

Roberta J. Vann Oral History Interview
Returned Peace Corps Volunteer Collection
Administrative Information

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Biographical Note

Roberta J. Vann served as a Peace Corps volunteer in Ethiopia from 1970 to 1971 as an English teacher at a public health college.

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Oral History Interview

with

Roberta J. Vann

May 2, 2008
Ames, Iowa

By Leslie Bloom

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

BLOOM: [00:00:05] Today is May 2nd, 2008. This is Leslie Rebecca Bloom, and I am interviewing Roberta Vann, who was a Peace Corps volunteer in Ethiopia from June '70 to August 1971 as an ESL, English as a Foreign Language teacher at the Gondar Public Health College in Gondar, Ethiopia. OK. I guess we're ready to start. I guess I'm going to go ahead and start where they suggest which is talking about why you decided to join the Peace Corps. So maybe tell me a little bit about your life at the time you joined, what were you doing?

VANN: [00:01:00] Well, I remember as a younger kid when Kennedy first announced this, it was like this really neat idea to me and something people were talking about and that I was really excited about. And then I think when I was in high school, actually, I started getting information. You know, there were, I don't know where I got, in some magazine or something where you could check some box and get information. And so I got something and I always said, you know, I'm going to do this after I

graduate from college. Because as a little kid, my big thing was to travel. You know, when I was about six years old, I had decided I wanted to travel. I came from a working class family. And so this was kind of bizarre, I suppose. In fact, my family no doubt thought it was bizarre.

VANN: [00:01:50] But, for example, I had a savings account as a little kid that I put my pennies in and I remember going to the bank and they said, OK, well, we have this special folder for your bank book. And one was saving for college and another had pictures of boats and planes on it. It was for travel. And they said, oh, you want the one saving for college, right? And I said, oh no, no, I want the travel one. So part of it, I think, was the lure of Peace Corps to me was going someplace exotic and really different and getting away from Indiana and getting away from home, getting away from everything that was familiar.

VANN: [00:02:34] And I think I had traveled in my head through reading. I was an avid reader. I was an English major in college and stuff. And so part of it, you know, I loved Hemingway. So Africa was this sort of special thing for me. I think I had this very romantic sense of Africa and particularly East Africa. So I'm not sure now if I answered the question.

BLOOM: [00:02:58] That's OK.

VANN: [00:02:58] I forgot the question was. How I came to be in the Peace Corps.

BLOOM: [00:03:00] I think part of it was Kennedy's, the notion of the service that Kennedy had talked about.

VANN: [00:03:07] Yeah, definitely that. And then I think in combination with the love of travel and sort of just fascination with learning about other cultures and all that sort of thing. I don't think I was very, um. You know, I mean, it seemed like a good idea to serve other people, but I think it was, um, my motivation was probably more selfish, that I really wanted to learn from the experience myself.

BLOOM: [00:03:35] Mm hmm.

VANN: [00:03:36] And I think in the end, that was the most valuable thing too. I mean, I think I really, it's been a great learning experience for me.

BLOOM: [00:03:45] So did you end up going after college as you had planned?

VANN: [00:03:49] Yeah. Yeah, went immediately after college.

BLOOM: [00:03:51] And you had been an English major?

VANN: [00:03:54] Yes.

BLOOM: [00:03:54] Had you done any?

VANN: [00:03:56] I was a BA generalist as I was termed in Peace Corps, and that wasn't a very great thing at that time. Peace Corps had just turned from taking BA generalists and putting them through jungle training to, um, you know, some of the early. Oh, the other thing I should say about wanting to go into Peace Corps. There were ads on television in the sixties, and they were of people swinging through the jungles on these ropes and this sort of thing, you know, and you know, these very engaging commercials, and so I'm sure that had something to do with it too. But before I went my senior year, I, oh, maybe this is coming later, but my senior year they, um, I was working in a restaurant. My parents had said, well, we'll put you through college. But then one summer I wanted to go to summer school. So they said, OK, well, then you know, you're going to have to pay for one of your semesters. And so I paid for my last semester by being a waitress, as we called them in those days.

VANN: [00:04:58] And I remember my manager thought I was a really good waitress, and he thought I was crazy for going into Peace Corps. And he begged me to stay and told me, you know, I'd be making a lot more if I stayed as a waitress because I'd only be making like, what was it, 16 cents an hour or something? He absolutely thought I was nuts. So, yeah, but anyway, I think television and Kennedy himself first, you know, all those kinds of things were part of it.

BLOOM: [00:05:31] Yeah. In college, did you take any courses that prepared you to teach English as a second or foreign language?

VANN: [00:05:39] No, but I actually took some courses that prepared me for going to Africa. I took an African history course my senior year, which was really, really a valuable course for me even today. It was an excellent course. And the professor knew I was going into Peace Corps and everything, and so that was neat. And I took an anthropology course that dealt with Africa specifically. For English, I didn't know what I was going to do. So I mean, there was no reason for me to take ESL. At that time they didn't really tell you ahead of time necessarily what you're going to be doing. And so I figured, well, I might be sent to some village to give shots or something, you know, there was just no way of knowing.

VANN: [00:06:25] No, I really, I didn't even have teacher ed courses, actually. I mean, I really was just a literature major, and that was it. So I knew a lot about Shakespeare. I had three courses in Shakespeare, things like that. But I really did try to. I took, um, I took some political geography. I was really, oh, I took a study in western European studies. I was always taking these courses on other countries and, you know, other people and that sort of thing. So not just English. And I think that actually prepared me somewhat, but not the teacher ed courses would have been very, very helpful. Of course, TESL courses, I don't even, I don't think they existed in those days. I don't think they did at all.

BLOOM: [00:07:11] When you were looking at that time, did you know you'd go to Africa or could you have been sent to Latin America? Were there enough other programs?

VANN: [00:07:22] Yeah, there were a lot of other programs and they said that you would get three. You could get up to three invitations and you didn't have to take your first one. And so I met somebody else who said Ethiopia was a really neat place to go. I didn't know where I wanted to go. I was really pretty interested in Africa. I'd heard bad things about Afghanistan, that it was a druggie place, you know, and I didn't speak Spanish. And, you know, I mean, I had, I think I thought Africa was pretty neat, but I really didn't know where I wanted to go. But then I heard from somebody that

that, um, Ethiopia was really an interesting place. So, oh, OK. Put that down as a first choice. It was pretty capricious. And anyway, that. But that was a really big Peace Corps country at the time. And so, um, I guess the odds were pretty good of getting that.

BLOOM: [00:08:23] So you graduated, you had this application, you got your invitation, and then you?

VANN: [00:08:28] Yeah, I got the invitation before. I can't remember when. Sometime during that spring semester and then went really soon after graduation, you know, like maybe two weeks.

BLOOM: [00:08:42] Wow. And you were, what? 21 or 20?

VANN: [00:08:46] I was 22, I think. Yeah, yeah.

BLOOM: [00:08:48] So what did your family say when you said, hey, I'm going to Ethiopia?

VANN: [00:08:55] They were really very upset. They did not like this idea at all. They thought maybe I'd just been saying this for years, I think, because I often did sort of, you know, talk about this or that, and I think they just thought I would definitely never do it. And they were really worried. My grandfather, I remember, was, had some. He had been in World War I and in France, you know, and so his idea of overseas was tarnished by war. And, you know, I mean, and plus it had been so long ago. This was like 1917 or something, you know? And he's telling me what it's going to be like in 1970. Of course, it's pretty, pretty remote. And you know, they, of course, people had seen these TV shows like *Daktari* and. I don't know if you remember?

BLOOM: [00:09:51] I do know it.

VANN: [00:09:51] Yes. And you know, all these people being eaten by alligators and crocodiles and, you know, Tarzan movies. And all these sort of images of Africa were floating about, so I think it was very, very upsetting. And of course, we had no email, no cell phones, no reliable telephones

even, so I literally didn't talk to my parents the entire time I was there. And you know, sometimes you'd go for weeks without getting a letter. The only way to really contact each other was by a letter. So, you know, it was a big deal, and I, oh, I was an only child and still am.

BLOOM: [00:10:34] Yeah. So that must have been devastating for them.

VANN: [00:10:38] Maybe a little more difficult. Yeah. And my family really didn't travel too much. We went, we had gone to North Carolina, where my father's family was from. So we weren't totally, you know, I wasn't a kid who had never been out of the state. But um, but you know, we had really basically gone to see family. And that was it. We had not gone to Europe or anything like, I had, but my family hadn't. So it was a big deal for me to do this. And they did not encourage it. In fact, they told me they would disown me.

BLOOM: [00:11:15] Oh.

VANN: [00:11:15] Yeah, they actually told me they would disown me. And I just said, well, OK. It didn't seem like a real big deal. Our family had no money anyway. So I thought, well, I guess, and once, I couldn't believe. My mother and I were very close and I couldn't really believe that this would happen, you know?

BLOOM: [00:11:35] It didn't, did it?

VANN: [00:11:36] And it didn't. No, it didn't. But it was a big threat. Yeah, yeah.

BLOOM: [00:11:44] Um. When you got your invitation and you were told you were going to be at the, um, this health college?

VANN: [00:11:57] No, actually, I wasn't. When I got my invitation.

BLOOM: [00:12:00] Oh no, I guess you don't know when you.

VANN: [00:12:02] No, I just was told that I was going to Ethiopia and they really didn't know what they were going to do with me until staging me. And

staging in Philadelphia, where we got shots and we were there for about a week, just met everybody. It was very short and then we had all in-country training. We were one of the earlier groups I think to do that. I think Peace Corps was just starting to do that. So we had three months of in-country training and which included homestays and that sort of thing. So it was during that time that the Peace Corps administrators were figuring out where would be a good fit. I mean, some people did know where they were going and they. I mean, very shortly after I got there, they said, OK, we have an opening for an English teacher at Gondar Public Health College, and we think this will be just perfect for you.

VANN: [00:12:59] Because they really didn't, they were kind of, um. Some people in our group they thought would be OK for rural development, and some people they thought should be in the city, which is kind of ironic because one of the, during my training, I was rooming part of the time. They moved us around a lot for training at various sites and so forth. And when we were in Addis at the very beginning, I was assigned to a roommate and this roommate had been thinking about Peace Corps all of her life, I think, and she had been a Girl Scout and she'd been a home ec major. And she was, you know, really prepared for rural development and she had a backpack and. And meanwhile, in college, I had been a model and, you know, all these things. I'm very different. I mean, we were like polar.

VANN: [00:13:50] But anyway, during one of our home stays, she went out to her home stay, and this was very, very early, but maybe after we'd been there a week or two. And she just couldn't adjust, I mean, she wanted this. In fact, while she was out walking around, she saw a dead body and that was just like the end of it for her. And so although the administrators had predicted that she would be just the perfect Peace Corps volunteer, she actually lasted the shortest of any time of any of us in the group and went back home very, very shortly.

BLOOM: [00:14:35] They didn't pick any of that up in the staging or?

