER: [00:03:44] Did they tell you what type of work you would be doing down there?

DRISCOLL: [00:03:48] They didn't know what type of work that we were going to be doing, but they told us about the locations. Our group was destined for remote locations. No city, no city boys here.

LASER: [00:04:04] What was the makeup of the volunteers? Were they from all different places, different ages, different abilities or backgrounds?

DRISCOLL: [00:04:12] Primarily, they were young college graduates. There were very few women involved, probably a half a dozen or a dozen women in the training group of 100.

LASER: [00:04:29] What was the selection process like?

DRISCOLL: [00:04:32] It's brutal. Every, when we're in Missouri, every, I want to say it happened two or three times during the course of the training program, they'd have what they called deselection. And they had various methods for deselecting, one of which was peer review. They'd ask you how many, which of your fellow volunteers you'd like to serve with, least like to serve with. And a lot of people found that objectionable, but that's the way it transpired. And then everybody got a letter. Wouldn't it say, pack your bags and go home, and the other one would say you're moving on in the process of training? But there were some good people deselected. Some had problems with the language. But for whatever reason, you never knew what caused them to be deselected.

LASER: [00:05:41] So out of the group of about 100, about how many were actually went to Ecuador?

DRISCOLL: [00:05:46] I want to say they deselected 20 people by the time the process was over, so about 80 of us went forward and the rest of them were considered for other assignments. Ecuador was considered a hardship post.

LASER: [00:06:06] Hardship?

DRISCOLL: [00:06:07] Right.

LASER: [00:06:09] Did they tell you why?

DRISCOLL: [00:06:13] I didn't find it a hardship post personally, but the State Department had their reasons.

LASER: [00:06:22] OK, so you landed in which city in Ecuador? And then what happened immediately after you arrived?

DRISCOLL: [00:06:30] We arrived in Quito at about midnight on a flight from Miami through Panama. And the next morning, they got us up and we had an in-house doctrination and there were various groups there involved, the ambassador and Peace Corps executives. Then they put us on a bus and we went to Cuenca. So it took a day long bus trip, which was interesting. That is our first introduction to Ecuador and Ecuadorian culture. The funny thing was is that the bus stopped about 100 miles outside of Quito. And everybody get off the bus and took a pee except for the gringos, and they all sat on it for a while, and then the next trip, they were the first ones off the bus to take a pee. But it was, I guess, our first introduction to the culture.

LASER: [00:07:46] So you are headed towards Cuenca. How many volunteers were on? Because I'm sure they divided up the group to different places in the country.

DRISCOLL: [00:07:53] I want to say about 30 of us ended up in Cuenca.

LASER: [00:07:56] OK. What were your first impressions of Cuenca?

DRISCOLL: [00:08:00] I liked it. It's a very engaging town.

LASER: [00:08:05] OK. And once you arrived there did you find an apartment or did they have something set up for you or how did that work?

DRISCOLL: [00:08:14] I met this guy named Stan Laser, and he did everything for me. I was supposed to go out and help him do some surveying. He had a spot in the apartment that he was living in that I moved into. So I went from Dave Driscoll, gringo, to Dave Driscoll, Peace Corps volunteer, immediately. There was no waiting for a project or having to develop a project. There was a project underway and Stan broke a lot of ice for me.

LASER: [00:08:53] And what was your first assignment?

DRISCOLL: [00:08:56] First assignment was to go to Cochapata, and we did some surveying. Cochapata was the name of the town that they were building a canal. And we were doing the preliminary layout of the canal. I worked there for about three months. And then the neighboring town wanted to do a canal too. And Stan booted me out of the nest into Nabón. Which was OK. So I had a second project underway immediately, a project to work on, I didn't know if it was going to be a project, but I did the preliminary engineering on it. And then subsequently worked on several other smaller canals. The canal in Cochapata was about 15 miles long, if my memory serves me correct, and the one at Nabón was about 18 miles long. These were about a meter in cross section, meter square in cross section and.

LASER: [00:10:06] How were you received by the people in Cochapata and Nabón, the local people?

DRISCOLL: [00:10:13] Initially with a little suspicion, but eventually very well. Stan again broke a lot of ice. He was out there before I was by. How long were you out there Stan? A year and a half before I got there?

LASER: [00:10:31] About a year.

DRISCOLL: [00:10:34] So he knew all the ropes.

LASER: [00:10:40] What was the weather like in your area?

