

Julia Mehrer Oral History Interview
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Administrative Information

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Biographical Note

Julia Mehrer served as a Peace Corps volunteer in Ecuador from 1963 to 1964 on a community development project.

Access

Open.

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Oral History Interview

with

Julia Mehrer

April 19, 2002
Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

By Robert Klein

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

KLEIN: [00:00:03] Today is April 19, 2002. This is Bob Klein, and I'm interviewing Julia Mehrer, who was a Peace Corps volunteer in Ecuador in 1963. And the story goes on from there. So let's go back to maybe '61, '62. What was going on in your life before you came into the Peace Corps?

MEHRER: [00:00:30] Well, I was in college then and of course I hadn't heard of the Peace Corps because it hadn't got started till '61. But I had been, my father was a career Army officer and all of my male relatives seem to have been in the Army or Marines or one branch of the service or the other. So I moved around a lot and I really enjoyed traveling. And when the Peace Corps started, I thought, that sounds like an interesting way to travel, and maybe I'll be able to do something that would help other people somewhere else, even though I really wasn't a qualified finish carpenter or mathematician or.

KLEIN: [00:01:13] Or where were you physically in '61, say?

MEHRER: [00:01:17] University of Maryland in College Park, Maryland, outside of D.C.

KLEIN: [00:01:21] Studying?

MEHRER: [00:01:23] My major was English, and minor was psychology.

KLEIN: [00:01:27] OK. And you had grown up with, had you spent time overseas?

MEHRER: [00:01:35] We lived in Japan when I was, right after the Second World War, from '48 to '50. We lived in Japan. And the rest of the time we'd moved around the United States. I don't know how many, I think I went to more than 12 schools in 12 years. And you know, my mother, however, was one of these people who tells her children, it's great. We're going to go to this great new place and you'll meet great new people. And everything will be interesting and fascinating, and you'll learn lots of stuff and you can always keep in touch with your friends by writing and we'll eventually be stationed at an Army post again with the same friends. And that happened. And to me, it was wonderful. There were a lot of Army wives who were very negative about the ordeal of having to pack up all your belongings time after time and get things broken and move the kids to new schools. But a lot of what you grow up with is influenced by the way your parents present it to you, I think.

KLEIN: [00:02:44] Yeah. So you must have developed the skill of moving into new situations and meeting people.

MEHRER: [00:02:49] I suppose so, yeah.

KLEIN: [00:02:50] Were you very shy or?

MEHRER: [00:02:54] I don't know how to describe myself. No, I'd say I was fairly outgoing at first in new situations. I guess I would sit back and take stock of what was going on before I would. I do not like to stand and never have liked to stand up in front of other people and make announcements. Now I

usually arrange to have somebody else do that if it needs to be done. But I am outgoing and like other people and meet people easily.

KLEIN: [00:03:23] So you went, you started. You were attending University of Maryland.

MEHRER: [00:03:27] Right.

KLEIN: [00:03:28] Were you at the same school for the four years?

MEHRER: [00:03:30] No. I went to Mary Washington University. Mary Washington College at the University of Virginia in Fredericksburg for the first year. And at that time it was very First Family of Virginia oriented, and I hated it and couldn't wait to get out. And at the University of Maryland, it was a big university and nobody cared whether I was First Family of Virginia or whether I failed or passed, and it was just fine with me.

KLEIN: [00:03:57] And then you were living at the university, I mean, you were resident in the university area.

MEHRER: [00:04:00] I lived at. For the first two years of college, I lived in the dorms, and after that I lived with my grandparents in Washington, D.C., and commuted to finish the last two years of college.

KLEIN: [00:04:13] During high school, extracurricular activities? Do you recall?

MEHRER: [00:04:20] A lot of church-oriented things. In high school, I was fortunate enough to spend the last three years of high school in one place, and it was a place that had a lot of activities for young kids in Fort Monroe, Virginia, near Hampton and Norfolk, Newport News. And I was very active in church related things and in the teen club and Girl Scouts. And one or two things the last year in high school at school, like Future Voters of America.

KLEIN: [00:04:53] Any vacation travel outside the country?

MEHRER: [00:04:57] No, we didn't do that in those days, flights. We didn't just hop on a plane. And actually my very first airplane flight was as a Peace Corps trainee going up to New York for orientation. But we didn't, my folks didn't vacation a whole lot. I mean, the only vacations they took were to visit family. So we did drive down to Tennessee to see my father's folks, or up to Washington to see my mother's folks. But we didn't have vacations.

KLEIN: [00:05:25] During the three years then at Maryland, did you study foreign language?

MEHRER: [00:05:32] Yes. I had well, actually, I'd had three years in high school of French, and then I took French first year at Mary Washington and did so terribly poor in it, poorly in it. So I decided, well, if I have to start over again, why don't I start over in Spanish? So I started with Spanish and I took two and a half years, a half year more than I had to, in Spanish at the University of Maryland. I really enjoy languages and always have even though I've never been really outstanding in them.

KLEIN: [00:06:04] Yeah. Was it a cultural thing, I mean, or was it just the fascination of knowing another language?

MEHRER: [00:06:12] I don't know. I don't know. It's just, maybe just another language, as languages have always interested me. But now it's my fascination with languages, getting to know the culture as well.

KLEIN: [00:06:28] Yeah. As you, well, '61, '62. Do you recall any awareness of politics of Kennedy becoming president and of the Peace Corps itself getting going?

MEHRER: [00:06:46] Well, yes, of course. I remember there was a big hoo-ha about the first Catholic president, and a lot of people thought that maybe the Pope would control the United States, but obviously the majority of people didn't feel that way. My family was very, coming from a career military family, they were very Republican and not at all Democratic. And it was before you could, one could vote as an 18 year old. I had to wait till I was 21 to vote.

KLEIN: [00:07:17] Yeah.

MEHRER: [00:07:18] And nevertheless, Kennedy was elected. And I was not very active. I wasn't active at all in politics and I didn't pay a whole lot of attention. But living within the Beltway, you still hear a lot of things. I did come within 30 feet of Kennedy one time. We were, a girlfriend and I, were going to the Army-Navy game and we had dates with cadets afterwards. And when the game had finished, unfortunately, Navy winning because Roger Staubach was the Navy quarterback for so long. Marcia and I walked over to where we were going to meet our dates after the games, just before it was finishing, and Kennedy as president was there and he was leaving just before the game was over. Probably fairly happy given the outcome.

KLEIN: [00:08:10] Yeah.

MEHRER: [00:08:10] And his limo, which was an open convertible, passed right in front of us, just about 30, 20, 30 feet away. And he was alone in the back seat and he looked over at us and smiled. And it was so strange, because I looked at Marcia and I said, that's the president, and we could have shot him. And in retrospect, it was, I mean, I actually said that because we were so close to him and there was no one between us. And not that I, you know, no, obviously. And it was just that I thought he would have had more protection than that. I suppose in a place that was totally populated by cadets and midshipmen, there wasn't much need for it. But anyway, that was my big encounter with big time.

KLEIN: [00:09:03] So you were due to graduate in June of '63.

MEHRER: [00:09:08] Uh, yes. And Lyndon Johnson, who was vice president, spoke at my graduation. Don't remember a thing he said, but I remember that he spoke there. And usually in the summers after between my college years, I taught horseback riding at a little camp in western Virginia, which was just wonderful. They don't realize it, but I would have paid to have done this. And it was so much fun. But they actually paid me. But that was the one year that I decided it was probably the last summer that I'd ever have free in my life to do anything I wanted to. So I didn't sign up to work that

summer, and I did a lot of hiking with my friends in the trail club. I belonged to the Terrapin Trail Club and we did hiking and rock climbing and a little caving. They did a lot of caving. I did just a little. And we traveled up to Mount Katahdin to meet some friends who were hiking the Appalachian Trail from Georgia to Maine. And traveled down to Tennessee to do hiking. And it was a lot of fun. It was a very busy summer.

KLEIN: [00:10:25] But as of graduation, what did you look forward to, looking ahead?

MEHRER: [00:10:30] Well, I had, before I graduated, I applied. I had applied to the officer's training school for the Air Force at my father's suggestion, and I had also applied to the Peace Corps.

KLEIN: [00:10:50] Hedging your bets.

MEHRER: [00:10:52] Well, I really wasn't very interested in going into the military.

KLEIN: [00:10:55] Oh, OK.

MEHRER: [00:10:57] But I was very interested in this new Kennedy program of traveling overseas. I didn't know what they required. I didn't know if you had to be a specialist or be smarter than I was or more knowledgeable in some field, but it sounded very interesting from the little I'd heard about it. And of course, by that time, people hadn't come back. So it was hard to know, hear from somebody who had been overseas. I qualified for OCS and then I dropped that much to my father's dismay, and really was interested in going into the Peace Corps. I finally was accepted in the Peace Corps after a very long process during which they went back to every place I'd ever lived, I think, and talked to everybody I'd ever known and my parents had ever known.

KLEIN: [00:11:52] In those days, there was an entrance exam. There was a lengthy questionnaire application, and there were also six letters of recommendation and background. So they did the background checking.