VANN: [00:14:38] No, I mean, she barely got in country, and they thought she was perfect because she was very gung-ho, very enthusiastic. But I think she had so many expectations and she just knew she was going to be of

great service and everything, but at the same time maybe wasn't prepared for the, um. So, I mean, Ethiopia was really, I mean, probably still is, but it was, you know, really a kind of a shocking place for, in terms of development, even by the standards of other developing countries at that time. It was on the very bottom, you know.

BLOOM: [00:15:18] When I think of Ethiopia from then, I always think of the pictures of starving people. That's my marker when I was in Peace Corps.

VANN: [00:15:24] Yeah. And that was a little bit later, actually.

BLOOM: [00:15:27] Was that later? It was Biafra when I was a kid, and then Ethiopia.

VANN: [00:15:31] Yeah, yeah.

BLOOM: [00:15:33] So what was your training experience like, your home stay, the language training? Can you talk about each of the pieces?

VANN: [00:15:41] Yeah. Language training is the thing that really pops out most of all, because it was very intense and just incredible. And I remember, you know, it was all direct method, of course. I guess Peace Corps always does that. And I just remember the guy coming in the first day and, you know, thrusting his hand out and saying [Amharic phrase] and [Amharic phrase] and, you know, everybody sort of being startled, you know, sort of giving an infant startle response or something and just thinking, this will never work. This will never happen. This is impossible. And then I remember the language lessons actually started an hour before breakfast. And then during breakfast, we continued to have language because they would make us sit at these small tables and at every table there was an instructor, a native speaker instructor, and the three of us.

VANN: [00:16:40] And I remember that first, that first meal where, you know, we couldn't say anything except hello, how are you? And we had to, you know, and this instructor would reprimand us if we would say anything in English because, you know, we were supposed to speak Amharic. So consequently, we had a sort of a monk like meal, you know, it was totally

in silence. Nobody could say anything. And then we had five minute breaks between our, um, our classes. And the classes, by the way. The big part of our language was training was held in Dire Dawa, which was at that time a fabulously beautiful place where Ethiopians used to honeymoon. And apparently now it's a military. It was, it had military there at that time, but I read a book about it recently and it's just, it was really heartbreaking because it's not a very nice place now at all.

VANN: [00:17:40] But anyway, it was the site of this volcanic lake, just exquisitely beautiful place. Really gorgeous. And anyway, we had five minute breaks between classes and we were just dying for a break, you know. Very small classes and they were held in these hotel, motel rooms, you know, we were sitting on beds and that was our classroom. And then we'd rush outside and we'd play a little baseball. And of course, we had no baseball bat, so we made one out of a board, you know, it's like anything to. And meanwhile, the instructors were saying, you can't speak English, you know, for this five minute American baseball, and we had no way to talk about baseball in Amharic at that stage.

BLOOM: [00:18:29] What's the name? What's the language called?

VANN: [00:18:32] Amharic.

BLOOM: [00:18:33] Amharic?

VANN: [00:18:34] Mm hmm. A-M-H-A-R-I-C. And so what else about, oh.

BLOOM: [00:18:41] How many were in your group?

VANN: [00:18:45] In our group, you know, I really don't know. They divided our group into the ag people and the public health people. And so I was in the public health group and almost everybody in our group was a nurse in that group. Initially, there were a lot of rural development people and a lot of agricultural people, engineers, and there were some lawyers, too. There were three lawyers who were doing land reform. So in my little, you know, when they divided us, they sent the ag people way down south and we hardly ever saw them. You know, once in a while, we'd see them in Addis.

So I don't know how many were in our group, that's really a good question. I think there were about, maybe about 40 or 50 in our total group, the 13. But I think in our little group, maybe about 20.

BLOOM: [00:19:43] So were you the only?

VANN: [00:19:43] Some people got sent home early too, from that group too, for smoking grass and various things. So we were dwindling pretty fast. So yeah, what were you going to say?

BLOOM: [00:19:57] Um, you said you were with the public health group and you were going to be teaching English at this public health college.

VANN: [00:20:04] Right. Yeah.

BLOOM: [00:20:06] And the others were nurses. Was there anyone else who was assigned as an English teacher?

VANN: [00:20:10] No.

BLOOM: [00:20:10] You were it.

VANN: [00:20:11] I was the only English teacher in my group because the previous year. Ethiopia had had tons of Peace Corps volunteers, like there were 600 people I think in country at the time that I went. And many years there were large, large numbers of people coming in and they sent hundreds of English teachers to Ethiopia at all levels. They just infused all the school systems with English teachers from the U.S., and consequently, Ethiopians speak really good English if you ever meet one. But there were lots of protests and riots and all kinds of things the year before I came, and the high schools basically all across the country just kind of went crazy. And particularly in the bigger cities. This was very close to the time if you recall that Haile Selassie was overthrown. There was a coup.

VANN: [00:21:10] So we're about two years away from the coup, and there were certainly signs that it was coming, the revolution and everything, that that

was coming when I was there. So they were very careful about where they put people and they weren't putting any more English teachers out anywhere except, you know, at the college they thought it would be safe. And it was. There was a riot, though, while I was in. Our house during my Peace Corps experience was near a large high school. And people would send their kids into these high schools, urban high schools, the provincial capitals. Gondar was a provincial capital. So people were from the villages, if they had a smart kid, would send that kid into the. And sometimes these kids would be unsupervised completely.

VANN: [00:22:04] In fact, we had one who lived with us who was unsupervised except for, you know, us. So. And there was a big riot at our, you know, where Ethiopian army came out with helmets and. Yeah, I mean, I saw it, very close to, you know, like across the street. So anyway, it was a kind of a rough time to be there, but there were some little places that were maybe OK.

BLOOM: [00:22:36] So when you did your training, you were in this volcanic kind of resort like region?

VANN: [00:22:41] Yeah.

BLOOM: [00:22:42] How long do you remember? Was that like a month? And then you?

VANN: [00:22:45] Well, yeah, they kept. You know, it seems like we'd be there for three weeks or so, and then they would send us somewhere for something else. So, for example, one of the things my group was doing was going around looking at public health facilities around the country, which was really interesting.

BLOOM: [00:23:04] Did they send you with the teacher or did they send you off with just the volunteers so you had to use your language?

VANN: [00:23:09] No, they always, we always had one of those Amharic speaking teachers.

BLOOM: [00:23:15] You did, ah.

VANN: [00:23:15] Yeah, yeah. And in fact, when they sent Mary and me, they sent one of us, two of us to Gondar that year, and they sent an instructor just for the two of us. So, yeah, and he came every day for four hours.

BLOOM: [00:23:34] While you were at the training?

VANN: [00:23:35] Yeah, while we were on our home. Well, no, this wasn't during our. This was still during training.

BLOOM: [00:23:40] Oh, OK.

VANN: [00:23:40] Part of our training was at this volcanic resort.

BLOOM: [00:23:45] Right.

VANN: [00:23:45] And part of it was, you know, we would get in a plane and Mary and I and the Zaha would go up to Gondar and stay there for a while, sort of understand what our local place was like. Our teacher would take us around and, you know, and would speak Amharic to us and come to the house. And it was private tutoring, basically. And I remember one day we, it was during the rainy season, just like this. Raining, raining, raining. And Mary and I were staying at the house of another Peace Corps volunteer who was on vacation that summer. And Zaha came to the house and we said, Zaha, we're so sick of just sitting, sitting, sitting and learning the language, can't we do something else? And he said, yeah, yeah, I'll tell you what. Saturday morning, we'll go to the market. And he said, that'll be really good. You could learn a lot and we'll go to the market.

VANN: [00:24:50] So Saturday morning. We're just thrilled to death. You know, we were so sick of these dreadful, boring, you know, drill and practice, on and on and on, although he was a good teacher. And so he came that morning and he said, no, we're not going to go. And we were just devastated. We were like two little kids. You know, why, why, why, why? He didn't want to tell us. No, no, no, no. He had an uncle who was living in Gondar, so he was staying with his uncle. And he said, no, no, no, no. I can't tell you. I

can't tell you again. No, you have to tell us, you have to tell us. And then he said, there's going to be a hanging there today. My uncle told me, so, and they're going to hang three people. And so it's, I'm sure you don't want to go. Yeah, you're right. You're right. We don't go.

BLOOM: [00:25:39] We'd rather practice.

VANN: [00:25:39] And of course, had he not had an uncle there, we would have gone, you know, but his uncle had given him the heads up on this. There were no newspapers, there was no television, there was no radio broadcast. I mean, you had to find out things from local people. So his, even though we were in a provincial capital, you know, he had to find this out from his well-connected uncle. So, yeah. So that was good, that we didn't want to do that. But yeah, that was, um, and that was during training. So already in training, I was getting some indication of, you know. This one person my group had told me about the dead body that she had run across on a walk somewhere. And about the frogs in her shower and then there was the hanging episode. You know, there I was already starting to get a sense that this was going to be, you know, a pretty rough experience.

BLOOM: [00:26:46] During training, did you get enough to eat? How was the food and all that?

VANN: [00:26:50] The food was, well, during training, everybody was getting sick constantly. It was like everybody had diarrhea, and not just a little bit, but really, really. Everybody was deathly ill almost all the time. We were getting, we got more shots after we got there. And of course, you're getting gamma globulin and cholera and everything, smallpox and all this stuff, and yellow fever. And I don't know if it was the shots, but probably it was just the initial problem too with the food, because most of us were sick for about six months while we were there.

BLOOM: [00:27:28] Hmm.

VANN: [00:27:29] And, you know, really a lot of, um, just a lot of vomiting and everything. And pretty soon, though, you actually got used to vomiting I

have to say. And people would just, you know, like we'd be playing cards. And this was not during training, this was later, but people would just hop up and go get sick and come back. You know, it's kind of like we got used to it because it was, it got to be so common to be really sick. And there was a period, though, during training. Oh my gosh, am I ever going to feel well again? And I think they just told us, you know, we were eating, we were eating food that was really strange. But not only was it strange, it probably had a lot of bacteria. And because, you know, we were eating in strange places.

VANN: [00:28:20] And everybody told us, once you get in your home, you'll be able to control. The American people who were training us said, don't worry, you know, once you get in your own home, you'll be able to boil your water. You'll be able to control for this sort of thing and you won't be so sick. And it certainly tapered off. We got better, you know, but I think it was a matter of adjusting.

BLOOM: [00:28:46] So did you, during your training, did you go live with an Ethiopian family for a home stay?

VANN: [00:28:51] No, no.

BLOOM: [00:28:55] Oh, you didn't do that?

VANN: [00:28:56] No, they, um, I'm not sure the Ethiopians would have accepted that. Maybe there were too many of us. That wasn't part of our training. You were supposed to go to the town, but you did not live with a family. Instead, they sent these language people with you, which was more expensive. Yeah, you lived on your own. And I don't know. I mean, Ethiopians are a bit standoffish. In fact, more than a bit. They're very standoffish. And I don't, I can't quite imagine it. I guess if they had paid them, maybe, you know. I suppose they do that in other countries.

BLOOM: [00:29:33] Yeah. Did they train you to teach during that training? Do they have you do practice teaching?

VANN: [00:29:40] A little bit. Yeah, a little bit. Yeah. In fact, many years later, I ran into the person who trained me in Peru.

