

Lisa Weiss Oral History Interview
Returned Peace Corps Volunteer Collection
Administrative Information

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Biographical Note

Lisa Weiss served as a Peace Corps volunteer in in Ukraine from 2005 to 2008 as a teacher. She later served in Peace Corps Response in Colombia in 2011, also as a teacher.

Access

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Oral History Interview

with

Lisa Weiss

December 7, 2019
Sterling, Virginia

By Elaine Staab

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

STAAB: [00:00:08] Today is December 7th, 2019. This is Elaine Staab and I am interviewing Lisa Weiss, who was a Peace Corps volunteer in two different countries. She was in the Ukraine 2005 to 2008 and in Colombia in 2011 in Peace Corps Response. Welcome, Lisa.

WEISS: [00:00:40] Thank you. Nice to be here.

STAAB: [00:00:43] Great. So we're just going to go ahead and get started. Could you tell me a little bit about what your life was like before joining the Peace Corps?

WEISS: [00:00:52] I was living in Oceanside, California, and I was a marketing communications specialist for the Outdoor Channel. And if you don't know what the Outdoor Channel is, it's a cable TV channel devoted to hunting and fishing and things like that. And I was single and no kids. I was 34 and I was bored with my life and I was bored with making money for other

people and doing the same thing every day. I did have a life outside of work. It mostly consisted of going down to San Diego to hear bands and a lot of my friends were in those bands and it was fun until it wasn't.

STAAB: [00:01:48] OK. So you did kind of tell me about why you were wanting to join the Peace Corps. Can you elaborate more on that?

WEISS: [00:01:57] Sure. I wanted to see how other. I wanted what I did with my day to help someone, to be helpful to someone. One thing. Another thing that I did after work was I tutored ESL to some, a lot of my students were the people who worked in the strawberry fields in Carlsbad and they were migrant workers. And it was even though I worked 8 hours a day, I always found the energy to talk to the students. And I always found that it was very, um, it gave me energy and it gave me joy to help. I won't say, I won't say help. They don't need help. But just to support people as they learn English and learn to take their place as people in this country. So and I wanted to do that in a way that would be able to pay my expenses as well as see how other people live. So that's kind of my whole, that's kind of the reason why I joined.

STAAB: [00:03:13] OK. Did you have a specific project or country in mind?

WEISS: [00:03:18] I wanted to go to China and learn Chinese or Mandarin, and I was not on the right application cycle for China. So I got invited to Ukraine.

STAAB: [00:03:33] OK. Can you, what was your initial reaction when you got invited to go to the Ukraine?

WEISS: [00:03:44] Well, I didn't know very much about Ukraine. I did have some ESL students from there, and I knew that Dnipropetrovsk was a hard word to say because they would, they were having trouble with English pronunciation. And they said, well, hey, can you say Dnipropetrovsk? And I can say a lot better now than I could back then. But Dnipropetrovsk is a city that, in Ukraine, that's now actually called the Dnipro, because Dnipropetrovsk was the Soviet name of it.

STAAB: [00:04:21] Can you describe upon arriving in Ukraine what it was like? What was your, initially arriving there, what was your impression of the place?

WEISS: [00:04:34] I was really tired. I think this is common with all Peace Corps volunteers. We had flown from Chicago to, what's that city in Germany, the one? Hamburg? No.

STAAB: [00:04:49] Berlin?

WEISS: [00:04:49] No, the one, the big, the big airport hub. Frankfurt. Yeah. We had flown from Chicago to Frankfurt and then Frankfurt to Kyiv. And I was really tired and kind of all airports look the same. So we were kind of herded through the airport. And then we had to wait in a long line for, but yeah, all airports. It was kind of your standard airport experience. And then we got on busses and we were taken outside the city to an old sanatorium. And this is where we would have our training our first week, where we were there for about a week before we went to our training sites. And it was, a sanatorium is a health resort where people would go. Either you got guaranteed in the Soviet Union, you got guaranteed a month of vacation, but you had to take it with your coworkers. And you would also, that's where you would also get treated for any maladies that you that you had.

WEISS: [00:05:54] So we have these little rooms in this kind of crumbling sanatorium. It was very pretty. It was on a river. And we had, it was a very structured schedule. And we had started our language training. We started our technical training.