MEHRER: [00:12:08] Oh, they did. As a matter of fact, I had other friends who were applying to work in Peace Corps Washington or applying to work in the Peace Corps, and they ended up interviewing them and their families about me, and me and my family about them. Separate people. But they offered me a position. This is the way it worked in those days. They offered me a position as a trainee in the Philippines, which was not where I had wanted to go. I had wanted to go in the Inca area of South America, the Peruvian Andes.

KLEIN: [00:12:44] Why?

MEHRER: [00:12:45] Just a fascination with the native peoples. I had become interested at camp, at the camp I taught, in Indian lore and in the American Indians and in the South American Indians.

KLEIN: [00:12:59] Oh OK. And how did your family react to your moving more toward the Peace Corps?

MEHRER: [00:13:06] Oh, I think my father felt well as long as it's a job, and my mother was behind me 100 percent. She didn't know what Peace Corps was, but she had confidence in my ability to make a decision and to do what I felt was the right thing.

KLEIN: [00:13:25] Your siblings, older, younger?

MEHRER: [00:13:26] I have younger brothers. And there was one two years younger who was in West Point at the time. And I think he didn't think much about my decisions. And then the other brothers were 12 and 14, 15 years younger than I. So they were very small. So when they accepted me. They didn't accept me, but they accepted me as an applicant for the Philippines program. And I said, OK. It sounded interesting, and my mother had been born in the Philippines, as an army brat. So she had some of her friends check out the current situations in the Philippines, which was better then than now. And they said, well, it could be very tough, could be hard living, but I knew that it was not going to be luxurious living no matter where I went.

KLEIN: [00:14:21] Do you remember if it was a program to be a teacher aide?

MEHRER: [00:14:24] I think so. I think so. And then they decided, Peace Corps decided, that they had too many volunteers in the Philippines, that they were flooding that country, so they canceled the whole program. So I wondered what was going to happen to me. And this was about the time that I was graduating with no job. And then, so I, instead of getting the job, I was going to spend the summer waiting to hear from the Peace Corps and doing some hiking and seeing friends and things like that. So I waited and then finally, after several very long months, they offered me a job in Colombia, which again was one of the first countries they went into in 1961, right as an urban Peace Corps volunteer. And I turned them down. I said, I don't want to be urban. I want to be rural. I have no interest in going to a city. I guess I was getting a little too big for my britches here. But they said, OK, well. They made it clear that it was acceptable to do that, and that didn't mean that I was out of their consideration.

KLEIN: [00:15:33] Oh, OK. Did you do you remember taking a language exam as part of the application process?

MEHRER: [00:15:42] We're reaching way far back now.

KLEIN: [00:15:44] I mean, as far as you can remember.

MEHRER: [00:15:46] I don't think I was given one unless it was, I think maybe there was a written language exam. It wouldn't have been an oral one, but there may have been.

KLEIN: [00:15:56] Well did you feel you were at all qualified in Spanish?

MEHRER: [00:16:00] I don't know. I was not. I had never had a course in Spanish conversation, so I had never had conversations with anybody. But I had book learning for five semesters, you know, four of language and then a fifth semester of poetry and literature.

KLEIN: [00:16:21] Right. So but your interest was in Spanish speaking Latin America, personally?

MEHRER: [00:16:29] Right.

KLEIN: [00:16:30] And a rural, preferring a rural not an urban assignment. So you said no to Colombia.

MEHRER: [00:16:37] And then one of my friends who was in the D.C. area, who was applying to work at Peace Corps Washington, was interviewed about my background, because they had known me since I was a baby. She and her father and her mother. And they mentioned something about rural versus urban, and the interviewer told her that I was going to be offered very soon a position I definitely would take. And she relayed that to me. I thought, well that's interesting. Why don't they tell me?

KLEIN: [00:17:18] I mean, it's so personal too I mean.

MEHRER: [00:17:20] Yeah. So they did offer me the position in rural Ecuador in community development. So I said yes. And by then, I was really hoping that I was going to get something.

KLEIN: [00:17:34] Yes. And when was this, October, November?

MEHRER: [00:17:38] It was probably September or August. It seemed like forever when you're waiting for the job to come through.

KLEIN: [00:17:47] But you hadn't considered chucking it and doing something else? You were would just sort of holding out for the.

MEHRER: [00:17:53] I was holding out for it because the more I thought about it, the more it seemed like something that would be, that I would like. I thought, well, maybe I'll have to go back and get teaching credentials and teach or something. But even though I majored in English, I had no intention of teaching. I enjoyed the literature. I liked languages. The basic study of English helped a little bit with other languages. And I really didn't want to be a teacher.

KLEIN: [00:18:22] Right. But you hadn't thought of applying to graduate school or?

MEHRER: [00:18:26] I wouldn't have known what I would study in. Advice from another friend was don't ever go to graduate school in the same thing you went to undergraduate school in. But no, I think I'd had enough of college for a while, enough of studies for a while, and I wanted to get out in the real world and do something. And international travel had been a fascination ever since I lived in Japan and had not done very much. We had been.

KLEIN: [00:18:56] How old were you when you lived in Japan?

MEHRER: [00:18:58] Seven, eight and nine. In the trail club, we got as far as Quebec. And we, I mean, it was French speaking. So we had experiences with another language there.

KLEIN: [00:19:14] Yeah. The invitation finally comes. And what was the invitation to? I mean, Ecuador.

MEHRER: [00:19:23] Ecuador. Rural community action. And I didn't know what community action was. And frankly, the Peace Corps didn't know what community action was in those days.

KLEIN: [00:19:31] Right. Then you're told to report to training. Am I right?

MEHRER: [00:19:38] I was told that I would be sent tickets and I would be sent tickets to New York City, where we would all be gathered together for orientation into what is the Peace Corps and what you're getting into. In retrospect, it seems to me that this is a very good idea because you can weed out people at that stage and not cost the Peace Corps quite so much if they realize that they're going to go to a country that doesn't speak English. Perhaps they didn't realize that before. But nobody quit then. We were 56 people.

KLEIN: [00:20:13] Where did you go? Where did you stay?

MEHRER: [00:20:16] In a hotel in New York City. I don't know the name.

KLEIN: [00:20:19] And the meetings were at the hotel?

MEHRER: [00:20:20] Yeah.

KLEIN: [00:20:21] And was the entire group for Ecuador?

MEHRER: [00:20:27] Yes.

MEHRER: [00:20:28] Both urban and rural Ecuador, some of us. And they said the lines weren't very clearly drawn. They might move some urban people into rural and vice versa. Which was a problem later when we began to plan our clothes to go overseas. Because the urban people in Guayaquil, where it's 90 degrees and 100 percent humidity all the time, had brought clothes for the Andes, which didn't work out, but anyway. It was urban and rural, and they said that you might be changed. I had a pretty good idea that I wouldn't be changed because I had made such a big point about being rural.

KLEIN: [00:21:10] What was the male female break in the group, do you remember particularly?

MEHRER: [00:21:14] No, I don't. There were quite a lot of both. I think we were 56 people or 65 people. I think probably 56.

KLEIN: [00:21:23] For the most part in early to mid-twenties?

MEHRER: [00:21:27] Yes. There was one girl who had not finished college. She was 20. There were several, including my first husband, my current husband, who is, um, who had finished graduate school. But I don't think anybody was older than 25.

KLEIN: [00:21:47] Right. Were there married couples in the group?

MEHRER: [00:21:49] Yeah, there were six married couples who started training.

KLEIN: [00:21:52] Yeah. So how long were you in New York?

MEHRER: [00:21:56] Just three days and this happened to be. We were convened there November 23rd, 1963.

KLEIN: [00:22:04] Ah yes.

MEHRER: [00:22:04] And while we were on a break, we were walking around the streets and people had the strangest. People you'd never talked to in New York, where people don't talk to strangers, would say the president's been shot and newsstand people would just throw up their hands. People were crying on the streets. And we. I went back to the hotel room, not knowing, not believing it. Not knowing what to do. I went back to the hotel room and everybody, this was a suite with three bedrooms and six people in it, and everybody was gathered around the television, watching the news and watching what was happening. Um, one girl with a very tall beehive hairdo that we thought she will never maintain this hairdo throughout the whole term - and she did - was weeping and she cried. She cried for hours and the rest of us were just staring at each other wondering what to do. We didn't know each other. We had no, we had just met. It was very strange. And the question came up, would they cancel the Peace Corps? Would they cancel our project? Were we going home tomorrow?

KLEIN: [00:23:21] Yeah, interesting. Did you did you call home, do you remember?

MEHRER: [00:23:24] No. In those days, we didn't call home a lot. Even 10, 15 years ago, we didn't call a lot. They had the same news we had. I would have had to call if I wasn't going to go overseas. We were getting ready to go to Puerto Rico, and two days later, we did.

KLEIN: [00:23:45] During the day or the day after, before you went to Puerto Rico, was there an official Peace Corps spokesman? There must have been someone who was calling the shots or directing what you were doing.

MEHRER: [00:23:58] Yes.

KLEIN: [00:23:58] Did they deal with Kennedy's death or?