BLOOM: [00:29:52] In Peru?

VANN: [00:29:53] Yeah, yeah. She was working for a language training center and we were going to go out for lunch and we went out for lunch and we were having a lunch. And, you know, I didn't really remember this woman's name or anything. She started asking me about what I've done and everything, and lo and behold, we discovered, you know. I said, you're that Irene? You know, we discovered that she had been personally training me and we remembered, then we remembered many things that we said to each. Oh, I remember you in the classroom. And, you know, that was a very a big coincidence. But I would say the training was pretty, the teaching was pretty cursory. I mean, it wasn't, you know, it was just a little bit. I'm thinking a week, about a week. Yeah. Not very much.

BLOOM: [00:30:53] Mm hmm. But it was a three month period of that kind of probationary training period.

VANN: [00:30:58] Yeah, the emphasis was really on language, very much on language all the time. That was it. And a little bit on culture. But I would say 95 percent of it was on language.

BLOOM: [00:31:13] And during that time period since the political situation was difficult, during that training period did you to get to be on your own at all? Did you go out into the market? Did you go out and do things? You go out and go to a bar at night or whatever? What was that like?

VANN: [00:31:30] I would say not too much. Mostly, we were. [tape break] Let me think, hmm. Yeah, there's a festival, it may have been a different festival, but it was one where you made a big bonfire and where you have to leap through the bonfire and you make, you know, you sing these songs and everything. And I remember them doing that sort of thing and dancing with them, you know, being taught some Ethiopian dances in it. But it seems to me, my recollection is that it was very much sort of internal. I remember talking to the maid, you know, that kind of thing. I'm sure we walked

around Dire Dawa a little bit. But again, I think they kept us so programmed and there wasn't much during training of going out and doing stuff on their own too much. Of course, when we went to our home stay, a little bit. But again, it seemed like Zaha was always hanging around us. And just like, you know, he wouldn't let us go to the market that day.

BLOOM: [00:32:43] How soon after you got there did you know you were going to Gondar?

VANN: [00:32:49] Gondar?

BLOOM: [00:32:50] Gondar.

VANN: [00:32:50] I think it was fairly soon because they had to arrange for these trips and stuff.

BLOOM: [00:32:57] And so what you call home stay is going to the site that you were going to be at, to actually be assigned to?

VANN: [00:33:01] Yeah, yeah. Yes.

BLOOM: [00:33:04] OK.

VANN: [00:33:04] Yeah. And actually, some of, we would do things like try to figure out where we were going to live. And, you know, there was some of that. Meet people at the Gondar Public Health College and that kind of thing.

BLOOM: [00:33:18] Is there anything else about training that you think would be good to also share?

VANN: [00:33:23] Well, one really funny part of training was that we had a psychiatrist with us all the time. It was very funny. And he was with us during staging, and then he interviewed all of us to make sure we should even get on the plane. And then when we got there, he was just always hanging around and we were all paranoid. We were so afraid that we were going to get sent home. Now, you know, why that would have been so bad

I'm not so sure. But you know, it was like a fate worse than death. You'll be sent home. And we were very worried about flunking out of the language training.

BLOOM: [00:34:00] Yep.

VANN: [00:34:00] And we were very afraid that we would flunk out of the psychological profile, whatever that was. And so, of course, we never knew if we were OK or not, you know. And this guy would sit down and he was really kind of depressed himself. I think he was homesick and everything. But he'd be sitting with us and asking us questions and saying things like, how do you feel? And we would say, OK, OK! How's language? Oh, it's fine. So I remember being very intimidated by this guy following me around. Yeah. Did you have that? You have that also?

BLOOM: [00:34:45] Not to that extent. I think they trained the in-country people and the associate director were watching us to see how we were doing.

VANN: [00:34:54] I'm sure it's very expensive.

BLOOM: [00:34:56] I don't think there was a psych, there was nothing like that.

VANN: [00:34:58] It must have been incredibly expensive.

BLOOM: [00:35:01] Yeah, it's funny, the picture though.

VANN: [00:35:03] Yeah. Yeah, it was very funny. Yeah, I think, you know, just really sitting on those beds and very funny things happened during language training. And, you know, we had this rotation of the Peace Corps training people, the Ethiopian native speakers would, you know, Amharic native speakers would come in and they just rotated on and on and on and fairly short classes. And so you'd look forward to certain people during the day. And so we were really thrilled that Fasaha was going to go with us on this home stay because he was one of our favorite teachers. And I remember one of them was very conservative. His name was Mohammed, and he was more conservative in the sense of being very teacherly, very pedantic.

VANN: [00:35:53] And I remember one time I was shaking hands. I was supposed to stand up in front and shake hands with this guy in my class, and we were supposed to do this little greeting roleplaying and all that. And he tickled my hand when he shook hands with me. And of course, nobody could see it, but I immediately just burst into laughter, at which point Fasaha made me put out my hand and get it slapped with a ruler. You know, and he was just, there were really funny things that happened during language training, of course.

VANN: [00:36:26] And I remember another really funny thing is that the imperative form of 'sell' is shit. And again, you know, we had, we were supposed to learn all these forms, you know, conjugate this verbs and everything. And we were supposed to be able to, we were practicing being at a marketplace and bargaining. And so we have to use the imperative form 'to sell' because we're trying to persuade the person who's selling and the Amharic teacher, you know. We would all just roll on the ground cause we were laughing so hard at having to say 'shit' really well. And our Amharic teacher just doesn't understand why we're making, you know, why can't we be a little more mature about this? So that's one of my memories. Yeah.

BLOOM: [00:37:14] So at the end of the three months they say, then you did have a ceremony to just say, OK, and the swearing in? Did you do a swearing in ceremony?

VANN: [00:37:24] You know, we may have, but I don't really recall it. We probably did. The part I remember most is the FSI, the exam, Foreign Service Institute exam. That was really scary and they tape recorded it and everything. And I remember I did, you know, when you'd come out they would tell you how you did. And everybody would be applauding, all your other fellow volunteers would all be jumping up and down. And I remember I was really thrilled and really surprised that I did well on that, you know, so. It was a big deal.

BLOOM: [00:38:00] So that was the rite of passage.

VANN: [00:38:01] There must have been some kind of ceremony, it just must not have been that salient to me. I don't know. I really don't. I don't remember it.

BLOOM: [00:38:08] So then you and Mary, who was a nurse?

VANN: [00:38:12] Uh huh.

BLOOM: [00:38:12] Got assigned to Gondar.

VANN: [00:38:14] Yeah.

BLOOM: [00:38:14] Am I saying it right this time?

VANN: [00:38:15] Yeah, yeah.

BLOOM: [00:38:17] So tell me about. So what happened when you got there and you start, you're without the teachers and you start more of a professional kind of life?

VANN: [00:38:26] Yeah, yeah. Well, I should say, oh, there was another thing during training. Let me go back to that just a little bit.

BLOOM: [00:38:32] Yeah, go ahead.

VANN: [00:38:32] Because one of the things that we did during training was go to these health places and we went to a leprosarium, for example. It was really interesting. Yeah, went to a leprosarium. We went to a maternal childcare clinic in Addis. Some of these places were in Addis. I think this was really a very well planned training, this part. And I remember walking through the wards. Actually, all the nurses came up to Gondar at one point because that was where the public health college was. So part of this training was this group of nurses and me going around the country, seeing these special sites that were real important for whatever and looking at how they were set up, you know, and looking at some of the problems. Like, at that time, Nestlé was, uh, remember that?

BLOOM: [00:39:19] I sure do.

VANN: [00:39:19] The breast feeding and all that. So that was a big deal. But I remember going to this ward in Gondar and this was where Mary and I were going to be, you know. And it was huge and it just looked like something out of a Crimean War scene, you know. And there were all these men in these beds moaning and many of them had amputated legs and the conditions looked so primitive. And the person giving us the tour explained that in fact, most of the men were there because of firearm accidents, because everybody carried a weapon and nobody had any training. And of course, in those days they weren't machine guns, but they were, you know, old fashioned rifles and stuff. And you'd get on a bus and somebody would just have a rifle lying on the seat, you know? And so anyway, a lot of people in there had shot themselves in the foot I was told, you know, and various things like that.

VANN: [00:40:13] But I remember walking down that ward and thinking that I was just going to, again, get sick. And my colleagues, the nurses, of course they're all used to this kind of thing. And although it was very tough on my roommate Mary, who had been, she was fresh out of Catholic Nursing College and this, you know, she was just shocked at the way things were. They were not the way she'd been trained they should be. Some of the other nurses who had been in Vietnam and stuff, they were a lot more comfortable. But anyway, they were trying to. Oh, they would say, poor Bobbie! You know, meaning me. And you know, I had a little difficulty on some of that part of the training. But it was very interesting. Still very, very interesting.

BLOOM: [00:41:03] Surprised you didn't vomit.

VANN: [00:41:03] Yeah, it was very interesting, though.

BLOOM: [00:41:09] It sounds you've got to see a lot of the country by doing that, as well as different types of health issues.

VANN: [00:41:14] Yeah, yeah. I think they tried to not, I mean, it wasn't like one end of the country to the other, but, you know, kind of in the central area.

And then when we got to our site, you know, of course, we'd already been to the wards and that sort of thing, which I didn't ever go back in because I was the English teacher. But again, it was actually good for me, I think, to understand what my students were experiencing. And I worked with a sanitarians, they were called sanitarians, nurses and health officers, and the sanitarians and nurses had like 10, they completed 10th grade. So really, it was more like teaching high school. You know, we're talking fairly young people here. And the health officers had finished 12th grade. And the sanitarians would be working to help sanitation across the country.

VANN: [00:42:14] The nurses would be basically public health nurses and the, well, they would. The deal was there would be health stations. Ethiopia at that time had basically no doctors. They had one doctor for every 10,000 people. And so the idea was that they wanted to set up these health stations across the country, each one of which would have a health officer who would function as a doctor even though he only had a 12th grade education. And, you know, a little bit of health, public health training. And then the sanitarians and the nurses. You need a break?

BLOOM: [00:42:49] Uh uh.

VANN: [00:42:51] So, yeah, so that was it.

BLOOM: [00:42:53] So tell me about where you and Mary lived first.

VANN: [00:42:57] Well, we lived in a beautiful house that had been owned by, um, and our landlady was Ethiopian. Her husband had been Italian. Mussolini's army had been based in Gondar, lucky for us, and so there was some really nice housing, you know, because of this. And in fact, one of the elementary schools had been a mess hall and very nice apartment complex where I later moved, in fact, was officer's quarters. Still a very nice apartment. And we lived in a, just a big kind of, I guess it's sort of typical, you know, it was very cold and it was stucco. Not really stucco, it was probably really made of cow dung and straw, and that was the typical thing. And the tin roof. Everybody had a tin roof and we had a big compound.