STAAB: [00:06:13] Can you tell me about those trainings a little bit?

WEISS: [00:06:19] It was very basic. We, at the time, some of us learned Russian and some of us learned Ukrainian. That's changed. There's no Russian language training anymore. And we just, we started out with the Russian alphabet and learning basic phrases.

STAAB: [00:06:37] Seems very hard.

WEISS: [00:06:39] The alphabet is not hard. It's the grammar that's hard. And it's. Unlike, let's say Spanish speakers, Russian speakers are not what we call sympathetic interlocutors. They're not very patient with people who make mistakes or who don't speak a language perfectly. It's hard for people to understand someone for whom Russian is an additional language. So. That's kind of, that was a little bit of an issue sometimes.

STAAB: [00:07:22] Did you get any technical training? I know you were already had some experience in teaching.

WEISS: [00:07:26] I had teaching. I had experience tutoring. But yeah, we had a lot of technical training. We were kind of student teachers at a school at our training site. My training site was called Kalynivka, and it was about 40 minutes outside of Kyiv by train. And there were two schools and I was placed at school number two, and I worked with a teacher who was a history teacher. But because all of a sudden they, in the public schools, they needed more English teachers, they kind of conscripted teachers from other subject areas to become English teachers. So the teacher was very nice, but she was very insecure about her English because it wasn't her area of training. She did speak it.

WEISS: [00:08:25] But I taught alongside, alongside her and that's where I was. It was a secondary school, worked with 9th and 10th grade or, no, actually it wasn't a secondary school, but I worked with 9th and 10th grade. The schools there go from 1st to 12th.

STAAB: [00:08:41] OK, so how long was your training? And then after the training, where did you then go to for your site?

WEISS: [00:08:46] Our training was three months and we got there in the beginning of October. We left around Christmas Day, but our Christmas Day. But in Ukraine, Christmas is the, the religious holiday is on January 7th, and the big kind of commercial celebration is New Year's Eve. So what we would do was Santa Claus and presents and the tree and parties was New Year's Eve and then the religious celebration is the 7th. So I went to, I was placed in Theodosia [also called Feodosia], Crimea, which

was, I was really happy about that. I told, I just said I wanted to be near a body of water. I thought I'd be on the river somewhere. But this was really nice. Theodosia is a resort town on the Black Sea in Crimea, which is Ukraine.

STAAB: [00:09:43] So what was that place like? You said it was very nice. Can you add, can you tell us more about that?

WEISS: [00:09:48] Oh, sure. It is a small city and there is a kind of a boardwalk along the sea. And the beach on the boardwalk is pebbly. And there are all these kind of old sanatoriums. They used to be czar's palaces. And it was it was rumored that Catherine the Great hung out in Theodosia when she wanted to go to the beach. And there's a very famous painter there. His name is Aivazovsky. And he painted these huge, like, wall size seascapes. And so he's very famous. There's the gallery is there. And so it's kind of, like I grew up in Virginia Beach. So it reminded me a lot of actually where I grew up and with the boardwalk and the summertime and everything shuts down in the winter.

WEISS: [00:10:45] And it's just a neat town because there are a lot of old buildings and the old section is really nice. I lived out in kind of the newer part. Well, newer being the apartments that were built during Khrushchev's time that are kind of the concrete block apartments that you see. But it was a really nice, it's, um, I think there's a little bit more, there was a little bit more wealth in my town than in a lot of other towns because, because of its proximity to Russia. A lot of people would leave and go and work in Russia for a while and then come back, because they were ethnically Russian or they were able to somehow get permit or work under the table in Russia. And Russian tourists came in and spent a lot of money.

STAAB: [00:11:37] So can you talk about your job or what you did at the site?

WEISS: [00:11:44] Yeah, I was working at a secondary school and it was a specialized school for the teaching of English. So during, it was set up during the Soviet times and during the Soviet times, they were the people who would become, who would maybe work in the KGB, maybe work in the military, have higher positions because of their ability in English. But

after the fall of the Soviet Union, even though it was a place where parents sent their kids if they wanted them to become proficient in English. And so whereas most schools in Ukraine started in fifth grade in teaching English, the school I was at started in the first grade, and they had English every day rather than three days a week.