MEHRER: [00:24:02] Well, yeah. They said, we will be going ahead. The Peace Corps is not canceled. And they just told us what you would get on the news that, you know, there would be an official 30 day period of mourning and something about the burial, the funeral, and that we would be going to Puerto Rico as planned. And um, that was pretty much it, I mean.

KLEIN: [00:24:32] Now, what was the purpose of going to Puerto Rico?

MEHRER: [00:24:36] Training. Not because it was where we were going was going to be hot, but what they did in those days. I don't know if the first groups went through this for Ghana, but we had Outward Bound training. And I guess I don't have the time to go into what Outward Bound training is.

KLEIN: [00:24:58] Well, that's OK. Yeah, I think it's.

MEHRER: [00:25:02] Everybody understands.

KLEIN: [00:25:02] Yeah.

MEHRER: [00:25:04] We went to Camp Crozier. There were two camps in the mountains, Radley and Crozier, in the mountains near Arecibo. And we had. They were set up sort of like army barracks. There were several cabins which held about 12 people and they had screens on them, which usually worked. But we had lots of bugs come in too. And it was in a rainforest. So there were lots of bugs. It was always wet. When you got into your bed at night, it was damp. The sheets were damp. We got up and we did calisthenics. We had to run a mile before breakfast. We had serious physical training and even more so emotional and mental training, as well as five hours a day of Spanish.

KLEIN: [00:25:56] Oh, OK.

MEHRER: [00:25:57] That was the beginning. And then the training went on for a total of four months and we had five hours a day of Spanish, every day.

KLEIN: [00:26:04] All of this in Puerto Rico.

MEHRER: [00:26:05] No, no. This is just the beginning. We had one month in Puerto Rico, three weeks in Outward Bound, and then we were put for one week in a community with two or three other Peace Corps trainees where they were doing construction. And we were supposed to help with the construction, which we had no training in. But maybe it was for language skills. I don't really know why they did this.

KLEIN: [00:26:31] Did you live with the family at that time?

MEHRER: [00:26:33] Yes.

KLEIN: [00:26:33] That may have been the language training. While you were in Puerto Rico with the Outward Bound training, was there a sense and with the intensive language training, was it a sense that you were being evaluated? You would have to pass some kind of standard on each of those before you would move on?

MEHRER: [00:26:57] My understanding at the time was that this was for training purposes and that I understood some of these people were very overweight. Some of these people had never, they didn't know how to swim, couldn't swim at all. There's no way the Peace Corps was going to kick people out if they couldn't manage to climb up a rope 30 feet. And the women, you know, we're not as strong as the guys. So a woman who had never done this before couldn't climb straight up a rope 30 feet. Why would the Peace Corps kick her out? I thought that this was training and just getting you to, I don't know, to understand your limits and to understand how to deal with situations you never been in before.

KLEIN: [00:27:50] Mm hmm.

MEHRER: [00:27:52] There was a part of it was rock climbing, which, as it happens, I had done before. But most of the people, 99.44% percent of the people had never done before, and I couldn't imagine Peace Corps selecting somebody because they couldn't climb the rocks. Deselecting is a word they used in those days and to any of us from that period that went through the selections that we went through, it is extremely negative. We

had so many things, not so much in Puerto Rico, but afterwards in the university training.

KLEIN: [00:28:33] Well during the physical training and the language, the initial language in Puerto Rico, did many people choose to drop out or do you recall?

MEHRER: [00:28:40] Nobody chose to drop out. Nobody did. We were. And part of it was we were divided up into groups. Group A, B, C, D. Mine was Group B, which quickly made people annoyed with them because three of us devised songs that were always "Grupo Be, we're with you all the way." Be is B in Spanish. And we had all these rousing songs to establish an esprit de corps. And everybody, you know, the other groups didn't get this together and were rather annoyed with us. At this point, by the way, we had mixed with Ecuador VI. We were Ecuador VII, all community action. Ecuador VI were co-op volunteers. They were all male. They had finished their university training. They had had three months of the written training about communism, about American history, training about.

KLEIN: [00:29:45] Area studies and all.

MEHRER: [00:29:45] Yeah. And so they felt very united as a group. They'd finished a lot of their selections. They were smaller group, like maybe 35, and they were mixed in with us. So our classes, our groups were composed of part Ecuador VI and part really nuevo people, Ecuador VII. And it was very interesting to see the difference. At the very end of training, if I can skip a few, at the very end of the Outward Bound training, they had a race. There was a race up a mountain. Well, it would be a hill compared to the Andes, but it was pretty steep. And the object was to get the entire group, your group, to the top of the hill and back down. The object was not to see an individual basis how fast you could run up and run down.

KLEIN: [00:30:45] Right.

MEHRER: [00:30:46] Even though this was thoroughly and adequately explained, the majority of jocks, women as well as men, raced up that hill and down and thought, I'm going to do the best I can for my team by doing this. But

Group B, we had had a pretty good experience, at least in my opinion. And we had some heavy-set people and some frail little people, and we pushed them up the hill and pulled them up the hill. And we worked as a group and we won. We won a case of Lowenbrau. And I was very proud of the group at that time.

KLEIN: [00:31:24] Which is one of the points of Outward Bound, of course, is team building and, you know, learning to work with others.

MEHRER: [00:31:31] Well, I hadn't known that that was one of the points, but that was what we did. [tape break]

KLEIN: [00:31:35] Puerto Rico and coming to the, it was a four-week period.

MEHRER: [00:31:41] Right. It was three weeks at Outward Bound and then the one in the community.

KLEIN: [00:31:45] OK. And in the community, you would just in a small town with some others?

MEHRER: [00:31:51] Right.

KLEIN: [00:31:51] And the main purpose was probably language?

MEHRER: [00:31:55] Probably, although some of us would possibly be involved in construction later on. One of the, I was in a community that had one other single woman volunteer trainee and a married couple. And Pat Roy, the married couple wife, realized early that she would not be doing physical construction and shoveling cement into cement mixers when she was a volunteer in her site. Because women don't do that in Latin America, or at least they didn't then. And so she started making friends with the children and talking to people, and I thought that was very smart of her.

KLEIN: [00:32:36] Yeah.

MEHRER: [00:32:38] All of our Spanish was fairly rudimentary. I mean, we had book learning. I had had five semesters in college, and then five hours a day for

three weeks. And then we had. What I remember most, I think, was meeting this little seven or eight or nine year old kid and letting him win at marbles. He was very outgoing and wanted to talk to this strange woman who had come to live with an older couple in their house and work with cement. And so we played marbles and I made sure that he won. And he, on the last day there. We tried to have many conversations, but my Spanish vocabulary wasn't really great. The last day there, he walked me down to where we had to stand alongside the highway and wave the bus down and catch the bus back into to San Juan. And he escorted me there and carried my little suitcase. And I said, don't you have to be in school? He said, well, there's this play and I'm the emcee in the play. And they can't. I said, aren't you going to miss this play? He said, they can't do it without me. They just have to wait. And he's probably the mayor of the town that at this point.

KLEIN: [00:34:02] Yeah. So then back to San Juan. Your group reformed, the Ecuador VII group?

MEHRER: [00:34:13] Right. Well, there were two sets. Both groups were there. And I don't know whether Ecuador VI went straight on to, uh, Ecuador at that point, or they probably in all likelihood had to go back to Miami and then go back. Well, it was just before Christmas. It was about two or three days before Christmas. So the Peace Corps decided in view of the fact that it was just before Christmas that they were going to let us take our home leave, our post training leave that we would normally get after all the training, they would let us do it at Christmas instead, which would mean we wouldn't get it later. And so we went home for a week or two weeks, probably one week. And then we were told to report to Denver and they gave us the tickets. So after Christmas, we all flew out to Denver.

KLEIN: [00:35:07] Going home, how'd the family greet you now that you were a Peace Corps volunteer and climbed tall mountains and leaped tall buildings?

MEHRER: [00:35:19] Oh, I don't. I don't remember. I don't think it was as big a deal for them as for me because they hadn't been there with me. And although they'd heard about it.

KLEIN: [00:35:33] Were you writing during the time?

MEHRER: [00:35:35] Yeah, I'm sure I was. I've always been a writer, writing home.

KLEIN: [00:35:39] Do you know if the letters exist?

MEHRER: [00:35:42] Oh, I'm sure they don't.

KLEIN: [00:35:43] OK. So you had the week home. Any second thoughts about maybe you shouldn't be going?

MEHRER: [00:35:43] Oh, none at all. Absolutely not. One of the reasons that I thought about going into the Peace Corps was a friend of mine, but actually he was the son of friends of my parents. He had worked in Indonesia, and I don't know with what program, whether it was a church program or the government program, and he was working in agriculture. I'm not sure it was Indonesia. It was Southeast Asia. It may have been Vietnam before the war. It was sometime before this period at any rate, and he was quite a bit older than I. Well, ten years at that period, it was quite a bit older. And he had been working with people in the fields and there had been an accident with the tractor and he lost his leg. And he was sent back to the United States and he was put in hospitals for a while. First thing he did when he got out of the hospital was go right back to his job.