VANN: [00:43:54] And in the compound, there were these little shanties, one of which some relatives, some very aged relative of our landlady lived. And she said, you know, he just goes with the place and he was called the *zabanya*, which means the guard. But really, he was, he must have had severe tuberculosis. I mean, he was emaciated and he was not quite right in the head. And, you know, and he was just this poor old man who just hung out there and tended this equally famished calf, a cow, which at one point gave birth to a calf, which was just like all bones. It was just, it was not, you know. But on the other hand, we had these papaya trees and we had coffee trees, tea trees, which I guess the Italian had planted, you know, to have some sort of gorgeous garden.

VANN: [00:44:50] And also when we got to town, a previous Peace Corps volunteer who had been part of our training said, you know, we've got this kid. It's kind of traditional for Peace Corps volunteers to take care of the kids who come to this high school that I told you about. And because there are so many of these kids that don't have any money, they come in from the villages. And so what you're expected to do is just give them a place to stay. They'd just stay in this little shanty out back, kind of like your garage or much smaller and not as nice, but dirt floor and all that. So a little dirt floor hut basically in your, it's part of your compound. In return, and you give them a little bit of money for food, and in return, he will do things like run errands and shine your shoes and just sort of general kids. The kind of stuff you might ask a 15 year old kid brother to do, you know?

VANN: [00:45:50] So it turned out that Mengistu really needed a lot of mothering. He was the kind of kid who got beat up on the playground and would come home with a bloody nose. And come home and say, my dictionary has been taken, and so we'd have to buy him a new one. And one time he came and said that there had been a snake in his hut. And we said, well, you know, is it still there? And he said, no, it's gone. And we said, oh, well, no problem, right? This is after we'd been there for a while. And he said, but you don't understand. The snake crawled all over my food and this ruined all my food because it's a poisonous snake. And he has now poisoned the food, which, you know, must have been the lore. So anyway, we bought him new food.

VANN: [00:46:42] But you know, it really was like, here I was, 22 years old. My roommate was probably 21, and all of a sudden we had not only the responsibilities of managing a household, but we also, you know, and teaching professionally, working professionally. Our first year out of school, we were both teaching at a college ourselves, but we also had an adolescent who very much needed our care. And we had a maid cook again, who was kind of, we were told this is part of the deal from the previous Peace Corps volunteers. This is going to be somebody you need to support. And so we were managing her. And of course, you didn't quite know how to do that as a young person.

VANN: [00:47:31] And I remember my roommate would wash her own clothes and I said, Mary, but remember, Yanaguchi said she would wash our clothes. And Mary says, I can't ask an older person to. She wasn't that, she was probably 30 max, 28. She had a four year old daughter. And she said, I just can't. I can't do that, you know? And it was very hard for us to ask her to do any work, being Americans. And it was also hard for us to know how to resolve conflicts and, you know, being so young. But we got initiated quickly.

BLOOM: [00:48:18] Let's see, I want to check the tape. [tape break] OK. Can you tell me a little bit about more about that settling in to your job site?

VANN: [00:48:35] Yeah. Well, one of the first things that happened to us when we arrived was we got invited to the dean's house for dinner and we were really excited because this was kind of a big deal, you know? You know, wow. And he was a tilikso, the Amharic is just coming back, which means kind of like, it means a big man. You know, he was a big man. And also, he had his M.D. from Indiana University, which is where I had gone. And so that was kind of special and I was anticipating that. And he was a very handsome man, and I was anticipating a really wonderful evening. And sure enough, we had a great evening and wonderful dinner and everything. And then at the end of the evening, he said, well, I just want you to know that I know that both of you are working for the CIA and that's, I realized that and I don't have any qualms. You know, I just accepted as a fact.

VANN: [00:49:38] And of course, both of us are sitting there with our mouths just totally open and totally in shock. We're very young, we're very naive. And we thought we'd just had a wonderful evening, beautiful food, and nice talking to, reminiscing about living in the U.S. and all kinds of things. And it was just like somebody had kicked me in the stomach, you know? And to say, but I'm not a member of the CIA, you know, it's almost like, I'm not even sure I said I wasn't because I was just so totally shocked that he could say such a thing. And then, you know, it was so depressing because we were just starting a relationship with him and he was technically our boss for the whole time that we were there. So and right before, the summer before I had gone, there was some sort of publicity associated with, you know, this idea that there was some kind of association with the CIA and Peace Corps.

VANN: [00:50:38] And in fact, some of my more far left friends, you know, this is 1970, were saying, oh, you don't want to do that, you'll be part of the CIA. And of course, I just sort of discounted that. But then when I got there and had that experience, it was really, you know, kind of a negative experience, obviously.

BLOOM: [00:51:00] But you had known that people might think that?

VANN: [00:51:03] Yeah, but I guess I saw something, there was something in Newsweek. And, you know, but I didn't really think, particularly I didn't think an Ethiopian would have heard about it, and I didn't think that they would be tuned into this. But this guy was a very sophisticated, very important, very well-read and intelligent. And he just said, well, you know, I know you're CIA, but you're still doing a good job for the university and for the public health college. And so I'll accept that and I'll, you know, but he wanted us to know that he knew.

BLOOM: [00:51:37] Mm hmm.

VANN: [00:51:39] And it was really devastating, you know.

BLOOM: [00:51:43] And did anything in your relationship with him and your interactions following that?

VANN: [00:51:49] We had no, we had no interaction with him after that. It had obviously been a formality, you know, to have these folks for dinner, greet them. And, you know, and he evidently had decided he wanted us to know this by the end of the evening. That was part of the evening. So it was pretty devastating again for these very young, very, very naive, fresh out of college students who just had an incredible naivete about the world, you know.

BLOOM: [00:52:23] Did any of your other Ethiopian colleagues ever raise that issue with you?

VANN: [00:52:28] You know, we were, I would say I was particularly isolated. I was the only English teacher, and I had very little contact with my Ethiopian colleagues. One of, there was somebody, they furnished us with a bus ride. There was an old school bus and it would pick us up every day if we wanted to, you know, if we didn't want to ride into town, into the campus. We could get a free ride on this public health college bus. And there was one colleague who had also been trained at Indiana. And, you know, she would sort of pleasantly say hello and, you know, but it wasn't. Nobody ever invited me for dinner or anything like that. It was, it was. People were pretty distant and maybe because my boss had said, they're members of the CIA, stay away from them. I don't know. I don't know, really.

BLOOM: [00:53:20] So you never?

VANN: [00:53:21] Like I said, they're pretty standoffish people. And you know, I guess I sort of thought, well, maybe they'll have us over at some point, but they didn't. The people who we socialized with were other *ferengis*, other foreigners. One was a Belgian doctor and his wife. And one was a British doctor and one was an Irish nurse. A couple of Yugoslavian doctors. Um, what else? Yeah, a lot of people came. American doctor who was there on the Ford Foundation and his wife.

BLOOM: [00:54:05] There were that much of an international group?

VANN: [00:54:08] Yeah, yeah.

BLOOM: [00:54:10] Wow.

VANN: [00:54:12] Yeah. It's still, I guess a couple of my friends have gone back and they said it's just, you wouldn't recognize, it's really an important part of Ethiopia. You know, I guess it always was. It was the only place for medical training in the entire country. Yeah, it was the medical college for the country. It still is. [dog barks] Is that going to be a problem? Want me to?

BLOOM: [00:54:43] All right. OK, so we're laughing because Roberta's dog is viciously mauling a toy.

VANN: [00:54:57] And it reminded me of a lion. And in town Gondar was a really interesting city, and in fact it's still a tourist city, because the Portuguese came there in the 15th century, or I guess the 16th century, 1500s, and built a little castle and something that's now called the Fasilides Bath, which is used for baptisms by the Ethiopian Coptic Church, but was part of a structure built by the Portuguese in the 1500s. And at this one little place in the center of town, which is like a little castle, they kept lions. And it was kind of neat because you could hear these lions roaring at night and it was kind of wonderful, you know, just what you should hear in Africa.

BLOOM: [00:55:50] That's so neat. So tell me about teaching and what your days were like?

VANN: [00:55:59] Well, it went fairly well. I was given books to use and I didn't find the teaching too difficult. You know, looking back, I realize I didn't do the kind of job. I'm a TESL teacher now, and so I realized, you know, how bad I was now in retrospect. But things went pretty well most of the time. It was kind of a shock. I walked into these classes initially and they had these old-fashioned desks like out of the 19th century. You know, the kind with the ink wells. And there would be three students crammed into each one and they were just sort of smashed together and they had their arms slung around each other, which was kind of shocking to me. You know, that they were touching, students touching one another in class.

BLOOM: [00:56:46] Yeah.

VANN: [00:56:46] And during the break, they would. Oh, and the classes would have about 45 students in them. So, you know, just being jammed in there, and I'm thinking, oh my gosh, how can I deal with this? I had no teaching experience whatsoever. Zero, nothing, ever. I'd never even worked as a camp counselor or a Sunday school teacher or anything. Nothing. Nothing. Zero. So I didn't know what I was doing. But and then during, they'd have these breaks and they'd go outside and then the guys would roll on the ground like little bears. These are like adults almost, you know, they were. The health officers were the equivalent of freshman in college and, you know, but for recreation, they'd sort of wrestle. And for me, that's such culturally shocking, you know, to see students, two males.

VANN: [00:57:47] And they would also be holding hands, which at that time in the U.S., you would never see two males. Gay folks were really, really closeted and you'd never, ever, ever see two males holding hands in the U.S., particularly, I guess, where I lived in Indiana. And so you'd see guys holding hands all the time and you'd see women holding hands with their arms around each other. And again, it's more common now in the U.S., but at that time it was. I was just like, oh my gosh, what a weird behavior, you know?

BLOOM: [00:58:19] There was just camaraderie.

VANN: [00:58:20] Yeah, it was definitely camaraderie. And in Ethiopia, the women and men don't hold hands in public. They don't sit together at desks as students. It would always be, you know, males and females.

BLOOM: [00:58:37] I guess there's two things I want to ask you about from things you've said, so let me go back. I guess I'm really taken with this notion that you didn't have Ethiopian friends that weren't, um, did that never materialize, that you could say I had a good Ethiopian friend?

VANN: [00:59:02] Right. I would say, um, you know, Yanaguchi, who was our cook and maid, was somebody I knew very well. And um, Mengistu

actually, very interestingly, one day about two years ago, I walked into my office and I had an email from Mengistu. And that's. It was incredible. It was really incredible. Because particularly incredible since the war had happened in the interim. I was really sure that he would have been killed because, like I said, he was the kind of kid who got beat up on the playground. And not only was he still alive, but he was, he had a Ph.D., so he was doing quite well. He was still kind of wimping around a little bit, you know, saying, oh, I'm just an adjunct at the University of Cincinnati and, you know. But I thought, God, this sounds pretty good to me, you know? So he was doing quite well.

VANN: [01:00:23] And I asked him, you know, how his family was doing. And his brother had been killed. I said, Mengistu, I thought for sure you were dead, you know, you'd been killed in the civil war. He said, well, as a matter of fact, my brother was killed in the civil war and it was terrible, you know, and my family's gone and everything, but I'm still living. And I asked him about Yanaguchi, who was really the person I would love to have heard from, this woman who had a little child, four year old child, who she used to bring to work and everything. And he didn't know what had happened to her. So I'm not sure.