DRISCOLL: [00:10:46] It was generally sunny, but it was cool. We were high in the Andes. Somewhere between seven and 12,000 feet, depending on where you were and what part of the canal you were working on. It rained a fair amount. What they call the *páramo*, would be foggy and mist. Misty. So you were damp all of the time, but not necessarily very cold. Not subtropical either, the altitude brought a lot of cold weather with it.

LASER: [00:11:30] So you spend most of your time doing surveying and working. What was like a typical day in the life of the, uh, as a volunteer there? Or typical days, what did you do?

DRISCOLL: [00:11:48] Well, the first six or eight months I spent laying in the canal out. I'm speaking about Nabón now. Stan had done the majority of the work in the canal at Cochapata. Cochapata canal. And then after that, it was just rounding up the people to go to work voluntarily. I mean, they didn't get paid anything. They had to go out and dig. If they wanted water, right, they had to dig 100 meters of canal. And depending on where we were in the construction phase, you'd either live in town and walk to the job site each day, or you'd be in a tent. And I spent probably half time in the tent when the weather was better.

LASER: [00:12:47] How about your health? Were you able to stay healthy most of the time?

DRISCOLL: [00:12:51] Probably the healthiest period of my life. I never had a cold. Had one cold and I had amoebas or worms or something one time, and that was an exciting adventure. But that's not something I recommend to anybody. But by and large, I was very healthy. I mean, living at altitude you adjust to the altitude when you come to a lower elevation. You get a huge red blood count. So we were doing pick and shovel work at 12,000 feet.

LASER: [00:13:34] What was some of the high points and the low points of your time in Nabón and Cochapata?

DRISCOLL: [00:13:45] Well, certainly the fiestas were an entertaining time. In terms of high points. In terms of the high points was getting the canal laid out, getting construction started on it. That was satisfying.

LASER: [00:14:08] Do you have any memorable experiences, positive or negative?

DRISCOLL: [00:14:15] Well, I can remember a negative experience. That was one time mail was brought out to me in the, I was in my upper construction

camp at the upper end of the canal. And one of the people, Stan brought mail out to Nabón, my mail out to Nabón, and somebody brought it up to me. I'm up there 12,000 feet in the Andes and you get mail from your sister saying that your dad is quadriplegic from an automobile accident. The letter was, at that time, almost a month old. I didn't know if he was dead or alive. That was off-putting, to say the least. It was late in the afternoon. The following morning I walked out to the Pan-American Highway and hitchhiked a ride into town. Got in touch through a shortwave radio patch to the States. Found out that he was partially paralyzed, but back walking again. That was a great relief. That was probably it, that and losing a roommate to a drowning were the two downsides.

LASER: [00:15:31] How did that happen?

DRISCOLL: [00:15:33] Jim. I won't use his name, but he was an apartment mate. He lived in the apartment we shared in Cuenca. He lived there full time, but he was out servicing a credit co-op in the Oriente, had to cross the rain swollen river and a kid slipped into the rapids. He went after him and drowned. The kid survived. And my obligation was to put Jim's personal effects together and write a letter to his parents and send it off. That was a real downer. Good friend.

LASER: [00:16:13] How about your experiences with the local people? How did you interact with them? Because you spent a lot of time in close quarters with local people communicating with them in Spanish.

DRISCOLL: [00:16:35] Sometimes communications were a little strange because the people spoke about, half the time they'd speak part Quichua and part Spanish, Quichua with being the indigenous language. So that would get confused every now and again. And my Spanish wasn't that great, frankly. But I could communicate. We got along well. I mean, we personally liked each other. We had a lot of fun together. They had a local beverage called *trago* that came across the Andes from the Oriente, which is basically cane alcohol. That loosened everybody up.

LASER: [00:17:27] But were you the only volunteer in Nabón?

DRISCOLL: [00:17:30] I was. I worked basically by myself.

LASER: [00:17:36] How did you find that? Being on your own and speaking in a different culture.

DRISCOLL: [00:17:46] Well, that was, came with the turf. It was initially a little unsettling, but I quickly overcame that.

LASER: [00:18:00] Tell me a little more about the main project you worked on. It was a canal and you said you did other little jobs?

DRISCOLL: [00:18:07] Did other little canals. They had satellite towns to Nabón, there were other little communities that needed water that weren't on the main canal. They had partially constructed canals that either didn't work or they wanted to add volume to. And I did some engineering in those too. But my primary concern was the one in Nabón.

LASER: [00:18:41] Were you trained to do to work on irrigation canals? How did you learn to do surveying and to lay out canals?