KLEIN: [00:36:49] Yeah.

MEHRER: [00:36:49] And he was not. I don't know that. He wasn't a Peace Corps volunteer. I don't know what kind of living conditions he had, but I have to assume that it was fairly basic. And his work with the people there made me think that he was a very giving person. A person who is really giving a good impression of what some of us in America are like, you know, or would like to be like. And I thought that was sort of an inspiration for me to try to get into the Peace Corps and do something like that.

KLEIN: [00:37:27] Do you remember reading a book called The Ugly American?

MEHRER: [00:37:29] Oh yeah.

KLEIN: [00:37:30] OK. That was part of that same mix of value forming about the role Americans could play, didn't play, but could play, sort of.

MEHRER: [00:37:41] Right. And speaking of books about Americans' roles overseas, I again have to mention this book *Green Fires* by Marnie Mueller, about a Peace Corps volunteer who returns to Ecuador, returns to her country of service, and finds out that she had done the wrong things for the right reasons. But there's all this cultural interplay and history. We, as Americans, we get to a new place and we think we're the first people there. Well, in fact, these people have been there for centuries and they have histories of interaction. And if we jump in the middle of it. We're not the first people there. We're just the latest in a series of things that's causing actions and reactions. And sometimes we don't interpret everything correctly.

KLEIN: [00:38:31] Yeah. So you flew out to Denver for the second part of your training?

MEHRER: [00:38:38] Right.

KLEIN: [00:38:39] And where did you end up?

MEHRER: [00:38:41] We were at the University of Denver and we were in, oh, this is really modern. We were in dorms that had apartments, and the apartments had either two or three bedrooms and a living room and dining room and kitchen. And we were on the same floor. Well, actually, the boys were on one floor and the girls were on another floor, but you could actually walk up and down the stairs and be in each other's apartments. It's not exactly coed living like they have now, but yeah, it was pretty racy for then. As far as I know, absolutely nothing went on that shouldn't have gone on.

KLEIN: [00:39:19] That's right smack in the middle of Denver, though, isn't it?

MEHRER: [00:39:22] It's right smack in Denver and it was winter and it was cold and dry. And people would, there'd be a big snowfall and people would go out in shorts and get suntanned. Not us, because we were too busy.

KLEIN: [00:39:36] Do you have any idea why they chose the University of Denver?

MEHRER: [00:39:38] No. And I suppose in some bureaucrat's mind they'd done the hot climate, so they were going to do the cold part of Ecuador, because there's hot and cold in Ecuador. But it really had no bearing on.

KLEIN: [00:39:53] Were there any resident specialists in Latin American studies or Ecuador?

MEHRER: [00:39:57] We had a lot of people come and talk to us. We had five hours of Spanish every day, two hours of lab and three hours of talking in a small classroom, and we were divided up into ability levels one to six or seven, one to seven, I guess. And so you were in with people who had your same amount of learning and you had to speak in classroom as well as in the lab, which was all tape recorded Foreign Service tapes.

KLEIN: [00:40:28] In a small class setting, was there a teacher or an instructor present?

MEHRER: [00:40:33] Oh yes, a native Spanish speaker. Not an American who could speak Spanish well, but a native Spanish speaker.

KLEIN: [00:40:41] Not necessarily an Ecuadorian.

MEHRER: [00:40:43] No, not Ecuadorians. We had a Chilean and ours was a Mexican lady. And they kept us very busy at that. And then we had lectures on, it was called ASWAC, A-S-W-A-K [sic]. American society, something or other, and communism. And they would give us lectures to make sure that we understood our country. And most of us have had that sort of thing through grade school, middle school and high school, as well as if anybody took any courses in college.

KLEIN: [00:41:15] Yes.

MEHRER: [00:41:17] There was this young man, actually more than one young man, who raised their hands and asked questions and commented and made remarks to these speakers, because the young men felt that they knew more about the situation than the people speaking, and sometimes they did. Because one of these guys, I later married. Some of the speakers, a great deal of the speakers who came to us, I don't know where or why the Peace Corps recruited these people, but they would come in and say, well, I'm here to talk to you about community development in Ecuador. Now I haven't been to Ecuador, but I just got back from Vietnam, and I can tell you there's a communist behind every tree and you have to be very careful. And I don't know how many speakers started that way.

KLEIN: [00:42:11] Wow.

MEHRER: [00:42:12] Many, many of them had just come back from Vietnam. And why the Peace Corps was attracted to these people? And the people who had traveled in Latin America. My at that point future husband had gone to grad school and did his thesis on social reform during the forties in Argentina under Juan Peron. And then he and his roommate had taken a trip through all of South America and Latin America by bus for six months, staying in really small places and spending very little money. And he did know something about Latin America after that experience, so he felt qualified to challenge some of the experts that were brought in.

KLEIN: [00:43:03] You mentioned that you were Ecuador VII. So there was a project in Ecuador beginning as early as '61, '62?

MEHRER: [00:43:13] There must have been because.

KLEIN: [00:43:14] Did you have any idea of what Ecuador I, II, III, IV had done or was doing?

MEHRER: [00:43:20] Well at that point, I had none.

KLEIN: [00:43:22] OK. And so no one came from the field.

MEHRER: [00:43:26] No.

KLEIN: [00:43:27] How about Peace Corps staff from Washington or people who would be working with you once you got in the field? Do you remember any of them at the university?

MEHRER: [00:43:36] Yeah, we had, uh, Carston Lane was one of the Peace Corps Washington staff. And he was a little strange but tried to keep us on the official line doing what we were supposed to be doing. But he wasn't involved in the day to day operations.

KLEIN: [00:43:58] Yeah. How were you, during this time, how were you aware of the selection process?

MEHRER: [00:44:04] Oh, the selection process. This was when we had peer ratings. And at the end of every six weeks or it seemed like it was fairly often, but it probably wasn't that often, we had to fill out a questionnaire. And the questionnaire asked which three people do you think would make the best Peace Corps volunteers? Which three people would make the worst Peace Corps volunteers? Which two people would you like to be stranded on a desert island with? And, um, a lot of other questions, and then we began to realize that these rating sheets were taken in by the four psychologists and one psychiatrist that were overseeing our group. And taken together, put with their findings, and used as a means of kicking people out of the Peace Corps.

KLEIN: [00:44:59] Yeah.

MEHRER: [00:45:00] And at some point we just refused to fill out at least the part about rating each other. But the psychologists were not at all responsible, some of them. They told one young man that every single person had voted against him. So he looked every one of us individually in the eye, and he knew that we had each voted against him. But when you voted against somebody, it was most likely because you didn't know them very well. They weren't outgoing. It didn't mean that they couldn't have been a good volunteer.

KLEIN: [00:45:39] Right. Did you each undergo a psychiatric interview?

MEHRER: [00:45:45] Oh, many, many of them. We had psychiatric, psychological or psychiatric groups which were not Grupo Be, but they were different groups put together. I don't know how. And then they'd get us together as if it were a psychoanalysis session. And they would ask us, what do you think about the group and who do you think is the worst person? And of course, the person chosen would be somebody that wasn't in the room. And what do you think we should do about this? How can we make her be better and what is your thinking about? And it was all, most of us saw it as total nonsense. But they were using this to evaluate us.

KLEIN: [00:46:29] Right. But you, as an individual, had at least one separate interview with a psychiatrist and one with the psychologist.

MEHRER: [00:46:40] Yes.

KLEIN: [00:46:41] Yeah, because one of the things that struck me has struck many people. You have no experience of psychiatry. I mean, you haven't been, you've never seen a psychiatrist and all of a sudden you're in a position of wanting to be in the Peace Corps and wanting to go to Ecuador, and you've got to confront this.

MEHRER: [00:47:01] Right.

KLEIN: [00:47:02] Do you particularly recall it or was it?

MEHRER: [00:47:04] I do, because of some of the questions he asked. My major was, my minor was psych.

KLEIN: [00:47:13] Oh, OK.

MEHRER: [00:47:14] And I had wanted, actually after I'd had a couple of years in college, I decided what I really would like to do was be a psychoanalyst or a clinical psychologist. But I didn't. I wasn't able. I mean, I didn't think that my parents would pay to put me through more college than four years of

college, and I had younger brothers who had to go to college. So I stuck with what I had, but I was a little maybe more familiar than some people. The psychologist that interviewed me asked me if I, when I got very, very frustrated, did I ever feel that I had to go out and drag a man home to my bed? And I thought this was a rather bizarre thing to be asking a 21 year old girl right out of college. I don't know whether it was bizarre or not, but it certainly seems so to me. Nobody had ever said that to me before.

KLEIN: [00:48:09] Right. And this was 1962.

MEHRER: [00:48:12] Yeah, we have to, you know, the nineties and the 2000s are very different than '63, '64. So um. The interviews with psychologists, I think, tended to go rather flat because once people realized that the psychologists were ruling people out, I think most of the group became non-cooperative.

KLEIN: [00:48:39] Yeah. Were people deselected during training?

MEHRER: [00:48:43] Yes.

KLEIN: [00:48:44] So people were disappearing. You'd come to class.