BLOOM: [01:01:03] So when did he email you?

VANN: [01:01:06] A couple of years ago. Yeah, yeah.

BLOOM: [01:01:10] Did you send emails back and forth?

VANN: [01:01:12] He was, yeah, we sent a few emails back and forth and he was basically just looking for a job in the U.S. and everything. But I guess the main thing was just to figure out, you know, wow, this kid, you know, who I haven't seen. And he was still calling me madam or something, you know? And I said, you know, Mengistu, we're really pretty close in age. We're like, probably, let's see, he was 15 and I was, what, 22. So actually, we're very close in age. And he also has a PhD.

BLOOM: [01:01:44] What was he teaching?

VANN: [01:01:48] He became a physical therapist, and he ended up going to, I think, Sweden or somewhere for training. And, um, you know, getting scholarships and everything and. Yeah, yeah. And so he was very grateful to Peace Corps for really helping him initially get started.

BLOOM: [01:02:08] Mm hmm. That's a great story.

VANN: [01:02:12] It was quite a shock, you know. It's the power of Google, you know? Yeah, it's wonderful.

BLOOM: [01:02:25] Did the international community that was there, did you form friendships with those people?

VANN: [01:02:30] Oh yeah, definitely. Yeah, yeah, that was really. That was really our source of social support, I would say. Yeah, yeah.

BLOOM: [01:02:44] On the weekends, did you stay on campus at your compound or did you go to Addis Ababa?

VANN: [01:02:50] Yeah, no, no. Our compound was actually off campus. There was a little, um, Gondar was a town of I'm thinking about 30,000 people at the time that I lived there. It was a provincial capital and definitely we stayed there all the time. There was no easy way to go out. I mean, you could fly, but we didn't have any money. It was a little. [tape break]

BLOOM: [01:03:17] Tape two, interview with Roberta Vann. OK, so we were talking about that you didn't actually have the materials for teaching the language that they would need for their profession.

VANN: [01:03:33] Yeah. Yeah, I mean, you know, so it was more literary, which was good because that's what I was comfortable with, having had only literary training. And some of the essays, I remember they read about Pele.

BLOOM: [01:03:49] The soccer player?

VANN: [01:03:52] The soccer player, yeah.

BLOOM: [01:03:52] He was around back then?

VANN: [01:03:53] Yeah, yeah. Yeah. And you know, and they would tell me interesting things. They would, um, they would share things with me and so forth. You know, I wish, I guess in retrospect that I'd had the knowledge that I have now, you know, I could have done a much better job. But on the other hand, I think they were in pretty good shape language wise too.

BLOOM: [01:04:16] I find it interesting that you said they already had some good skills.

VANN: [01:04:19] Yeah.

BLOOM: [01:04:20] And they didn't, they weren't shy in class. They would interact?

VANN: [01:04:25] Yeah, yeah, I think so. I think probably I had a mostly teacher centered class and nobody had told me that that was a bad thing in those days. That would seem to be the perfect way to do things. You know, so we weren't making the demands on them that we would now make on students. But, you know.

BLOOM: [01:04:49] How many classes did you teach?

VANN: [01:04:52] It's hard to remember. I'm sure I taught, you know, the health officers, the nurses and the sanitarians. And I don't, I really don't remember if it was every day that I taught all three classes. I think it was. I think I taught all of them every day, which didn't seem like much to me at that. You know, I thought, geez, three hours of work, a little preparation, you know? And actually, I did have a lot of time, um, to read and that sort of thing.

BLOOM: [01:05:25] How did you get books?

VANN: [01:05:27] How did I?

BLOOM: [01:05:28] How did you get books in English?

VANN: [01:05:30] Oh, there was something called a Peace Corps book locker at that time. Evidently in earlier years, not in the year that I went in, but in previous years, maybe it went back many years. There was something about the Peace Corps book locker, and they used to give Peace Corps volunteers a hundred books, a hundred paperbacks. You know, isn't that wonderful?

BLOOM: [01:05:52] That is so cool.

VANN: [01:05:52] But what happened was that, of course, we would hoard books and we'd hang on to books. And then in a town like Gondar, which had 30,000 people, in a country like Ethiopia, which had a large number of Peace Corps volunteers, you would have a large number of paperbacks floating about. And so, you know, that's where I read Exodus because somebody had it on their shelf. Jack Cahill had it on his shelf, you know, and so, oh, I haven't read that. But then we also luckily, we had a library. We were at a public health college, so we had a library, and many books were in English. So that's also where I read War and Peace, because that happened to be one of the books that was on the shelf. And, you know, it wasn't a huge selection, but I, you know, it was enough. It was really enough. And there's a lot of training around.

BLOOM: [01:06:50] How many Peace Corps volunteers were in Gondar?

VANN: [01:06:56] Four I think. Yeah, four of us.

BLOOM: [01:07:00] So you and Mary. And then what were the others doing?

VANN: [01:07:02] One. They were doing, I guess it would be called economic development. They were working with. They were trying to get people to do hides, to use hides for leather.

BLOOM: [01:07:19] Oh.

VANN: [01:07:20] You know, they previously, apparently the Ethiopians had thrown away their hides when they killed an animal and they were actually

developing this industry so that they would, you know, tan the hides. And they were very excited about it. Oh, I'm leaving out one Peace Corps volunteer. There were, there was one other Peace Corps volunteer. There were five of us. The other one was in smallpox eradication. So he was gone a lot. And I always thought, that's what I'd like to be in, smallpox eradication, you know, go out to the villages and everything. And I actually begged him one time to take me with him. I thought that would be really fun, but he wouldn't do it. So these other guys.

BLOOM: [01:08:05] [inaudible]

VANN: [01:08:05] I don't know. These other guys were often gone. But they would come in and, you know, they'd pop in and see us and that sort of thing. And one of the guys in the tanning business took the overseas, had an overseas subscription to Newsweek. It was on a really thin tissue-like paper and somebody had given this to him as a gift. And so every week he would, you know, this Newsweek would be passed around and we'd all read about news. We'd all read the Newsweek and read what was happening in Ethiopia sometimes, you know, like a bridge was blown up. I remember that, and the cholera epidemic. And you know, we didn't even know about this stuff and were reading about it in Ed's Newsweek.

BLOOM: [01:08:51] You know, it's interesting. In my year, Newsweek was sent to every volunteer.

VANN: [01:08:58] Oh.

BLOOM: [01:08:58] It was. We all had a subscription whether we asked for it or not. And I never read it before or since, but I was so glad to get it.

VANN: [01:09:05] Oh yeah, yeah.

BLOOM: [01:09:09] Was there a gender divide between the men and the women?

VANN: [01:09:12] Yeah, very much, very much.

BLOOM: [01:09:15] Can you talk about that?

VANN: [01:09:18] Yeah. Well, I sort of alluded to it a minute ago when I was talking about Bob who wouldn't take me out, and I was dying to experience what that was like to be in a real village with just a few little tukuls, these little huts, you know, totally isolated village. And, you know, I don't know if he thought it would be too difficult for me or, um, or what, but, um, too dangerous to, I'm not sure. But anyway, you know, or in fact, one of the things was the men. You were talking about did I have any close Ethiopian friends? The men did. The men would go play cards. They would hang out with other men. They would drink with men. Sometimes they would visit prostitutes. You know, it was very much a part, uh, there was a very much a strong male culture. And when you went into a restaurant or bar or whatever it was all men, and men were really, you know, they were out there.

VANN: [01:10:20] And so, yeah, the male Peace Corps volunteers had a very, um, I don't know if rich is the right word, but they had a very active involvement with Ethiopian men and would. In fact, that's, that was my. I would talk to the Peace Corps males, and I would get information about Ethiopian culture and what was it like and what did they do? And you know, so I was interviewing them. There was a downside, though, in that they got things like syphilis. They would drink out of streams and get sick. So they, um, one of our good friends walked in one day. My roommate was a nurse. So of course, when people were sick, they came to our house. And, you know, the little guy who worked for us, Mengistu, had a boil on his forehead one time Mary had to lance.

VANN: [01:11:17] Peace Corps volunteers would come in and one time Bob walked in and he had yellow, the whites of his eyes were yellow and so it was pretty clear that he had a hepatitis. And he ended up being isolated for months and months, being sent up to the medical hospital. There was a military base, an American military base, I don't know if you know that, with 5,000 American military.

BLOOM: [01:11:44] Five thousand?

VANN: [01:11:46] Five thousand, yeah. Nobody knows that. But in Eritrea. And so he was sent to that base and isolated for months on end. And, you know, it was from the kind of lifestyle they led, so they tended to be a lot sicker with much more serious diseases than we had. Malaria, hepatitis. Ascaris, well ascaris isn't too serious, I guess.

BLOOM: [01:12:13] It's what?

VANN: [01:12:13] It's parasites, worms, the kind that dogs get actually. Tapeworm. Bob had tapeworm. One time he walked in and announced, I have a tapeworm! One time Ed walks in and said, I have syphilis! And of course, the women are just getting fatter and fatter and having this totally boring life. But we've read War and Peace, three times. So that was kind of the, I would say that's sort of the picture of what it was like.

BLOOM: [01:12:51] This was surprising. Did you have a relationship with the Peace Corps administrators or the Peace Corps office at all?

VANN: [01:13:01] Not very much. Very little. We were so remote. One time, the Peace Corps doctor called us and told us that, um, oh, what's the? We had several big disease scares and one was cholera, and one was, I'm losing the word right now. This is a senior moment here.

BLOOM: [01:13:29] That's why we have to get your interview now.

VANN: [01:13:32] Yeah, right. Um. It's what you get from cows. Bristles. It's carried by cows.

BLOOM: [01:13:47] Mad cow disease is all I know but that was way before that.

VANN: [01:13:51] This is before mad cow disease. Anyway, it's very serious. Anyway, our Peace Corps doctor called us once and said, all right, there's a big epidemic. You've got to be really careful. This can be spread very easily. You know, that kind of thing.

BLOOM: [01:14:08] So you didn't have to go into the Peace Corps office periodically for shots and stuff like that?

VANN: [01:14:13] Um, no, because it was so, so, so far away. My roommate gave me rabies shots, like every six months she gave me a rabies shot and all other stuff, you know?

BLOOM: [01:14:29] Gamma globulin? We got those.

VANN: [01:14:30] Yeah, just we did it locally because I was at a medical college and I had a roommate who was a nurse. So my nurse roommate gave me everything.

BLOOM: [01:14:39] So in the time you were there, they didn't call all the volunteers together for a conference or to do anything?

VANN: [01:14:45] No. No.

BLOOM: [01:14:46] So then some of those volunteers you never saw again, that you saw during the training?

VANN: [01:14:50] Right, right. That's right. Yeah, I saw them at a reunion recently and I vaguely remember some of them from the initial training.

BLOOM: [01:15:05] How would you describe your relationships with your students?