STAAB: [00:12:40] OK. And now were you actually teaching the students or were you teaching the teachers?

WEISS: [00:12:45] I was teaching the students and I had my, um. Because it was a kind of a more elite school, the better teachers, the teachers who had more a lot more experience and some of them had traveled. So it wasn't the, they didn't want me there because they had a lack of English teachers or they, it was more to, um, I did what's called content based instruction. So I didn't really teach the English language. They did that, but I taught literature and history of the U.S. and the U.K. and other English speaking countries like South Africa, Jamaica, and places like, and Canada. So it was more.

STAAB: [00:13:36] Interesting. So they wanted more content in history.

WEISS: [00:13:38] Yeah, they showed me the textbook. They said, yeah, we teach them grammar, you can teach them something else.

STAAB: [00:13:43] So where did you get the information to teach them?

WEISS: [00:13:46] I had some books. I use the internet a lot and at that time I had, you paid by the gigabyte or the megabyte for internet. So I had, I actually, I had a cable. The way they did it was they actually connected a network cable into your house and you paid. You went down to the place and you bought however many megabytes you needed. And then when they ran out, you bought more. So no streaming video, no streaming audio.

STAAB: [00:14:22] What were the biggest challenges?

WEISS: [00:14:26] Um, let's see. I think isolation. There weren't a lot of volunteers around, and I kind of liked it that way. But it was, and I was very friendly.

The teachers at the school were very friendly with me. And in school it was, we were social but not so much out of school. Everybody kind of had their own life. So I read a lot of books. I watched I think all the seasons of Lost on DVD, and we had DVDs that we would pass around when all the volunteers would get together. I did get a site mate six months into my service, and luckily she was about my same age and we got along really well. But I haven't said a word to her after we, um, after she went back to the States or after we returned to the States. But that was nice. And, um, I think that's.

STAAB: [00:15:33] Did the projects move? Or your job, was it smooth? Everything else seemed to go well?

WEISS: [00:15:39] It was, it was.

STAAB: [00:15:39] A lot of other Peace Corps volunteers, you know, throughout the world. I mean, there's always things, obstacles and problems that get in the way of doing your job.

WEISS: [00:15:48] Yeah, I won't say there weren't. But the teachers were very willing to work with me. And I was, I discovered that I was, that I wanted to be a teacher. So I think for a lot, that's where I discovered that I wanted to be a teacher, that I want to teach high school. And I think a lot of volunteers, they didn't or they didn't like teaching or didn't or, you know, or their school wasn't very receptive to them. But I think it was, I was very lucky I think. It could have gone wrong in so many ways, but I was a good fit for the school and the school was a good fit for me.

STAAB: [00:16:32] And it influenced you to become a teacher?

WEISS: [00:16:34] Mm hmm. Yeah. And, I mean, I think one big issue I had was the kids liked to demonstrate every English cuss word that they, this is a common thing with a lot of Ukraine volunteers. They just would let a stream of English profanity out and as you were walking in the door. And there were really no consequences, there was no detention, which is I mean, that's a good thing. I mean, detention doesn't do any, as we know, does it really help.

STAAB: [00:17:04] The behavior, there was not good discipline you're saying? Or was it just with the cussing?

WEISS: [00:17:09] Just with that. You know, inside the classroom and once the school bell rang, it was okay. And once they figured out that, um, once they figured out that I could speak Russian sort of, they calmed down. Or, you know, the novelty wore off and, you know, and even if they weren't in my class, the kids who were in my class. Oh, she's okay, you know. Yeah.

STAAB: [00:17:37] Were the kids in this high school kids that were bound for college or?

WEISS: [00:17:44] Some. But it was very difficult to get. Number one, you could take the exam and if you pass the exam to get into college, you still had to pay a bribe. So it was a very uneven, inequitable system of getting into college. So I think most people wanted to go, but not everyone did.

STAAB: [00:18:15] Interesting. OK. What about free time in the Ukraine? Vacation time, free time.