MEHRER: [00:48:46] Well, the first deselection was Valentine's Day. We call it the Valentine's Day massacre, and my future husband to be was deselected. Just prior to that, his shoulder dislocated in one of these things that you're not required to do. It was a basketball game. Everybody's playing. And he has trick shoulders and Peace Corps told him that they couldn't be responsible for him in South America if his shoulders were going to dislocate. They didn't know where he would be, how far from help he would be. And this was maybe the third time that his shoulder had dislocated. And it's in fact, it's happened, I think, a total of eight times now, both shoulders, and there's really no way to fix it. Just stay out of positions that are going to. Don't ski, for example. Anyway, a lot of people were kicked out. I don't know, 12 people out of the total number, something like that. And some of them for reasons that you couldn't understand. They seem like perfectly fine people.

KLEIN: [00:49:56] And nobody made any explanations to you, to the group?

MEHRER: [00:50:00] No, not that I remember. It's possible that something was said. Maybe they met with us and said, these people are leaving and you'll have to take our word for it that they're not going to be good volunteers. I don't know.

KLEIN: [00:50:13] When your future husband was deselected, had you been dating before?

MEHRER: [00:50:20] No. He had been dating my roommate.

KLEIN: [00:50:22] Oh, OK. So it wasn't, I mean, then it wasn't you had envisioned being there with him and that.

MEHRER: [00:50:29] No, no. There were a lot of people very unhappy because by that time we had formed friendships.

KLEIN: [00:50:37] Yeah. Oh yeah.

MEHRER: [00:50:38] But it wasn't that I envisioned being in South America with him.

KLEIN: [00:50:43] How long was the entire period at Denver?

MEHRER: [00:50:48] Well, from maybe January 2nd to sometime in March. I don't know exactly, because I know that we did go down for one or two weeks to Mexico. We split up after this training. There were at least two deselections, possibly three during that time. Then the rural group went to the UNESCO Training Center, which is the acronym is CREFAL, C-R-E-F-A-L, in Pátzcuaro, Mexico, where we were given courses. We were given in Spanish lectures on community action.

KLEIN: [00:51:28] So you were in that group.

MEHRER: [00:51:31] I was in that group. I was really lucky because that was a wonderful experience. Really nice people working there and.

KLEIN: [00:51:39] Obviously your Spanish had improved and the language training took with you, I mean.

MEHRER: [00:51:45] Well, it took with everybody to some extent. I mean, you can't spend five hours a day. We were all dreaming in Spanish and talking in our sleep in Spanish.

KLEIN: [00:51:52] And when you were evaluated in Spanish while you were still in Denver, did you get some kind of rating that you were an FSR something?

MEHRER: [00:51:59] No, I was never told anything like that. I don't even remember an evaluation.

KLEIN: [00:52:05] How did they know that you knew Spanish?

MEHRER: [00:52:08] I don't know whether they did know. Well, they probably talked to the language teachers and the language teachers could easily tell. I was in the next to the highest group. My roommate in Ecuador, who did go to Ecuador, was in the bottom group, who didn't know any Spanish and doesn't really seem to have an inclination toward languages. But because of her skills, one way or another, she was sent down there.

KLEIN: [00:52:37] Still in Denver, during training, did you begin to get a sense of what your role was going to be or might be when you got to Ecuador? Or was the focus still sort of general and generic?

MEHRER: [00:52:51] Well, they tried. They showed us how to kill chickens and how to dismember them, pluck them, and put them together. They showed the men how to lay a water main, including pouring the lead into the turnings and everything. This was very sexist orientation, but that's the way Latin America is. Women are not going to be laying water mains. So we had some idea that this might be handy. We were also given courses in health, in sanitation, things like that.

KLEIN: [00:53:25] But was there anything specific to Ecuador, that this is the rural urban split and these kind of villages and the general needs might be?

MEHRER: [00:53:36] No, there was very little information about specifics.

KLEIN: [00:53:40] Ecuador history?

MEHRER: [00:53:42] We probably had some Ecuador history. I don't remember now. But they didn't tell us who was going where. And they didn't tell us, uh, I suppose some of that would depend on how you worked out in the urban rural situation you were put in. I don't know.

KLEIN: [00:53:57] Well did they know do you think?

MEHRER: [00:53:58] Probably not. Not at that point.

KLEIN: [00:54:03] OK. Was there Peace Corps field staff who would touch base at the training to become familiar with you? I mean, was there any kind of communication between the field and training that you knew of?

MEHRER: [00:54:18] It's hard for me to remember. But it's possible the director, who was Gene Baird, came and visited us, but he wouldn't have been given an opportunity to make any selection or anything. And there was nobody who really told us what life is like in a village or life is like in Guayaquil in the big city. So we really didn't have. Most of our speakers had talked to us about Vietnam.

KLEIN: [00:54:46] Were there any Washington visitors?

MEHRER: [00:54:52] Yeah.

KLEIN: [00:54:52] Name people?

MEHRER: [00:54:53] Well, Carston Lane was one who was constantly. He must have been in charge of our group because he would be there every so often and give us a little chat about official stuff.

KLEIN: [00:55:03] Shriver? Bill Moyers?

MEHRER: [00:55:04] No. No, no, no. Those were big guys and we were just a very small group.

KLEIN: [00:55:09] You never knew where Shriver was going to pop up

MEHRER: [00:55:11] Well, he didn't seem to pop up in our place.

KLEIN: [00:55:15] Did you have a sense of you were going off sort of individual or in small group on this adventure? Or did you have a strong link to the Peace Corps? I mean, do you have any sense of that? Don't let me put words in your mouth, I mean.

MEHRER: [00:55:37] Well, my background is my relatives were all military. I was used to being a government subsidy or a government person. And yes, and the kind of person I am, I felt loyalty to the Peace Corps. I felt this was my organization that I belonged to. I don't know that everybody felt the same way. I had heard many negative reports about training, even about Outward Bound, which my husband and I felt was one of the best experiences in our lives we've ever had. And we felt that way right afterwards, whereas a lot of people in our group felt it was very negative and didn't like it. And I don't know how they feel about it now. But there were lots of different feelings about the whole organization.

MEHRER: [00:56:32] My experience has been, since I have a daughter who was in the Peace Corps too, and I was a staff wife at one point, that the worst thing that volunteers. Well, one of the worst things that they encounter is their antagonism toward the administration. And they're always going to be fighting the administration. And unlike many jobs, it's the volunteers who are doing the job that was supposed to be done. It's not the administration that's there to be the administration. I mean, they're there as backup, but it's the people on the bottom that are there doing the job.

KLEIN: [00:57:15] Interesting point.

MEHRER: [00:57:15] And it's an interesting way to, um, to see a structure of an organization and have to deal with people. When you get somebody in who is a supervisor or a boss, he's often used to knowing everything and

telling people how he wants them to behave. And in the Peace Corps, it's often the other way around. The volunteer is the person who knows the things.

KLEIN: [00:57:41] Yeah, so you went Denver, two weeks in Mexico at the UNESCO Training Center.

MEHRER: [00:57:47] Right. And the other half, the urban half, went to San Antonio.

KLEIN: [00:57:50] So at that point, there was an urban rural split made in the group?

MEHRER: [00:57:53] Yeah, but it still wasn't guaranteed that it would be.

KLEIN: [00:57:59] And that was a good experience in that you were totally you were in a complete Spanish language environment?

MEHRER: [00:58:06] Right. I meant to say while we were being lectured in Spanish by knowledgeable people about community action, we didn't all understand everything that was being said. We understood according to our Spanish level. But sometimes when you're in a situation like that, things just go over your head. As much as you try very hard to listen to everything, there reaches a point at which you're saturated and you just can't understand anymore.

KLEIN: [00:58:39] And again, sitting in a lecture hall, listening to Spanish and maybe even asking a few questions is still different than the way you're going to use language once you're in the country. You're going to use it by saying, I'd like to buy a loaf of bread, or something, I mean.

MEHRER: [00:58:53] Well, we did that in our five hours a day. In the three hours that we had, we were eight people in a room with somebody who kept us talking all the time. Made us devise skits, made us interact and work together and come up with all the local things. I think that they were told to do that.

KLEIN: [00:59:11] And you were feeling comfortable with your ability in language?

MEHRER: [00:59:14] Yes. If I'd been given a quiz after one of these lectures, though, I don't know that I would have done very well, but I was gaining. We went to markets and things, and we were able to say a few words and I was feeling somewhat comfortable.

KLEIN: [00:59:28] And were you still in a dorm setting when you were in Mexico?

MEHRER: [00:59:34] No, it wasn't a dorm. I can't, I can't remember exactly. I think that there were rooms, like they might have maybe two people in a room or something like that. Sort of like a motel where they would have put people up for the United Nations.

KLEIN: [00:59:51] What after the two weeks in Mexico?

MEHRER: [00:59:55] Then we were flown to San Antonio, where we were sworn-in in the airport. We were met with the San Antonio group. We were sworn-in as Peace Corps volunteers.

KLEIN: [01:00:06] And the urban group?