VANN: [01:15:11] I felt it was a good relationship. You know, it was, it was probably not unlike other student relationships I've had, you know, it was probably a little more formal and more distant, but I would walk back to the dorm. You know, we walked back. Our classroom was across the street from where the dorms were, and maybe I would walk with them and talk to them and so forth. And I remember before I left the nurses that, there were a few women health officers, but very few. The health officer who was pretty much male. The sanitation group was all male and then the nurse group was all female. And they always said, oh, when you leave, can we have your clothes? Can we buy your clothes, you know?

VANN: [01:15:56] And you know, and we would talk about, we would talk about other. I would walk with the student and they would might say something

like, I remember one conversation I had. Tell me, in America, you're all very rich. Do you have just lots and lots of servants? And I said, we don't have servants at all. You don't? But you're so rich. And I said, well, you know, and they said something like, well, who does the dishes? And I said, well, we have machines that do the dishes. Machines that do the dishes? You know, so we'd have conversations like that where we would share one another's cultures. And, you know, they would tell me, I remember the first day I walked into class I was, they had prepared me for this a little bit. But the students' watches, many of the students had set their watch on Ethiopian time, their watches on Ethiopian time, and the first hour of the day is 6:00 a.m., you know. And so the watches are really set in a really odd way because 6:00 is like 1:00 or, you know, it's really odd.

VANN: [01:17:03] So you'd walk around proctoring a quiz and you'd see which students had set their watches on Ethiopian time and which students had set their watches by Western time. You know, but anyway, they would share things with me, and many of my students believed that Haile Selassie was God and, you know, was some sort of sacred being. And some of my students probably didn't believe that because, you know, a couple of years later, this big revolution. But that was probably kept under cover if they didn't. But, you know, my students would sometimes share with me, you know, how they felt about certain things. And we would talk or we would walk across campus together, that kind of thing, but um, but pretty formal in the sense that we didn't socialize together or anything.

BLOOM: [01:18:02] Did you go to faculty meetings or anything?

VANN: [01:18:05] You know, I don't ever remember. No, there were no faculty meetings at all. I really, in retrospect, you know, it seems very odd to me now as an academic. I didn't know what the world was like. I was just a kid and this is my first job. But I, my guess now is that the business about the CIA and so forth, I mean, I think they really wanted to keep us pretty isolated.

BLOOM: [01:18:32] Yeah. Did Mary feel that way too?

VANN: [01:18:37] I think so. She was in the ward and she was interacting with people, but I think all of us are, our main. Her main friend was a doctor, a British doctor. You know, so.

BLOOM: [01:18:50] Mm hmm. Was that, um, living with Mary, was that a nice setup, was it nice to have that or what was that like?

VANN: [01:19:00] Yeah, it was pretty good, I guess. Eventually, we actually went our separate ways, and I. She moved on campus with one of the doctors, and I went to Mussolini's officers' quarters, which I loved. They were these nice apartments and we always had hot water there. We always had water.

BLOOM: [01:19:20] That's also, yeah, one thing, did you have a bathroom?

VANN: [01:19:23] Yeah, we had a bathroom. But sometimes you'd turn on the taps and nothing came out of the faucets, you know? And during the dry season, it was very unpredictable. And so I would go up to town to the Peace Corps volunteer's house who was in smallpox eradication, take a shower at his house, you know? But then when, um, Mary decided she wanted to move out with Janet, who was a doctor, the British physician on campus. And so I moved up to the Mussolini's quarters. And that was a really good deal actually, it was quite nice. I liked living in an apartment and I liked, um, I liked having hot water all the time. And yeah, I don't know. I mean, I guess we were lonely in a sense, but I was kind of getting used to it by that time. You know, I mean, I think to be in Peace Corps is to have to grapple with loneliness on a certain level and, you know, to become introspective, to become reflective. To realize that, um, you know, that's, you work these things out. Maybe not by talking to somebody, but by writing in a journal or writing a letter. We wrote lots of letters and that kind of thing.

VANN: [01:20:41] And then we'd really look forward to visitors, you know, people, Peace Corps volunteers who were coming from another town. This was a big, we were in a big city, relatively speaking, and so people would come down from the Simien Mountains. We had two wildlife people up there and they really were wildlife people. They didn't shower for a month. They had

no access to mail whatsoever. So they'd come to Gondar. That's insane. They'd come to Gondar, take a shower at our house, you know, spend a couple of nights, get their mail. And you know, they would never have been our friends in the U.S., but they were our friends there because, you know. These were people who are obsessed with mountain goats and a special kind of Egyptian turkey vulture that was only in this part of the world. And, you know, I mean, they weren't exactly people we would have hung out with in college. They were classic nerds, you know, and people who were very comfortable not taking a shower for a month. And yet they were our friends. Oh, somebody is coming to visit us, oh great! So people were always sleeping on your floor, you know, and that kind of thing.

BLOOM: [01:22:00] Did you have a way to contact each other? Telegrams or no?

VANN: [01:22:06] No, no, we really didn't have any way. I guess we could have emailed each, or not emailed. Yes, right? I guess we could have written letters to each other. Well, no. The people in the mountains we couldn't have written letters to, because their mail they had to get in Gondar, you know. My roommate had friends among the nurses in other towns that I think she used to write letters to.

BLOOM: [01:22:31] So letter writing was it.

VANN: [01:22:33] Yeah, I think letter writing was pretty much it.

BLOOM: [01:22:36] Nothing with telegrams?

VANN: [01:22:38] I suppose they existed, but I never used any. Yeah.

BLOOM: [01:22:42] Tell me about getting letters from home. Who wrote to you, what was that like?

VANN: [01:22:49] Oh, my mother was the one who wrote. And um, and yeah, that was really, of course, very important. Packages were even better. Once in a while I'd get a package. My parents sent me a fruitcake at Christmas, which cost them a fortune to send. Yeah. You know, things like packages were really important and letters were really important. But I think I really

enjoyed writing letters, and I think it really, um, I think, like I say, I think that introspection, reflection, reflecting on what Peace Corps was like, what I was going through, trying to share the experiences.

BLOOM: [01:23:30] So you pretty regularly kept a journal?

VANN: [01:23:33] Oh, I would, not every day, you know, but definitely, definitely kept a journal. Yeah.

BLOOM: [01:23:39] Have you reread it since you've been home?

VANN: [01:23:42] I don't think so.

BLOOM: [01:23:46] Did your family keep your letters. Do you have them?

VANN: [01:23:49] Yeah, they did.

BLOOM: [01:23:50] Do you have them now?

VANN: [01:23:52] Yeah, right. Well, no, they, my mom still has them. Yeah, my mother still has the letter. Yeah, I'm really glad she did that. Yeah, I'm really glad.

BLOOM: [01:24:00] And you haven't read from them.

VANN: [01:24:02] No, I haven't. It would be fun to read them. Yeah.

BLOOM: [01:24:07] Um, and so once you got to Ethiopia, your mother kept up with you.

VANN: [01:24:17] Oh yeah, yeah, she was sending me blouses and fruitcake. Letters. Yeah. And I had another friend in New York who had been a housemate in college, and she would send me things like, um, Bon Appétit magazines, you know, things like that. And it was sort of a version of Bon Appétit, I don't know that it was. It wasn't real Bon Appétit, but and I would try to cook these things, which was really fun. It's extremely high altitude,

about three times the altitude of Denver, you know, so it was really a challenge to do things like make a soufflé.

BLOOM: [01:25:01] Yeah.

VANN: [01:25:03] You know, you'd keep cutting back, cutting back, cutting back on the leavening, any baking soda or anything. But at a point, for the altitude we were at, you'd be at a negative. And so it was really tricky to try to figure out, well, how do you deal with this? So there was, you know, to amuse myself, I would experiment with, can I make a soufflé at 10,700 feet, you know? Yeah. So it was, it was. Cooking was very, very interesting there actually.

BLOOM: [01:25:36] It's so funny because one of my questions to you was going to be, did you learn to cook there and did you go to market and what was that like?

VANN: [01:25:42] Oh, yeah, yeah. It was really, um, it was fun. And yeah, I did a lot of cooking. And um, at the Mussolini's apartment, I had no refrigeration and so I, but I learned something about meat there. I learned my, Yanaguchi was still, would come several times a week, and she would buy me a big slab of meat. The meat there had, of course, didn't have the cuts that we have. So you know, I thought these were universal, you know? And I quickly discovered, oh no, they don't cut beef the same way. And of course, we had no pork whatsoever because, as my students told me, only pagans eat pork, miss. All right. Got it. And I really missed bacon a lot. But anyway, so we're eating beef, and it was really, really, really, really lean beef because of course, these are beef that are out on the range and probably quite old. And they didn't cut it the way we cut it. So you just would go in and get a slab and you never knew what you were getting.

VANN: [01:26:54] But anyway, Yanaguchi bought me this piece of meat and I discovered that, you know, it was very dry there and you don't really need refrigeration. It would get this big, thick black crust on it. And I would cut the crust off and eat this meat, and it would, I would not get sick, strangely enough. So, yeah, I learned that refrigeration wasn't as important as I always thought it was. You know, of course, we never refrigerated eggs.

And, you know, all these things that I thought from living here had to be refrigerated, I found out didn't, you know? And yeah, I did a lot of serious cooking, I would say, having a lot of fun with that. One time we got really, um, this guy I told you about that was the smallpox eradication guy. We decided we were just, it was during the fasting period. It was during Lent. This is an Orthodox, it's a Coptic country, Coptic Christianity.

VANN: [01:27:57] They have a very long and very strict fasting period right before their Easter. And during that time, nobody eats any animal products at all. And certainly, we as foreigners could not buy animal products from any Christian butcher and the butcher shops were marked with a Coptic cross if it was Christian. We could buy from a Muslim butcher, but they were considered a little more risky. So I don't know if that was prejudice or whatever. So anyway, one time Yanaguchi, our maid, went to the market and said, OK, I will buy you a couple of chickens. Live chickens. The chickens there were like bannan roosters. Very tiny little things by American standards. And but Yanaguchi would not butcher them. Women were not allowed to butcher. And no Christian man would butcher. We didn't have anybody who.

VANN: [01:28:51] One time we butchered a goat. We had, you know, we got a guy to butcher a goat for us. We couldn't find anybody to butcher these chickens. So Yanaguchi arrives at my apartment, um, with these chickens, hands them to me. Of course, I'm totally afraid of chickens. So having grown up in a city, I don't know what to do with these chickens. So I say, OK, leave them in the entrance hall in this, you know, on the terracotta floors and stuff. So Bob arrives. Bob is the son of a Berkeley professor. He's spent most of his life sitting by the pool, you know, with the telephone by the pool, and you know, he has no idea how to slaughter anything. But we were both really kind of hungry for chicken. So he decides. Oh, actually, before Bob got there, there was another part of the story is the chickens.

VANN: [01:29:49] The chickens actually, Yanaguchi put them on the balcony. I had a cute little balcony and I thought, OK, they're on the balcony. I'm not going to worry about it. When Bob gets here, fine. And pretty soon I heard these little kids yelling up from the street. And I looked out. My chickens

were gone. The chickens actually had flown out into the street. And these little kids were all, you know, trying to express their alarm. You know, they knew these chickens had come off of this white woman's balcony, and this was obviously a big deal. I thought, you know, these kids, there would be nothing that would amuse them more than seeing this white woman running after these chickens trying to catch them. And I'm afraid of chickens anyway. I don't want to be pecked. I'm just, OK. Bad investment. I lost the chickens. You know, we'll just let them go.