WEISS: [00:18:27] Weekends I really didn't do a whole lot. In the summer, it was great because I went to the beach a lot with my site mate and we went. There's a lot of neat places to go in Crimea that, uh, like Yalta, where the famous Yalta Conference was after World War II, is a very, very built up and very. That's where all the, that's kind of, that's kind of like the premier tourist resort where people go. And then there's a lot of little towns and little side trips and it's easy to go. Well, it was because the busses are, it's easy to catch a bus and go for the day to visit Yalta or Yevpatoriya or there's a cognac making region that you can, Koktebel, where you can go, and all these little places that are along the Black Sea coast. So. Or volunteers would come and visit me and then we'd go on a little trip.

WEISS: [00:19:45] And then in the summers, I, uh. In most places, most of the TEFL volunteers in Ukraine ran summer camps for kids. But in my town, all the families worked in the summertime. So all the kids would work on the boardwalk or work in a store or work in a restaurant. So my teachers

would say, well, you're not going to get anybody for the summer camp because they're all either working. And one thing that they would do would be to rent out their house in Theodosia and go into the interior of Crimea where they had family and live there for the summer and to get the rent from the tourists who would rent their apartments. Because they would, the tourists would stay. There weren't really, there were a couple of hotels, but the kind of the vacation style was to stay in a hotel, stay in an apartment for weeks or a month. And then so the people who had the apartments in desirable locations would leave, rent them out to tourists, and then come back after the summer was over.

WEISS: [00:21:01] But I got to go to, I got to go to a place in western Ukraine called Mukachevo. And as it turns out, I was doing genealogy on my family. My dad's side of the family is from Hungary, which at the time was Austria-Hungary, and that city, Mukachevo, was part of Austria-Hungary. And that is where my, I don't know where my great grandfather, my great grandmother was from exactly. But I did find that the man that she married after was from that city. So I have roots in that, I've been to a place where I have roots. So it was pretty cool.

STAAB: [00:21:49] Very cool.

WEISS: [00:21:50] Yeah.

STAAB: [00:21:51] Very interesting. OK. So after your Peace Corps service in the Ukraine, you came back to the United States. I understand you did another Peace Corps Response service, but there was some time in between. What did you do in the time in between?

WEISS: [00:22:10] Well, it was. 2008 was the beginning of the Great Recession. And I was in California and normally it's pretty easy. So I decided I wanted to be a teacher. And California grants a preliminary teaching credential for Peace Corps service. So I had the equivalent of a provisional license where you still have some requirements that you have to complete before you can be a full, fully certified teacher. But anyway, so I was looking for a job and I didn't really find a teaching job because districts were laying off people and not hiring and having hiring freezes because California was

broke. And so I substitute taught. And then I found a job at a private school in Guatemala. And I worked there for about a year and a half.

WEISS: [00:23:07] And I applied to. I read in a New York Times article about Cartagena in Colombia and about Gabriel Garcia Marquez. And Colombia was just starting to become a place that it was okay to go to again, that wasn't experiencing violence and car bombings and things like that. So I applied to the Response position and I got, after a little back and forth, I got accepted for that. And Colombia had been closed as a Peace Corps country since 1981. So I was the second, I was in the second group of Response volunteers. The first group came in 2010. And we were, ostensibly we were training teachers, training English teachers. But the level of, again, and I was placed at a school for the gifted. And so I really felt like I didn't have a whole lot to teach those teachers.

WEISS: [00:24:17] And it was more like we were kind of an advance team for deciding if Colombia would be a place for regular Peace Corps. So there were two groups of, there were two Response groups, and then there were some scattered Response volunteers here and there. And then after, while I was, while I was, I think. Yeah, during towards the end of my service, we call it C-2-3 - Colombia, second time around, third group - came and they were the first full time group. And they were all, they were, it was called Teaching English for Livelihoods. So they were placed at secondary schools and technical schools as well.

STAAB: [00:25:16] Can you explain more about, first, the life in Cartagena where you were living as a Peace Corps response volunteer? And then more about your job? Kind of like what you did when you talked about the Ukraine.

WEISS: [00:25:31] Well, I wasn't in Cartagena. I was in Barranquilla.

STAAB: [00:25:34] Oh, sorry.