MEHRER: [01:00:07] The urban group was in San Antonio. We came up. And we didn't get out of the airport. We were just flown there and then met them. Everybody, there was no deselection after the last week or two. I mean, after we were split up. Everybody who was sent there was accepted. You were still given a chance to get out of it if you wanted to get out of it. And then the same day we were flown to Miami and we were supposed to catch a plane for Ecuador. The plane was delayed for mechanical reasons, and it went on forever and ever, and we were very tired after going Mexico, San Antonio, Miami.

KLEIN: [01:00:28] Was it charter or regular flight?

MEHRER: [01:00:48] Regular flight, Panagra. And it was delayed, delayed, delayed. And we were. It was the middle of the night, 2:00 in the morning, something like that. And we didn't have hotel rooms. I think a couple of volunteers splurged and there was a hotel in the Miami airport and they

went to a hotel room. But the rest of us were sitting or sleeping on those where they had an exhibit with an automobile on a platform with carpeting. They were lying on the carpeting. And we finally took off and got down to Ecuador.

KLEIN: [01:01:23] Now this at that point, how long had you been in the Peace Corps?

MEHRER: [01:01:27] It was a total of four months of training, I think.

KLEIN: [01:01:30] OK. All right. And you were going with the expectation that you would do 20 months as a volunteer, in other words, for a two year tour all together?

MEHRER: [01:01:41] I wasn't aware whether it was 20 months or 24 months in.

KLEIN: [01:01:45] At that point. It wasn't a concern.

MEHRER: [01:01:48] No. I called, I was instructed by Mike, with whom I had been writing letters since he had been deselected. We'd been exchanging letters, actually it turned out to be on a daily basis. And he said, you must call me. Call me collect from the airport. It's urgent. And so I called him, and he proposed. Now we had never dated. We had never gone out. We had been in class together for a couple of months. But anyway, I accepted tentatively. I accepted.

KLEIN: [01:02:31] Well that's funny because you're about to get on a plane to go to Ecuador.

MEHRER: [01:02:33] Yeah, I told him that I was committed to this project. I really, I did not want to quit. I did not want to. I was committed to this enterprise and his proposal said in two years or whenever we can, whenever we can. Meanwhile, he was looking for a job in Latin America because his training had been in Latin America, and that's what he wanted to do. And he did get a job in Venezuela, in Acción in Venezuela, a private. It started the same year the same month as the Peace Corps, but it was a private community action. [tape break] Yes and.

KLEIN: [01:03:14] Let me just. This is tape two, Julia Mehrer. OK.

MEHRER: [01:03:19] So we agreed that whenever we could manage it. And both of us realized without saying it that if we waited for two years, we probably would have grown in different ways and it most likely was not going to work. So it was just in the back of our minds. But I didn't really know what I was going to do about it because I was going down to a job that I expected to have for two years.

KLEIN: [01:03:49] Yeah, yeah. So you finally got out of the airport and down to Ecuador with the marriage proposal in mind, but also the now ready to start work as a volunteer. Take it from there. I mean, what happened? Was there more training in?

MEHRER: [01:04:11] No, thankfully. We were all very sick of the training. One thing I forgot to mention in the university training I just want to insert here.

KLEIN: [01:04:22] Sure. Yeah.

MEHRER: [01:04:24] The head of the community development department of the University of Missouri came and was giving us a lecture on what community development is. And he said, if you get down there and you've called a meeting at the water fountain for 7:00, and if they don't show up by 7:15, you have to teach them the right way to do things. You, if they're not there by 7:15 or 7:20, you leave and tell them they have to be there because this is the way we do it. And I think most people, at any rate, I realized that this was not the way to get anything accomplished.

KLEIN: [01:05:07] He must have worked for AID.

MEHRER: [01:05:07] I don't know. I don't know. I don't think he worked for anybody because I don't think anybody could accomplish something, other than maybe in America or England or Germany with that kind of attitude.

KLEIN: [01:05:18] Right.

MEHRER: [01:05:19] But that struck me as very strange. And of course, afterwards when I got to working with Acción, who actually knew something about community action and had a whole plan for how you do step A, then you go to step B. Then I realized how wrong that really was.

KLEIN: [01:05:40] Yeah, but let's. You arrive in Ecuador with the group.

MEHRER: [01:05:44] Right. So we had a day or two in Quito in a small pension with, oh, I think maybe we had several beds in a room there as well.

KLEIN: [01:05:55] Yeah. You're now the rural group?

MEHRER: [01:06:01] No, we're still, we're still the whole group together. We have come from either 56 or 65 down to 35. Been kicked out. Nobody, as far as I know, left on their own volition. They were all, all of those people were deselected.

KLEIN: [01:06:19] Did you have a sense that many of them, many of these deselections were for language reasons? Or you didn't know?

MEHRER: [01:06:27] Not too many. We thought that maybe it was just a way of blaming it on the psychological evaluations or the peer ratings. But there were some that may have been. But my roommate was very unskilled in language. And she went down and she did fine. And so when you're in a situation, I mean, they gave us the background to go down there. And then when you're dropped into a country that speaks something else and there's no one around to speak English with you, you pick it up, especially if you've had five hours a day for four months of training. So then we were given a brief orientation into the rules and regulations of Ecuador.

KLEIN: [01:07:17] By?

MEHRER: [01:07:18] By the Peace Corps staff there. One of the things I remember is that we weren't allowed to ride a certain bus line. Which was in the town where I lived, it was the one that went through the town in the daytime. The other bus line that we were allowed to ride went through at 12:30 at night, which was very, very late in a rural community. The reason we

weren't allowed to ride the Santa bus line was because the drivers often drank and would drive the bus over a cliff, which is a pretty good reason not to put people on the bus. No one was given a vehicle, as I've heard in other countries, they have had. Although we worked with the Andean Mission and the Andean Mission chauffeur, a local Ecuadorian, would allow me to drive a jeep once in a while, which was fun, especially since it was illegal. But it was just once in a while.

MEHRER: [01:08:19] Some of the other rules. People who lived, and Ecuador is a pretty small country. But in those days the Pan-American Highway was not paved. It was full of ruts. In the rainy season, the roads were washed out. You could travel someplace that might be two hours away and it would take you 12 because the road's washed out and you're waiting in the bus or beside the bus for somebody to come and fix it. But one of the rules was unless you lived in the furthest away provinces, when the Peace Corps called you back for a conference in Quito, which they would do once every six months or so, you were not allowed to take an airplane. You must take local transportation.

KLEIN: [01:09:03] Hmm.

MEHRER: [01:09:03] We lived in the furthest away province, just just barely, so were allowed. I think we flew back once before I left the Peace Corps. And then when my future husband came down to visit just before we got married, I had to go up. And I couldn't afford to fly on my own, so I took a bus. It was 23 hours by bus. It's now maybe six.

KLEIN: [01:09:30] Yeah. And when you flew locally, that was Ecuadorian airlines?

MEHRER: [01:09:35] Right. And Cuenca, for instance, had an airport, probably still the same, that because it's surrounded by the very tall Andes and the planes have to get up over. Well, the plane had to circle and circle and circle and to get lower and lower before it could land.

KLEIN: [01:09:54] I can picture. I don't know that I'd want to be on the plane.

MEHRER: [01:09:59] No, it was a little frightening at times. One has to just get over the feeling and say, these people must know what they're doing.

KLEIN: [01:10:07] So Peace Corps gave you the rules and regulations.

MEHRER: [01:10:09] Mm hmm. Excuse me a sec.

KLEIN: [01:10:14] You were going to receive a living allowance, paid by the Peace Corps?

MEHRER: [01:10:19] Right. We received one hundred dollars a month in those days.

KLEIN: [01:10:23] And at that point did you meet an Ecuadorian counterpart or anyone from the Ecuadorian ministry?

MEHRER: [01:10:34] No. What they did was finally tell us where we were scheduled to go.

KLEIN: [01:10:40] And on what basis did they do that?

MEHRER: [01:10:42] You'd have to ask them. Well, I knew that I had insisted on rural for the whole time. And one of the questions on the peer rating forms was, who would you like to be stationed with? Name three people. And the person that I had named was my roommate in training. And she was scheduled to be with me as my roommate down there, even though she had been originally scheduled for an urban group. But she was an art, had been an art major, and knew a lot about weaving and the Indians that I was assigned to work with knew, did weaving. And so she was helpful in establishing weaving patterns for them, things like that.

KLEIN: [01:11:27] And her name is?

MEHRER: [01:11:27] Janice Hensley.

KLEIN: [01:11:28] OK. So you were sent then, I don't know much about Ecuador, to a primarily Indian area?

MEHRER: [01:11:41] I was. We were given in Quito then our assignments and the people we would be with, which we had not known up until that point. And then we were sent by bus. No, by plane. It must have been by plane in our case. At any rate, however we went there, we went to Cuenca, which is a major city, the third largest city, and it's in the south. And then we met the regional rep. He was in charge of the southern Ecuador area.

KLEIN: [01:12:10] OK, that's Peace Corps rep?