DRISCOLL: [00:18:53] I was a cooperative work student at MIT. I didn't go to MIT at the time, but I was a cooperative work student there and we did some precision leveling when we were studying the settlement of buildings. So I knew how to do precision leveling, but I wasn't certainly a surveyor by any stretch of the imagination, but I knew enough to how to lay out a canal. And proceeded from there. To get a low point in the canal, we had to cross and worked in both directions up and down hill. Try to stay out of the mountains in the winter when the winter weather was there, but it was high. I never saw it snow, but I saw it sleet a couple of times.

LASER: [00:20:02] Did you have any moments that were scary moments or accidents or things like that?

DRISCOLL: [00:20:13] I shared a campsite with a gentleman named Don Liberato, who's long dead now, but he was a herdsman and he'd take people's cows up to the stream valley that we were pulling water out of. The

stream was headed towards the Oriente into the Amazon River basin. But, uh. They were always somewhere between 15 and 30 head of cows in the valley down below. And this one night they heard this god-awful screech and scream and there was a dead cow in the morning. And it turns out there was a cougar or a puma frequenting the area. And so I'm up there all by myself. The next night the cat starts in again and I was unsettled, to say the least. But that was the only time that I was really scared.

DRISCOLL: [00:21:12] I had an accident one night with a Coleman lantern. This Coleman lantern didn't explode, but it squirted raw gas up my arm and I was on fire. I felt like a Buddhist monk. I was lying in my sleeping bag in a tent, my right arm was on fire. I slipped it inside the sleeping bag and snuffed it out. That's the closest thing I had to a serious accident. It was a serious accident, but I mean, it didn't burn me. Burned all the hair off my arm, but it didn't burn my skin. But it gave me reason for pause, because you're 15 miles from everywhere all by yourself. But other than that, it was a good time.

LASER: [00:22:06] What did you do for recreation and entertainment when you weren't surveying and working on the canal?

DRISCOLL: [00:22:14] There were some idle hours. But it was mostly, when I was out in Nabón, it was mostly work. And I'd come into the city and try to coordinate trips into the city with Stan, into Cuenca once a month to get paid and cleaned up. Personal hygiene was an issue. You're living in a tent with no hot water other than what you heat up in the Coleman stove.

LASER: [00:22:50] So in the end, with the canal that you worked on in Nabón, did they finish the canal or was the canal working?

DRISCOLL: [00:22:58] It was about 80 percent done and it wasn't completed, but it increased the volume of water that came into town quite a bit by picking up side streams along the way. It was no major river or anything that we had. The last two kilometers were tough going. I don't know if they ever finished it or not, I didn't keep in touch with them.

LASER: [00:23:24] So after you left, did any other volunteers continue in that area?

DRISCOLL: [00:23:29] Apparently, there was another volunteer who supposedly took my place, but he had some health issues and I lost track of it after that. There's a Peace Corps volunteer in Nabón now, I understand, that I'm going to try to track her down. Nabón has changed quite a bit from when I was there. When I was there, it was at the end of a dirt road, not a gravel road, but a dirt road. It was very, very treacherous in wet weather. And there was no electric lights to speak of. There were lights, but they only worked part time. They had a telegraph station. That was the way to communicate with the outside world.

LASER: [00:24:20] How did you communicate?

DRISCOLL: [00:24:22] Using the telegraph. You could send a telegram, but you couldn't. There were no cell phones.

LASER: [00:24:36] Was there any difference between the second year and the first year of your service?

DRISCOLL: [00:24:44] Uh, as I became more comfortable, I became more independent.

LASER: [00:24:51] What would you do for food?

DRISCOLL: [00:24:53] You go to town once a month and you got non-perishables. Vegetables and whatnot. Meat was a rarity, a lot of tuna fish. Buy a salami and hang the salami off this tent pole, the ridge pole of the tent. Peel the mold off before you ate it, but other than that, it was. I had no complaints about what we ate. And these were. Make everything in a frying pan on a Coleman stove. Great spaghetti recipe. A lot of rice. As I say, a lot of tuna fish, canned tuna fish.

LASER: [00:25:52] What would you say were your, um, what did you like most about your Peace Corps experience?

DRISCOLL: [00:26:01] I didn't mind the solitude, actually, as long as you had an occasional interaction with people. But one time up there, I spent 21 days without seeing another human being other than myself in the shaving mirror. That was a little unsettling because I had big plans for a lot of construction. But the people just didn't show up, and I couldn't figure out why. And after 21 days of doing nothing, I walked down in a town to find out that the padre had started to build a A-frame in the front of this traditional Spanish Mission style church. And refused to give the people sacraments unless they worked on his project rather than my project. The padre and I had words. But it's the way things were.