WEISS: [00:25:34] Which is about an hour to the west.

STAAB: [00:25:38] OK. So Cartagena was, that's where you arrived first though, you said?

WEISS: [00:25:43] No, that's just, I just read the New York Times article about that city.

STAAB: [00:25:46] Oh, oh, I'm so sorry.

WEISS: [00:25:47] And Cartagena gets a lot more tourists because it has an old, um, an old historical core and it's right on the beach.

STAAB: [00:25:57] So you were in Bar?

WEISS: [00:25:58] Barranquilla.

STAAB: [00:26:00] Barranquilla.

WEISS: [00:26:00] Yeah, yeah. And that's a port city. And it's got more of a middle class because there's a lot of industry in the city. And yeah, so there, in Colombia we were required to live with a host family for the whole time. In Ukraine, I had my own place. And so luckily, again, I feel like I've been very lucky in the Peace Corps. I had a really great host family. I'm still in touch with my host, well, my host mom. But she's six years older than me but. Um. But professionally I, it was a little, it wasn't quite as satisfying as Ukraine because I felt like I didn't really have a whole lot to offer to.

WEISS: [00:27:10] In Colombia, the teachers had. There's a lot of interchange with the United States already, because Colombia is so close to the United States and people in the middle class can visit Miami. It's not impossible to get a tourist visa. But I felt like, um, I felt like some. I got along well with the teachers at the school, but I felt like I was kind of window dressing and I felt like, um. This, also, the selection process was a little bit different. In Ukraine, I actually went along on some site selection visits and talked to the teachers at the school. And when they were doing the process, when they do the process in Ukraine, which they'd been doing for years and years, they would make sure that the school really wanted and could benefit from a volunteer.

WEISS: [00:28:19] In Colombia, I think they just, they talk to the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Education kind of named some schools. And we were placed there. And so it wasn't, um, I mean, I think if they had just said we're going to be an advance team and to make sure that it's an okay location for volunteers, I think, you know, in that way it was satisfying. But I. A lot of us in my group really felt like we were not, um, we were not as useful as we wanted to be.

STAAB: [00:29:08] Mm hmm. And you were teaching other teachers?

WEISS: [00:29:11] I was co-teaching in some classes. I was teaching, yeah, I was teaching English to other teachers. Doing some professional development. But it was just, it's, it's very difficult to, um.

STAAB: [00:29:32] To come in as an outsider?

WEISS: [00:29:34] Yeah, to come in as an outsider and to just to. Scheduling was, you know, it wasn't lack of desire or lack of will to participate in these professional developments. It was time. And there are already a lot of teachers would finish one shift at the public school and go teach some classes at the university, because they needed the money. Or they would finish, um, they would finish their day at the school, the public school, and tutor for 5 hours. So there wasn't a whole lot of time for them to receive this, you know, what we were doing. And so.

STAAB: [00:30:23] How long were you in Colombia? Because I know this was Response. This wasn't a full two year stint, right?

WEISS: [00:30:28] Right, it was. Eleven. A year.

STAAB: [00:30:31] A year.

WEISS: [00:30:31] A year. Mm hmm.

STAAB: [00:30:35] And did you do any traveling other than?

WEISS: [00:30:40] Just inside, well, inside the country, I'm trying to remember. Because I actually, I got a job after Response because one thing that we, one thing that another volunteer and I did was go. We went to the binational center. I don't know if you, it's called Centro Cultural Colombo Americano. And they offered English classes, they offered movies, they offered cultural programs. And they got, they received money from the State Department. And while I was a volunteer, another volunteer and I would say, OK, well, let's find something we can do where we're useful. And so we went and talked to the director there and they said, oh yeah, we have a conversation club. You can help lead the English Club. OK, something to do. And so after doing that, they offered me the job there.

WEISS: [00:31:37] And I'm trying to remember what was during Peace Corps and what was. I went to Cartagena and Santa Marta because those were the three cities where volunteers were placed. We weren't placed anywhere else in the country. I think now they're starting to place people around Bogota and Boyacá in the interior of the country. But those were the, so I would visit other volunteers in Cartagena, Santa Marta. I went to Panama for spring break I think one year. But yeah, so I got to see a fair amount of the country.