MEHRER: [01:12:11] Peace Corps rep. American. And I'm trying to remember his name, but it's slipped me. And then he talked to us, chatted with us for a while, invited us to his house, as I recall. Met his wife and kids. And then we. We were probably met there by the married couple that we were going to replace. We had a two-month overlap. And then they probably took us down to Saraguro.

KLEIN: [01:12:53] Saraguro.

MEHRER: [01:12:57] Saraguro, which was south of Cuenca, close to the border with Peru. Fairly close. And as I recall, that's the way it happened. They had come up just to meet us. And then we all went down together and they lived in the house of, uh, they rented two rooms in somebody's house. Now this was a big adobe house, which had doors to an outdoor veranda. You didn't go between the rooms, you went out to the veranda and then to the next room. So they had arranged for us to occupy one room. They had another room and then they had a little room, which they used as a kitchen.

KLEIN: [01:13:44] Ok. What was the physical environment of Saraguro?

MEHRER: [01:13:49] It's, when you approach it in the night, our bus got there at 12:30. There were about three hours or four hours of electricity a day, period. It would start maybe 9:00 or 10:00 at night. And obviously, you can't keep a refrigerator going under those conditions. But when you approached it, the bus would wind and wind and wind on this road and you'd see things appear and disappear in the distance, and it looked like Brigadoon. It looked like the movie Brigadoon. You'd see the fog, the mist

in the distance and you'd see the streetlights were electric light bulbs strung on one wire down the street. But it wasn't straight. It went from house to house, and they were at irregular intervals. So it was much more pleasant than having a straight line. But seeing it through the mist and through the mountains that were between you and Saraguro in a bowl in the Andes, it seemed like Brigadoon. And it seemed more and more like that when you think about a place that existed a long time ago and hasn't changed a whole lot. And this place hadn't changed very much at all. As a matter of fact, the Spanish that was used there was from the time of the conquistadors. It was old, antique Spanish.

KLEIN: [01:15:12] Like Elizabethan English.

MEHRER: [01:15:13] Right, exactly. It's like going into Appalachia and finding somebody talking like an Elizabethan. And of course, it took me a while to realize this. I wasn't fluent in Spanish then, but interesting to see the.

KLEIN: [01:15:27] Did it make it easier to, I mean, because sometimes the classical form of the language is a little bit slower and there's less slang in it.

MEHRER: [01:15:36] Well, yes, in that aspect. For example, in Guayaquil, it was very modern. Guayaquil, my theory is that all these port cities see a lot of change in the language because they have a lot of people from all over the world. And the language in Guayaquil, the Spanish language is terrible. It's got a lot of idioms. Not just idioms, but they drop the S's and they drop the E's, like Cuba and Venezuela, a lot of those. At any rate, it is. It was slower, more precise. The words were different. If we had learned the word for beet or cabbage it, it was different.

KLEIN: [01:16:16] Ah. Yeah.

MEHRER: [01:16:17] But there are pockets, as I know now, there are pockets in South America of places where they keep really old words. And my theory is that it's mostly in the Andes that had very little progress going through hard to reach places. So things remained like they had been.

KLEIN: [01:16:37] What's the elevation of Saraguro?

MEHRER: [01:16:38] Close to ten thousand feet, I think.

KLEIN: [01:16:43] Oh.

MEHRER: [01:16:44] It was a little hard. The Belotes, Linda and Jim Belote, were the couple that Jan and I went in to replace. And they were used to going out and visiting the Indians and trying to keep up with the Indians. They said they had had a tough time at first, but all of them went at a mile a minute compared to us. We would trudge along, just panting at the elevation. And I had been a very active person. But it was very difficult for us to keep up at first, but I knew we would get better.

KLEIN: [01:17:16] Yeah, ten thousand feet is.

MEHRER: [01:17:17] Yeah.

KLEIN: [01:17:20] The population was most largely Indian?

MEHRER: [01:17:24] Right. The Indian, well, let me break this out. The whites there, quote unquote, were largely Indian blood, but culturally speaking, they were no longer part of any Indian group. As a matter of fact, there seemed to be many Indian groups in Ecuador that weren't part of a tribe or a particular Indian group, but they were definitely poor Indians. But the people who lived in town were whites in Saraguro. I'm talking just about my site. The Indians themselves, and excuse me for using the word Indian, it's more easily understood. It would be very offensive there.

KLEIN: [01:18:10] Yeah.

MEHRER: [01:18:12] But they would live outside of town in loosely defined villages with either Quechua or Spanish names. The Indians were, everybody about 30 years old or so was bilingual. The children were bilingual, Spanish and Quechua, that is. And the older people maybe only spoke Quechua. Kichwa is what they call it in Ecuador. They call it Kichwa. And it had, at the time it had at least seven dialects within Ecuador, which is a

small country, let alone Peru and Bolivia have all their own dialects. I tried once saying something in Ecuadorian Kichwa to someone in Cusco, which is very far away in Peru, and they looked at me as if I had said something really strange and said, I'm sorry, we don't speak English here.

KLEIN: [01:19:03] Yeah. You told as you move out from Saraguro, there are the Indian villages, the Quechuan villages. Are those sort of traditional groupings? In other words, there would be some kind of traditional interrelationships among the people there? In some settings we call a tribal almost, but tribal may be the wrong word.

MEHRER: [01:19:29] Well, a clan or. There would be a feeling that this is a village. But as far as physically, there was no way to say this was a village because there was no central post office. There was no store. There was just a bunch of farmers who lived in a house and owned a certain amount of land.

KLEIN: [01:19:50] But there was an extended traditional relationship among those people?

MEHRER: [01:19:54] Right, right.

KLEIN: [01:19:56] Which is different than those who lived in town?

MEHRER: [01:19:58] Oh yes.

KLEIN: [01:19:59] OK.

MEHRER: [01:19:59] And you could. There were people who lived in Canicapa who were related to people in Kishkinchea, but they, and they were all, they all knew and they all wore the same clothes. They all knew that they were traditional Saraguro Indians. But they understood where their communities were. It's very hard to see any, I mean, see a differentiation in where one began and the next one started.

KLEIN: [01:20:28] Now the couple who you were replacing had been there for about a year and a half, two years?

MEHRER: [01:20:35] Probably two years. Jim had been there first, I believe, and then Linda came and then they got married, which was against Peace Corps rules. But at some point they got married. And they'd been there probably two years by then.

KLEIN: [01:20:53] And were they the only Peace Corps volunteers in Saraguro?

MEHRER: [01:20:57] They were when I was there. There had been one before or at the same time as Jim. I don't remember anything because, I don't know about them because I'd never met them. But we were, Jan and I were the fourth and fifth volunteers in that site. And I think they stopped having volunteers after a while, and then they began to get electricity and more. I heard recently that it was a party site. And my roommate and I had a very difficult time figuring out how you could have a party with warm beer and with no electricity. Certainly not a party site when we were there.

KLEIN: [01:21:36] So moving into the situation, did you look completely to the couple to define what your role is supposed to be?

MEHRER: [01:21:45] Pretty much, yeah. And they, on the other hand, were a little reluctant to impose roles on us. And they were, uh, they wanted us to find our own way and sometimes wouldn't tell us things that we needed to know, or we felt we needed to know, because they wanted us to make our own way. For instance, when I said the language hadn't changed in four hundred years, also, the church hadn't changed a whole lot in four hundred years. We were dealing with the Catholic Church at the time of the Inquisition. I'm not, don't laugh.

KLEIN: [01:22:19] I'm sorry.

MEHRER: [01:22:19] Because a woman up in Cuenca, north of us, had been stoned because the priest told the local people to go stone her because she was a witch. And they had. And when we were in Saraguro, there was a Protestant missionary doctor, American, with missionary nurses living a few doors from us. Everything was a few doors from us. And there was a big argument between whether he could convert people in a town that was

all Catholic. And the priest hated him, of course, for trying to take away his flock because the priest was the demigod of the village.

KLEIN: [01:22:58] And he was an American missionary?

MEHRER: [01:23:00] American missionary, doctor. And he was a very good guy. Dr. Daos was his name. And he was a very kind person, the way you would want a missionary to be or a doctor to be or a human being to be. The priest, on the other hand, was none of those things. And it was always, I was always a little nervous about being in a place where I could, somebody could tell the Indians to go stone me and they might do it. I mean, that was kind of frightening.

KLEIN: [01:23:34] Now you, go ahead. Sorry.

MEHRER: [01:23:35] My roommate said, I'm not religious, I'm not faking it. I'm not going to church. I said, well, I discussed this with the Belotes. I said, how about if I tell him that I'm an Episcopalian? I had actually mentally left the church before that, but I was willing to say that. But I am on the verge of considering becoming a Catholic, so that should make me a little safer or make us a little safer. And they said, that'll probably do. And so we went. The Belotes took us to meet the important people in town, and they took us to meet the priest. And they told me that he's going to ask me some questions probably. So he started asking questions, and I was able to tell him what the Trinity was and I was, you know.

KLEIN: [01:24:25] Oh, a theological question?