LASER: [00:27:05] Did you get any vacation? Did you do anything special during your vacation time?

DRISCOLL: [00:27:11] I saved all my vacation and took it out. You had to do 15 days in country. Which I did. And then I had another 38 days left. You could only spend 30 days out of country. I went to Chile and skied for a month. They got 15 feet of snow in 1965. Portillo avalanched, so I didn't get to go to Portillo, but I skied at Farellones and La Parva most of the month. Spent a week in Buenos Aires when the weather was really inclement.

LASER: [00:27:54] After you got back from the Peace Corps, how was your reentry back home?

DRISCOLL: [00:28:02] It was actually pretty smooth. We were warned that when we'd get home, the people really didn't give a damn about what you'd done for two years in the Peace Corps. And initially, I couldn't believe that people wouldn't at least have some interest in what went on, but basically they didn't, which I found kind of comical.

LASER: [00:28:25] Did your Peace Corps experience help you with your career after the Peace Corps?

DRISCOLL: [00:28:31] It gave me a different appreciation for life. I ended up going to graduate school at MIT and got a degree in geotechnical engineering. Master's degree in geotechnical engineering. And I had the opportunity to select different projects. And I've tended to pick projects that were of

interest to me that related to Peace Corps work, formally related to Peace Corps work, dams and tunnels and canals.

LASER: [00:29:11] So how is that? I mean, it's over 50 years ago that you were there. How, how much? What part of your life was? Well, how did it contribute to your life experiences?

DRISCOLL: [00:29:28] Well, I think there was always a desire to continue to volunteer. Probably one of my greatest satisfactions when I came home was to. I lived out in rural Oregon. And was instrumental in putting together a program that got a kindergarten built. It had been voted down consistently for the last 15 years before I got there. And I'd say that my Peace Corps volunteer time helped me orchestrate the completion of the kindergarten. Funding and completion of the kindergarten. Knew how to how to handle a rope, so to speak.

LASER: [00:30:17] So volunteerism became part of your life afterwards?

DRISCOLL: [00:30:25] Yes. Yeah, I'm active in professional societies and civic issues.

LASER: [00:30:37] Have you stayed in touch with any of the former volunteers?

DRISCOLL: [00:30:42] Not too many. Gary Richardson and Stan Laser are the two that I communicate with most frequently.

LASER: [00:30:56] Have you maintained any contacts with people from Ecuador?

DRISCOLL: [00:31:03] No.

LASER: [00:31:08] How about your social life in Ecuador?

DRISCOLL: [00:31:14] I went down there single and I came home single, so it wasn't very active. I had some good friends down there. I can't remember their names now, most of them. I had friends in the campo and friends in the city. The apartment that Stan and I had shared together with, he and several other people, was sort of the party central. And when Stan and I

would come to town, the people in the city would have spent all their monthly salary by the time we got there and we always had money enough to have a barbecue.

LASER: [00:32:10] Are there any other things that, any other experiences that you had that you would think were unusual or difficult, different, that come to mind?

DRISCOLL: [00:32:29] Probably the greatest confrontation that I had down there was with the padre over the construction project that he pulled off on the church. I thought that was ill advised and ill founded, it served nothing, nothing to the benefit of the people in the town other than enhancement of the padre's image with the local, I don't know the right word for it, but the Catholic Church hierarchy in Cuenca. It was a project that he could do and say, oh, look at this, I did it. I improved the church. But it didn't improve the life of the people that lived there at all. And I found that annoying at best.

LASER: [00:33:26] How did you deal with the local politics in the town? Were there different factions, some that maybe wanted the canal, maybe some that didn't?

DRISCOLL: [00:33:37] Everybody wanted the canal. Everybody didn't want to work on the canal. And it was my job to, as a Peace Corps volunteer and community development worker, to encourage people to go up and work. And they had nothing to give them other than the water. But they did a masterful job of digging a ditch. Actually, I've got a water right, too. I don't know what I'll ever do with it.

LASER: [00:34:12] Maybe when you retire.

DRISCOLL: [00:34:13] Yeah.

LASER: [00:34:16] Go back there and start a farm, you have water. How about traveling in the country? Did you visit different places in Ecuador? Did you have time to do that? Any interesting little side trips?