STAAB: [00:32:22] OK. So kind of tying your two experiences together, what do you think were your biggest accomplishments or takeaways from your service in the Peace Corps?

WEISS: [00:32:34] Well, I hope that people got a different idea of people from the U.S. And I think in Ukraine it was a lot of people had preconceived notions of how people from the U.S. were. And we, when I was there, George Bush was president, and he was not popular there. And so a lot of times I explained how, you know, people saw the general impression was that he was not a very intelligent person. And people would ask me, well, how did that happen? How could someone like that become president of the United States? And I was able to kind of tell them about the cultural and of the religious forces that shape our country and our culture and answer that those kinds of questions.

WEISS: [00:33:43] I think that, um, I think the biggest, the biggest takeaway is just that people know that someone people in the U.S. give a damn about them. You know, that it's, it was the, it was forming personal relationships and forming, and as an equal, not as someone coming with a handout. You know, as someone in the, another person in, your colleague in the teacher's lounge, not as someone, you know, someone from the States who's going to tell you how to do your job. I think that's, in both cases, I think that's the biggest takeaway and that, um.

STAAB: [00:34:31] And this shaped your sort of, how this later impacted or influenced your life, these experiences. I mean, it sounded like when you left the Ukraine, you already kind of knew you wanted to be a teacher. But did your experience in Colombia further shape that sort of decision that you had to become a teacher?

WEISS: [00:34:52] Yeah. Yeah, I already, um. I mean, when I left Colombia, I went to graduate school to get a master's in teaching English to speakers of other languages. So I felt that, you know, after working for two years in Colombia with, not with the Peace Corps, I felt like, what did I really have to offer that a Colombian didn't? Because one thing that's happening around the world with English teaching is that more local people are going to college to get degrees in languages, and more local people are qualified as teachers. So maybe in, and I know in Colombia there is not, uh, Peace Corps Colombia is not sending as many English teaching volunteers as they used to, because there are local people who can do it.

WEISS: [00:35:52] It's just the places they're sending them to. They're sending them to very rural areas that kind of have, don't have people who, um, don't have a large pool of English teaching talent like the major cities do. But yeah, so it did, you know, it did kind of tell me that, yeah, that's what I want to do. And that's what I'm meant to do.

STAAB: [00:36:17] Mm hmm. This question here about the three goals of the Peace Corps. It sounds like the first goal is to provide technical assistance where requested. You did that in teaching English in both Ukraine and in Colombia. And then you talked about how you promoted understanding of Americans in supporting and helping the people in these countries and

showing, teaching them about your culture and your values. What about the third thing? The third goal, which is to promote better understanding of other people by Americans. And I know you're now an ESL teacher or EL teacher in Loudoun County Public Schools and living here in the United States among immigrants and in a diverse world that we're in. Do you feel like you are promoting understanding of other people to Americans here?

WEISS: [00:37:23] Yeah, one, well, one concrete way that I did that was when I was in graduate school there, where I went to graduate school, Monterey Institute of International Studies. You cannot throw a rock and not hit a Peace Corps volunteer. So we had a Peace Corps club and we would go, uh, I would go especially and talk to Spanish classes about Colombia. And so I did, I've done that. But as far as, well, and I also, I'm part of an organization. Every Peace Corps country kind of has an organization of former volunteers. So I'm part of Friends of Colombia.

WEISS: [00:38:08] And the Kennedy Center in Washington, D.C., just opened up something called The Reach. And it's kind of a community outreach activity center. So you can go to the Kennedy Center even if you don't have a ticket to one of the shows or whatever. And we had an interactive exhibit on the biodiversity of Colombia, and we had a little game where you could match the animals with their descriptions and get to win a little prize. And that was really cool because the kids, you know, who doesn't love animals? And there's some really interesting animals in Colombia. And so that was really fun.

STAAB: [00:38:54] Hmm. So it sounds like you're still involved with Colombia. Do you have any other continued involvement with the countries or people that you served, that you worked with in those countries? I know you talked about a host mother.