VANN: [01:30:43] So pretty soon there was a knock at the door. These two little kids came, each cuddling a little chicken, you know. So I gave them some money, which of course they expected, and I left the chickens in the entrance hall at that point until Bob got there. When Bob got there, he took them out on the back porch or on the balcony and came back in with them dead. And I said, how did you, what did you do? He said, well, I didn't know what to do, so I rang their necks, you know, so he figured out something. And of course, I didn't know how to, um. Normally, I guess you're supposed. I now have learned you're supposed to put these chickens into boiling water and then, you know, pluck them. But I thought, I'll just take their little outfits off, you know, so I just like made a slit, you know? And so they were skinless chickens, which of course, now we eat that all. But at that time, nobody ate skinless chickens.

BLOOM: [01:31:42] And then you cooked them up for dinner?

VANN: [01:31:44] I just cooked them, yeah.

BLOOM: [01:31:45] Wow.

VANN: [01:31:45] One per person because they were about the size of a Cornish game hen. Yeah.

BLOOM: [01:31:56] And you haven't done that since?

VANN: [01:32:00] Cooked a live chicken? Yeah, no, no, definitely, definitely not. Definitely a Peace Corps experience. I'm sure Bob is not ringing any chicken necks lately either.

BLOOM: [01:32:09] Yeah, really. So you would go to the market and was there food to be had?

VANN: [01:32:19] Yeah. Oh yeah. We had both an open market and then we had stores in town that were owned, I think, by Muslims mostly. And they actually had even things like peanut butter, which of course, was very expensive. It would be like three ESIs, three Ethiopian dollars. And, you know, it's too much money for us to spend, but you could pretty much get, you could get a lot of stuff. You couldn't get milk there. Milk was very tuberculosis ridden. And so we had to use powdered milk and we had to make it with, um, boiled water and everything. We had to boil our own water and filter it. And, you know, we had to do a lot of, we had to Clorox our lettuce. And, you know, we had to do a lot of stuff to keep from getting sick.

VANN: [01:33:11] But um, yeah, we had a good situation with food and we got into Ethiopian food very early when we arrived. We told Yanaguchi, we want to eat Ethiopian food. She was a pretty good cook, you know, pretty experienced. We want to Ethiopian food every day for lunch and then we'll eat European food or whatever for the other meal. And so consequently, we got very fat, very fast, by eating two big meals a day.

BLOOM: [01:33:40] Did they eat like what you get at a restaurant with the?

VANN: [01:33:43] Right, the injera. Yeah, it's much stronger in Ethiopia. It's much more, um, fermented. It's a fermented, um, and so it would be gray instead of the pale blond like you get in the States. And it would have a lot of holes in it and be fermented for a very long time. Everybody has kind of a, they have a bucket. It's like a diaper pail with a cover on it and you ferment your teff for a very long time, like two weeks. And you know, it's much, much stronger. So the first time you taste the Ethiopian injera, you think, oh my gosh, it's so sour and so distasteful, you know? But the stuff in the U.S. actually tastes very pale and kind of bland. Yeah. And also the stew part, the wat, is extremely hot there and much milder here, just probably like with Thai restaurants. Yeah, it's much more watered down. Yeah. So it was a real shock during training to eat this food, but we. [tape break]

BLOOM: [01:34:57] How much did the Ethiopian culture, the kind of gender norms or just sort of human interaction norms, influence your daily life when you were there?

VANN: [01:35:12] Well, I mean, the gender norms. We had to wear, definitely at that time skirts were above the knee in the U.S., far above the knee in the U.S. And we wore it below the knee. We kept our arms covered. I had a very hard time doing any kind of physical activity. One time I got on a bike and Mengistu, my little house boy, said, miss! I didn't know girls could ride a bike. He really didn't. And I said, why? And he said, oh, I just didn't think they had what it took to ride a bike, whatever, you know. And I tried going on a bike ride once. It was very difficult. Walking through the street was even difficult.

VANN: [01:36:07] You know, typically you, little kids would yell at you and they would yell sharmuto, which is the Ethiopian word for prostitute. And they'd throw stones at you, you know, and that sort of thing. So it was kind of hard to do any physical outdoor. I'm a real outdoor physical sort of person and that was really hard for me, you know, not being able to get out and do stuff. But we did a little bit, you know, once in a while, we'd do some stuff. Yeah.

BLOOM: [01:36:38] Was it different on campus than in town?

VANN: [01:36:40] Oh yeah. On campus, it was fine. Yeah, yeah. It was a tiny little campus though, it wasn't like a university here. It was maybe like a real tiny little private college.

BLOOM: [01:36:57] What would you say the hardest part of being a Peace Corps volunteer is?

VANN: [01:37:05] I think maybe, I think maybe the gender differences and the just, like I like say, not being able to get out, I'm such an outdoor person and just not being able to do the things I was used to doing. I remember when I first got there, I decided. Our landlady had our rooms painted and we picked out the colors. And then I looked at my room and I said, oh, it's

way too pale, this yellow. I want a darker paint, I want a darker yellow, and I wanted it like the meskel flower, which was in bloom at that time. It was very bright yellow. So I said, what the heck? I'm just going to go down, buy the paint, and paint it myself. Well, we had these 15 foot ceilings and, you know, I had to stand on top of my wardrobe to do it, but it was no big deal. But these little kids would walk by and they would point and say, oh, *ferengi* is painting the wall. and they would laugh and they'd roll on the ground, and they'd just think that was the silliest thing. What in the world was I painting a wall for?

VANN: [01:38:09] And, you know, getting on a bike was a big deal. Taking a walk. Walking with another Peace Corps volunteer would definitely get me labeled as a prostitute. Having anyone stay in my home of the opposite sex would get me labeled as a prostitute. So, you know, it was just so many difficulties like that. I tried to dress conservatively and it was never enough, never ever enough.

BLOOM: [01:38:36] You couldn't go out for a beer.

VANN: [01:38:39] Oh, I didn't even think about it. Yeah, yeah. Right. I mean, even just the simplest thing was very difficult. I think that was the hardest part. Yeah.

BLOOM: [01:38:53] And the best part?

VANN: [01:38:57] Well, I think the best part was just being in another culture and just every day was something fascinating would happen, something, you know, something probably fairly trivial for them. But for me, you know, something really insightful and interesting. And you know, I mean, my journal is full of all kinds of interesting things that were happening every day, you know. And I remember one time our neighbors. I mean, there were so many difficult and painful things in Ethiopia, and one of the things was that people were very cruel to animals and this really disturbed me. Instead of taxis, we had horse drawn carts which were called *garis* in town, and that's how we got around. And these carts, with you know, these poor horses. It was very mountainous, you know, very high altitude,

very mountainous. And these carts would be full of all kinds of stuff and people and everything.

VANN: [01:39:52] And they'd have one little riding horse pulling it, and this horse would have sores and everything, and the driver would be whipping the horse. And it's just a lot of cruelty all around. And our neighbors kept a monkey chained to a tree and they tortured it by throwing rocks at it.

BLOOM: [01:40:13] Oh.

VANN: [01:40:14] And one time this monkey got loose. And of course, it began to run around our house and tried to get into our house. And we'd been warned by a Peace Corps doctor that monkeys were very often rabid and we really had to worry about rabies a lot. This monkey was trying to get into my bedroom, you know, and we had shutters on our house. So I'm shutting the shutters and then the monkey's very clever. Going to the next window, shutting the shutters, going to the next one, shutting the shutters. And, you know, I was fearing for my life because I knew this monkey, if he got me, he was going to try to kill me. And because he hated humans, he hated humans because he'd been tortured by humans all of his life, you know? And so there were, I mean, there were things like that that just would never, ever, ever, ever happen in an ordinary life, you know.

VANN: [01:41:06] So every day was interesting, I mean, I was never bored. I may have been lonely, but I was never bored. There was always something interesting. And you know, when I was living alone, these monks used to come and beg. And you know, they were these, they were like out of the Middle Ages. They were these ancient monks begging for food. And you know, there are just so many interesting. Pardon me?

BLOOM: [01:41:33] Are they Coptic?

VANN: [01:41:33] The Coptic monks, yeah, yeah. They are totally, they take vows of poverty. They are like the original monks and, you know, they live on whatever dried injera people toss them. And, you know, so every day was interesting and nothing was boring for me, and it was really an exciting,

exciting period. If difficult. I mean, certainly difficult, certainly very painful at times, but very interesting.

BLOOM: [01:42:08] Do you think you would have become a TESL teacher if you hadn't?

VANN: [01:42:16] Oh, no, I'm sure, I'm sure I wouldn't have.

BLOOM: [01:42:18] That's had a huge effect.

VANN: [01:42:20] Oh yeah, definitely. Yeah, I don't think I said that at the beginning of the tape, you know, what I'm doing now. I'm a professor of English as a second language. So yeah.

BLOOM: [01:42:39] When you think about the beginning of your service to when you left, what do you think were the biggest changes in you over that time?

VANN: [01:42:51] Oh, I just think definitely I matured and definitely I began to be capable of, you know, managing other people, being self-sufficient, figuring out how to do things. You know, like, what do you do when there's no water coming out of the tap? What do you do when your bookshelves are being eaten by termites? I mean, just, OK, what do you do when your kid has, the kid who's working for you has a snake or boils or whatever. And just all kinds of little everyday sorts of adjustments to make. And having to, even teaching, you know, just I felt like I was baptized by fire. You know, it was the kind of experience that probably would take a decade in the States to get. You know, I think most people don't have the kind of experiences that we had at least until their 30s. You know, the kind of managerial experiences and the kind of powerful experiences that we had. Yeah.

BLOOM: [01:44:16] You mentioned when we were talking not on tape. Do you want to pause for a second so you can take the dog out?

VANN: [01:44:24] Maybe we should. [dog barks] Yes, she says yes. Doggy has to go out.

BLOOM: [01:44:32] OK, let's see. Oh, we talked a little bit. You had mentioned to me once that you guys got to go on vacation while you were volunteers.

VANN: [01:44:44] Yeah, yeah. It was part of the deal in Ethiopia that they bought your ticket, instead of to Addis Ababa, to Nairobi because it was exactly the same price and everybody wanted to go to Nairobi obviously. So the big tradition there was to take one month off, we got one month vacation and to spend that one month on safari. And typically you went to Kenya, Uganda, and Tanzania. And I was in Uganda the summer that Idi Amin, you know, took over.

BLOOM: [01:45:18] Oh! Yeah.

VANN: [01:45:19] And of course, was totally oblivious to how dangerous it was. And we did hear that three Peace Corps volunteers were killed that summer, and we were kind of. You know, things were starting to happen and we were, you know, but we just assumed it was some aberration. And, you know, we went to Entebbe. And of course, a couple of months after we were in Entebbe, the Peace Corps volunteers were captive, held captive there.

BLOOM: [01:45:49] That was close.