DRISCOLL: [00:34:32] I did side trips to the coast. One Christmas, Stan and John Snead and I went down to the coast. And we were told we couldn't go to Playa de Salinas because the Peace Corps volunteers' local representative was going to be down there with his family. So we went to a place called Bajo Alto, which is south of Guayaquil. That was an experience. It was a black volcanic sand beach, beautiful beach, but there was nobody there but the three gringos. I can't even remember where we ate. There was a cantina there and there were feral hogs living on the beach, and they were all lined up out of the sun. Took a picture and sent it to my dad and said, yeah, it's true, only mad dogs and Englishmen go out in the noonday sun. Probably 10 hogs lying in the front of this cantina under the palm fronds.

LASER: [00:35:44] You travel to any other places in the Sierra?

DRISCOLL: [00:35:50] Well, any place you went by bus was an adventure, and it was always by bus. Nobody. Airfares were expensive and they were hard to schedule with the weather. But a trip down the Pan-American Highway in a bus when it was a gravel road was an exciting trip. The busses, some were sort of suspect in terms of safety. But they got the job done.

LASER: [00:36:29] So I understand you also took a trip to the Oriente, which is over the.

DRISCOLL: [00:36:33] That's right, I've forgotten that.

LASER: [00:36:35] Over the Andes Mountains down into the beginning of the Amazon basin.

DRISCOLL: [00:36:41] Right. Stan and I did a preliminary road study looking to see if it was feasible to build a road. It was a road under construction called the [inaudible] road. This would have been from Cochapata to Tutupali. It was a two-day trip over the mountains. Then a couple of days into Tutupali. It was an adventure, to say the least. One of the classics was we went to a place where they made this moonshine whiskey. That was the high point I think. [inaudible] Squeeze the sugar cane and ferment

the sugar cane and then distill it. It's still there. All pretty exciting for a gringo.

LASER: [00:38:01] So would you recommend the Peace Corps to young people now?

DRISCOLL: [00:38:06] I don't know what the Peace Corps is like now. I know it's changed quite a bit. I know most of the training is done in-country, whereas we were, we had a three-month training period between the University of Missouri at Columbia and Puerto Rico so that we were feet on the ground ready to go. And now they, as I say, they train in-country as I understand it. I can't say that I've honestly sent anybody to the Peace Corps as an adventure in their young lives or old lives. But the concept is still a valid one. I think we had more success than the State Department did in terms of getting projects done and acculturating with the people. We didn't live in a compound.

LASER: [00:39:11] OK. Was there anything else that you think you might want to add about your experience, anything that people might want to hear?

DRISCOLL: [00:39:22] I don't know. I'd say that the Peace Corps had a positive influence on my life, just from a standpoint of change in perspective.

LASER: [00:39:38] So one of the main reasons that you joined was there the military draft situation.

DRISCOLL: [00:39:47] Well, I had to do something about, that was mandatory draft for everybody then.

LASER: [00:39:51] Right.

DRISCOLL: [00:39:52] And I had to do something with the military, which was why I had taken the Naval ROTC exam and Naval Officers Candidate School exam. But when I got home, the draft board was still sitting there waiting for me and they asked me what I was going to do. I told them I was going to be a graduate student at MIT and I had a kind of a low level teaching position there. And they said, go do that. So I did. But it was,

the Peace Corps wasn't a substitute for the draft. You're still eligible for the draft.

LASER: [00:40:43] I know several people that were drafted after they came home.

DRISCOLL: [00:40:46] Came home, right.

LASER: [00:40:47] So that happened.

DRISCOLL: [00:40:49] And I was prepared for that. If I got drafted, I'd have gone into the Army. So maybe thought the Navy was a better choice. I had an older brother and a younger brother that had been in the Marine Corps. I didn't need to replicate those experiences.

LASER: [00:41:15] So either case of whether you were going into the military or the Peace Corps, it was still a form of service, you know, going back to the John F. Kennedy speech. What you can do for your country. So these two types of, two different types, completely different types of service, but it's still service.

DRISCOLL: [00:41:38] Right. And I feel strongly about service to the country. I think the United States would be a lot better off if they did have mandatory service. I don't know what they'd do with all of the kids, what kind of service they'd find them. I mean, I think about the CCC and the WPA and the Roosevelt programs that were common during the Depression. The CCC was a great program. I still take advantage of their facilities, the national parks around the country.

LASER: [00:42:20] OK, I think we're done.

DRISCOLL: [00:42:21] We're done.

LASER: [00:42:22] OK, thank you David. This concludes the interview of Dave Driscoll.

[END OF INTERVIEW]