WEISS: [00:39:12] Yeah, well, I. Yeah, I don't, I mean, I have contact with some of the teachers on Facebook and, um, but I wouldn't. I don't have a whole lot of contact with people I worked with that just, you know, when you go from seeing someone in person every day to, you know, a lot of the people in Ukraine didn't have internet service. And getting a letter from here to

Ukraine is not always. They didn't even, if you wanted to get mail in Ukraine, we had to get post office boxes at that time.

WEISS: [00:39:59] But one thing that I did do was after graduate school, I was an English language fellow and I went to Ukraine, got sent there. So I was able to, unfortunately, that was after the Russian annexation of Crimea, and I was advised not to go and probably wouldn't have been able to get into Crimea. But one of the students that I had kept up with from the high school moved to Kyiv and she's a TV journalist. And there's now a, also kind of a, it's a little, it's kind of an extension of the U.S. embassy. It's called America House, and they have a huge English speaking club and all kinds of activities having to do with the U.S. culture, with entrepreneurial development, and, you know, U.S.-Ukraine relations.

WEISS: [00:41:07] And we, I met up with her, with her and another student. So it's really, it was exactly ten years after they had graduated. And so I knew them when they were in high school when they were 17 and now they're 27. And it was really neat to see them again. And one of the other fellows I was with said, well, what did Miss Weiss do at your school that you remember? And they said, she was the first teacher who asked us what we thought about something. She was the first teacher to have a class discussion with us.

STAAB: [00:41:48] Very nice. You made a big impact it sounds like.

WEISS: [00:41:51] I hope, yeah.

STAAB: [00:41:53] Is there anything else you would like to add? Any lessons learned, any overall thing about the Peace Corps or about your time in these two countries?

WEISS: [00:42:05] Well, I. It's hard to measure a volunteer's impact and sometimes a volunteer's impact is not measurable. You know, we have to fill out these forms that say how many people are in our classes and how many people came to our English club, and how many men, how many women, how old were they? And I would say that, I mean, if I, the biggest thing that I took away from the Peace Corps was before I joined the Peace

Corps, I sat around waiting for things to happen. And when I joined the Peace Corps, I found out that I could make things happen. So I was always, I just had, I had, I always looked for jobs where I did what someone else told me to do.

WEISS: [00:43:07] Or I never started anything from scratch. I was a journalist and I was, and I had stories that I would chase, but I never had to start anything from the ground up. I never had to get people on board to do something, like get a grant, like get a grant or start a new class or something like that. So I think that. What the person who occupies the space in the United States that is me, I think is more useful now for having been a Peace Corps volunteer because. Um. I think I am more resilient and I am more understanding of other cultures and it just widens your world. It just. I got out. My original intent was to find out about how other people live and I found out about it.

WEISS: [00:44:22] When, you know, when Ukraine was making the news again and when Colombia makes the news, I feel like I have a deeper understanding of the situation in those countries and why those things happen. And I can, if anyone asks, if anyone cares, I can, I can explain that to them. And also just situations that I was in, especially in the heavily ethnically Russian parts of Ukraine, the U.S. is not popular. People from the U.S. are not. So I had my first experience of discrimination because I'm a white woman, and I had my first experience of like people chasing me down the street and telling me to go home. And I had my first experience of not being able to speak the language of the country and people treating me differently because of it.

WEISS: [00:45:34] So it helped me to understand in a very, very tiny way. I'm not going to say that my experience is the same as a lot of people in this country. But at least I was able to understand a little bit about what it's like to be the other, to not be part of the dominant group in the country. I mean, Colombia's attitude towards foreigners is completely different. But in the Russian heavy, heavily ethnically Russian parts of Ukraine, it's a little. And not everybody. Some people were, most, most people were wonderful. Most people were wonderful. But you always. you know, it's kind of scary being chased down the street. And told to go home.

STAAB: [00:46:32] Anything else you'd like to add?

WEISS: [00:46:36] I think that's it.

STAAB: [00:46:37] Well, thank you so much.

WEISS: [00:46:38] You're welcome.

STAAB: [00:46:38] For sharing with us today, Lisa. We really appreciated learning about your experience in both the Ukraine and in Colombia. All right, thank you.

WEISS: [00:46:49] Thanks for giving me the opportunity.

[END OF INTERVIEW]