VANN: [01:45:50] That was in October. I had been there in July. Yeah. My mother was saying, oh, I'm so glad you're not there now. And I was saying, oh, but that's such a wonderful hotel. If you're going to be held captive, it's a great place. Um. Yeah. Murchison Falls was wonderful. We stayed in a tent and heard the hippos munching at night and the lions roaring and everything. It was fabulous. It was. It's still today is the most fabulous vacation I've ever had in my life. And there were six of us on this and, you know, I'm still in contact with most of those people actually. So a very interesting experience. That's the capital of Uganda at that time was a wonderful, bustling, sophisticated place. And of course, isn't any longer so. It was really interesting to watch the Last King of Scotland.

BLOOM: [01:46:59] I think I need to rent that. Yeah, I need to do that. Let's see. And you said you haven't been back to Ethiopia since?

VANN: [01:47:11] I haven't been back to Africa at all. No. One of my friends has. One of my friends from Gondar has, and he's told me all about it. So it's really interesting.

BLOOM: [01:47:23] Is that in the retirement goals to get there or do you have a desire to get there at this point in your life?

VANN: [01:47:28] I don't know. I have mixed feelings about it, you know. I think it's difficult to go back to places you've been, you know? Yeah. Particularly when I read, I read a book, you know, and I was reading about Dire Dawa in it. It just, I thought I just couldn't bear to go back there and see how it's changed in a negative way. Because when we were there, we were so optimistic. And you know, it was this period where we believed the world was going to change for the better, and it was only going to take a few years. And, you know, these books were coming out, the greening of the world or whatever. And, you know, we were very optimistic and we certainly never, ever, ever, I think, dreamed that things would get worse rather than better because they were pretty bad. You know, how could they get any worse? So I think. But apparently the health colleges are booming. You know, Gondar is a much bigger city. You know, some things have gotten better.

BLOOM: [01:48:34] What would you say your biggest achievements were as a PCV?

VANN: [01:48:41] Well, I don't know that I achieved anything for the people there. I mean, I guess, um, you know, I did a decent job teaching and maybe some of the people who were my students think I did a decent job. I don't know. Mengistu, obviously, is very grateful to Peace Corps in general. His life was certainly enhanced by our presence, and I think for me, the best thing was what it did for me. And, you know, how that's influenced my life.

BLOOM: [01:49:26] Are there any things that you have written down that you wanted to make sure you got to talk about?

VANN: [01:49:33] Oh, probably not. No, I don't think so. No, it's OK.

BLOOM: [01:49:45] One of the questions that the Peace Corps asks is to think about your Peace Corps years in light of the three goals of Peace Corps. To think about whether those were part of, you know, how you think about your service. So did you feel like you provided technical assistance? So you already mentioned you did your best teaching.

VANN: [01:50:08] Yeah, you know, I guess it was OK. Actually, when I left, an Ethiopian took over my job, and so I felt really good about that. I think the job that I was doing actually could have been done by an Ethiopian. Maybe my students got some cultural insights they wouldn't get from an Ethiopian. But other than that.

BLOOM: [01:50:33] And that would be cultural in terms of understanding the U.S. in different ways.

VANN: [01:50:35] Sure. Yeah, sure. Yeah. I mean, it was probably interesting for them to have a pink, a pink person as they called me. They said, this one kid would say, miss? What do they call you, white? You are pink. You know, so I think it's always interesting for cultures to have interaction in that way, but I wouldn't say that I gave Ethiopia anything special. I would say they gave me much more.

BLOOM: [01:51:12] Um. Have you had students from Ethiopia? Have you had any experiences here where you've been able to call on what you experienced there in your work here?

VANN: [01:51:28] Interestingly enough, I haven't had very many students from Ethiopia. When I go to D.C. it's really fun because there are tons of Ethiopians and sometimes I, you know, I'll exchange a greeting or so and talk to them. I immediately can spot Ethiopians wherever I go. And I say, oh, you're Ethiopian, are you? Or usually I just go up and say *tena yistilin*, you know? And interestingly enough, when I gave birth, I was in a, um, afterwards I was in a room in Ames, Iowa, you know, in the hospital. And I looked over and I said, oh yeah, I got an Ethiopian roommate. And she

was from Eritrea. I said, you're Ethiopian. She said, well, actually I'm Eritrean, which is, you know, a little sensitive.

BLOOM: [01:52:14] Aren't they at war? Yeah.

VANN: [01:52:15] Well, but it's part of, yeah, part of the whole scene. And so we had fun. We had a lot of fun talking about. And she taught me a lot of interesting things about, you know, what it's like. She said, now when you go home, you don't do a thing for a month. And she warned me against doing dishes or anything. I was supposed to be completely at leisure. And so we had a lot of fun conversations about that. And you know, that was interesting for me because, you know, obviously, and for her too, because I'd had this contact and I was, she didn't feel as isolated as I'm sure she felt she would feel. She probably looked over, said, oh, a white woman, you know, a white American, what am I going to be able to talk to her about? And we ended up talking about all kinds of neat things, you know? But I guess mostly when I go to D.C., I really have had some great conversations with Ethiopians there, and some of whom I actually knew when I was in Ethiopia.

BLOOM: [01:53:17] Oh.

VANN: [01:53:19] There's one woman who owns an Ethiopian restaurant who was actually a Peace Corps secretary when we were there. So, yeah, in D.C., it's a different situation. Two of my old Peace Corps friends are there. But here, probably not. And I don't think I've ever had an Ethiopian student the whole time I've taught.

BLOOM: [01:53:42] So you've met Yawl?

VANN: [01:53:42] No, I don't think so. Uh uh. Unless she's the one from Eritrea.

BLOOM: [01:53:49] No, she's not. She's definitely not.

VANN: [01:53:53] Oh, I did meet one Ethiopian here. That's right. I did. Yeah, yeah, I did meet one Ethiopian couple of names since I've been here. And

yeah, I mean, you know, you have some rich conversations that you wouldn't have otherwise, but no students.

BLOOM: [01:54:07] Have you kept up with, you said there was a Peace Corps reunion, your group?

VANN: [01:54:12] Yeah.

BLOOM: [01:54:13] Yeah. So you've kept up in some ways with those.

VANN: [01:54:15] Yeah. Well, it was kind of a, I think it was the internet that enabled that. People, when that site was started, people put, and in fact, that's how Mengistu got in touch with me. And then we decided, somebody in D.C., again, another Peace Corps volunteer from our group in D.C., decided he would have a reunion. So yeah. That was fun. That was interesting.

BLOOM: [01:54:40] That was when?

VANN: [01:54:40] That was last year, actually.

BLOOM: [01:54:43] It was the first one?

VANN: [01:54:43] Yeah, yeah.

BLOOM: [01:54:44] Wow.

VANN: [01:54:45] Yeah, yeah. So, of course, all these young, handsome people are now old and not so handsome anymore.

BLOOM: [01:54:54] It's really something.

VANN: [01:54:58] And you know, several people are gone from our group.

BLOOM: [01:55:02] Are you a member of the returned volunteers, RPCV?

VANN: [01:55:06] I don't think I am. You know, I get mailings. Yeah.

BLOOM: [01:55:18] Do you think of yourself now, and what would you say, can you articulate what you think being a volunteer did most for you? If you think of yourself now? So you talked about it at the end of service, but what's it meant in your life?

VANN: [01:55:39] Yeah, I think it, I think it gives you confidence. I think it gives you a perspective on the world. And I think, in fact, I often. I often say to my husband that I wish George Bush, you know, had been in Peace Corps. I think he'd be a different, different person. Because I think a lot of people just don't get it. You know, they just don't get the world.

BLOOM: [01:56:18] I think now of the global food crisis and how much of it we've caused.

VANN: [01:56:22] Right, yeah.

BLOOM: [01:56:24] And there's no sense of what that means. I mean, it's awful hearing them [inaudible] but it's so wide scale in other parts in Africa and Haiti and the government, there's no conception of what that means.

VANN: [01:56:39] Yeah. Yeah. And I really think, you know, if you experienced it firsthand, it makes a huge difference. And just the, I think the whole notion of realizing that people don't think about the world in the same way. You know, my students would say, how can you talk about loving french fries? You can talk about loving God or loving your father, but how can you talk about loving french fries? I think just being confronted with these different ways of looking at the world at a fairly young age, it's really important because it just makes you realize, hey, you know, there's another way to look at things. It's not. It's not necessarily the way I look at things. So I think being kind of jerked out of my own way of thinking and, whoa, never looked at it that way. You know, that sort of feeling was really important for me to have that experience at a young age. You know, that maybe there were different perspectives.

BLOOM: [01:57:41] So a 21 year old, not your daughter, comes to you and says, I'm thinking of joining the Peace Corps, Dr. Vann, what do you think?

VANN: [01:57:50] Oh, I always, I'm always, I'm very encouraging of students. I've talked a lot of students into doing that or something similar, you know? Yeah, I think I talked to a student last year into doing Teach for America, and her parents were very much against it, again, you know. And I really talked hard to get her to do it, you know, and I'm sure her parents hate me for it. But she did it. She's doing it right now. And yeah, I've talked several people into doing Peace Corps as well. Yeah.

BLOOM: [01:58:26] Is there anything else you want to say that I haven't thought to ask or that hasn't been asked that you want to share?

VANN: [01:58:36] Probably not. My daughter is thinking of joining the Peace Corps.

BLOOM: [01:58:40] Yes!

VANN: [01:58:41] Yes, she is. She actually got accepted, in fact. I'm not sure it's right for everybody. You know, I don't want to be like my mom. I'm not going to disown her. But I think some people probably are going to have not such a positive time. And I think also Africa is a very different place now than it was when we were there.

BLOOM: [01:59:06] So who knows where she'd get sent to?

VANN: [01:59:09] She would get sent to French speaking Africa. That's why they want her. Yeah. She's French speaking.

BLOOM: [01:59:17] Oh, OK. Sure. We had a guy in our group who had a degree in African studies and spoke French and they sent him to Thailand.

VANN: [01:59:24] They used to do that. They don't do that.

BLOOM: [01:59:26] They don't do that anymore? OK.

VANN: [01:59:27] No, when they found out she spoke French, they immediately.

BLOOM: [01:59:31] They just wanted to gobble her up.

VANN: [01:59:32] Moved her to the top of the list and started telling her she would go to West Africa and she would be in a French speaking country and she would be teaching ESL. And what's made her hesitate, actually, is that she doesn't enjoy teaching very much. She's already teaching ESL and she doesn't enjoy it. And you know, there doesn't seem much of a chance for her to do something like, you know, smallpox eradication or, I don't know, whatever it is, you know. It's just going to be classroom.

BLOOM: [02:00:04] Administrative.

VANN: [02:00:06] Classroom stuff and, you know.

BLOOM: [02:00:07] Mm hmm. OK.

VANN: [02:00:13] I think we did it.

BLOOM: [02:00:14] Yeah, I think we did it. Very good.

VANN: [02:00:16] Thanks, Peace Corps.

BLOOM: [02:00:19] Hello, JFK Library.

VANN: [02:00:21] Yeah, right.

[END OF INTERVIEW]