MEHRER: [01:24:27] Yeah. And I mean, he asked what we felt and what we believed, and he wanted to know whether we were going to be on the doctor's side or his too. And Jan's language, it was not good at all. So, you know, I was answering the questions. So then he asked me the all-important question, which I didn't realize at the time and I hadn't been prepared for it. Well, who's more important, Mary or Jesus? So I realized I was treading on thin ice here, and I said, well. I thought, well, let's define our terms. OK, well, Mary was the mother of Jesus. And the priest said,

yes, so she's the most important. And so I said, OK. And so I guess I passed the interview.

KLEIN: [01:25:12] That's fascinating.

MEHRER: [01:25:12] But I felt that it was necessary for me to go to church, for one of us, and Jan wouldn't do it, to go to church every Sunday, even though I didn't believe any of the religion. And fake it and sit there and listen to what he said because I wanted advance notice if he was going to turn everybody on to us and say, go out there and stone those people. I was going to sit and hear it first.

KLEIN: [01:25:36] There must have been all kinds of inhibitions on the way you dress then.

MEHRER: [01:25:40] Well, um, we were told that it was unlikely they would accept women in pants. They would think we were trying to be men. So we compromised and wore culottes. And sort of a pant skirt. And we brought several pair and that's what we wore nearly all the time.

KLEIN: [01:25:59] You were properly covered, I mean.

MEHRER: [01:26:00] Oh, of course. Well, it was cold. You wouldn't be sleeveless anyway.

KLEIN: [01:26:03] You wouldn't be walking around in a T-shirt.

MEHRER: [01:26:05] No. No, we didn't ever wear T-shirts. I wore a regular dress shirt like you have on shirts, medium length sleeve. And Jan wore something similar. And the climate there, you could wear wool year-round. When it rained, it was very cold at ten thousand feet, even though it's right near the equator. And it got cold inside. It was just wet and cold. You know how a damp cold is?

KLEIN: [01:26:34] Oh yeah.

MEHRER: [01:26:35] And when it was not raining, it was dry. It was sunny. It was lovely. It was just delightful.

KLEIN: [01:26:47] After you've been there a couple of weeks, the married couple was still there. Did you begin to get a sense that there was a job there for you or there was a role for you to play?

MEHRER: [01:26:58] Well, we were trying to work on what role we were going to play.

KLEIN: [01:27:01] How were you doing that?

MEHRER: [01:27:04] How was I doing that?

KLEIN: [01:27:05] Trying to figure out the role?

MEHRER: [01:27:06] Well, listening to what Linda and Jim said. Linda was talking to the women in the communities, and she had started embroidery classes for the girls and cooking classes for the women. Now I'm talking in the indigenous communities, not in the center of town. And they worked with the Andean Mission, which was another. The Alliance for Progress was also started by Kennedy, which put some money into South America, and the Andean Mission was the Ecuador, Ecuadorian branch of that. So hired by the Ecuadorian government with this money was Colon, who was the head of the Andean Mission in Saraguro. He had a secretary. There was a home economist who was supposed to be dealing with the Indian women and helping them. She hated Indians. She wanted this for the prestige. But the only time she would get anywhere physically close to an Indian as if she was having her picture taken. There was a doctor and there was a dentist and there was the chauffeur. And so we were assigned to work with them.

KLEIN: [01:28:14] They were all Ecuadorian?

MEHRER: [01:28:16] They were all Ecuadorian, and they worked for the Andean Mission and they thought we were under their domination and had to do everything they said. Our understanding was that we were working with

them and we could, we would do what we could, but were free to branch out in other areas too. Fortunately, the head, Colon, the head of the Andean Mission, was a very good guy, and he didn't mind if we did other things or if we didn't. If we had wanted to object to something that he was putting us up to, then he probably would have understood, unlike some other heads of Andean Missions that other volunteers worked with that were, you know, there are all kinds of people in the world, and they were not as nice.

MEHRER: [01:29:03] We went out with the Indian, with a chauffeur if it was a faraway community. It might take an hour or two to get to in the jeep with the social worker, and we would go to Linda's groups and try to teach the girls embroidery. Maybe it was a skill they could use, and maybe it was just getting to know the people in the community.

KLEIN: [01:29:28] Did you know how to do embroidery?

MEHRER: [01:29:30] Yeah, I mean, I'd been a Girl Scout.

KLEIN: [01:29:34] Forgot that.

MEHRER: [01:29:35] And then there were very few foods that grew locally. And the ones that grew locally we would help try to figure out different ways to use them in cooking. I don't know if these people, I mean, once in a rural community, people know how they like things. They've done it for millennia that way. They probably aren't all that thrilled about having somebody come in and tell them how to make a different kind of omelet. But they wanted to get to know us. They thought we were all, not just me, everyone, that we were all interesting. As far as where we came from, they saw we had white faces and they knew we were from further away than Riobamba. They asked where the, what was the United States? And they said, oh, that's even further away than Riobamba, isn't it? Which isn't as far as Quito.

KLEIN: [01:30:26] Was there any sense of the Peace Corps? If you said, I'm a Peace Corps volunteer, I mean, in Spanish, would?

MEHRER: [01:30:31] In the community?

KLEIN: [01:30:33] Yeah.

MEHRER: [01:30:34] No, they knew. We were Peace Corps volunteers. That's all they knew, is the four faces. Those were.

KLEIN: [01:30:40] But it didn't have any meaning beyond that?

MEHRER: [01:30:40] But it meant nothing. No, no. Um, they knew we weren't, we didn't speak Spanish very well, but then a lot of them didn't speak Spanish very well.

KLEIN: [01:30:50] Now did you begin to learn Quechua?

MEHRER: [01:30:53] I was trying to pick some up. I had learned to say good morning or how are you? And I learned to say, when you go up to somebody's house in the countryside, because they might not be sitting in front of their house, you yell out. Can I come in? Hello! Can I come in? You don't just walk up because nobody could be there and you could just walk up and walk into their house. It's very impolite. So I learned how to say that in Quechua and hear the answer to it. One or two things, but not too many.

KLEIN: [01:31:29] Were people pleased?

MEHRER: [01:31:30] Sure. Of course. Everybody's pleased when you learn their language, when you make an effort, you know, to do their thing. Now I had thought about working with the Heifer Project to get. The people there raised cattle. But they have the cattle. They'd take them up over the Andes and down into the wet side of the jungle, the high jungle, where they could eat a lot of grass. They would fatten them up and sell them there. They were not going to slaughter an animal that they could make a lot of money from in town. So there was no beef in town. No pork. No chicken. Nothing in fact in the way of protein, except cans of tuna fish. So they. Oh, what was I talking about? Oh, the heifers. So I thought working with Heifer Project, I think Jim Belote brought it up to me. We might be able to get a heifer brought in and then given to a family on the understanding they

would give away the first offspring to someone else who would give away the first offspring to someone else. And that might improve the the breed.

MEHRER: [01:32:36] But I never, I wasn't there long enough to get involved with that. The agronomist was helping people plant eucalyptus trees, which is the most common kind of tree. They're used for timber and for the houses and anything they need wood for.

KLEIN: [01:32:53] Cooking.

MEHRER: [01:32:54] Yeah. One of the things we did, Jan and I noticed right away that there was a major flea problem. Now these Andean fleas are not host specific, that if our dog or cats have fleas here, they don't bite people, generally speaking. But these fleas, and I have a terrible allergy to them. It's worse than many people. So when you met a person, they would have fleas. You'd shake hands, you'd end up with fleas. The cows all had fleas, the dogs had fleas. The fleas would live in the walls of the adobe, the cracks. And we had flea problems. So Jan and I thought we should have a flea spraying program. I guess it was our idea, but the Belotes helped us implement it. We went into Loja, which was the provincial capital, which was two hours away if the roads were not wiped out.

KLEIN: [01:33:51] Right.

MEHRER: [01:33:51] And we, by local bus, and we would go into Loja and ask some municipal organization if they would give us folydol to spray for the, against the fleas. And so we would bring these bags back, mix it up, and get a sprayer and go around to different communities spraying the walls of their houses, and they'd beg us to please spray their cattle too. And we would actually put it our beds, in our sleeping bags, because that would kill the fleas. Now, Linda and Jim had learned how to reach down in their sleeping bag and grab a flea and kill it with their. You have to break the back and you can kill it with your fingernail. But I never got that good. So we slept in the folydol in our sleeping bags until after Linda and Jim left. They wrote us a letter and said, this stuff, actually, I think it's arsenic based or it's like arsenic and an accumulation of it. [tape break]

MEHRER: [01:35:01] Said, no, we can't spray every six weeks or so, if this stuff is cumulative, we'll kill ourselves and the people too. And I don't know whether they found out whether this stuff causes cancer or not, but that's what Jan ended up with after she left the Peace Corps. And it's come back again. Another project.

KLEIN: [01:35:25] Well, let's just go a little bit. Medical problems. How did you get treatment for any kind of health problems while you were there?

MEHRER: [01:35:35] Well, I don't remember having any. We could have gone to Dr. Daos, who was the missionary doctor. But we were told by the Belotes that if we stay away from him, we'd be better off, because we wanted to be non-political. We were, as a Peace Corps volunteers, not supposed to align ourselves with political parties or religious groups. And there was a conflict going on with the Protestant missionary and the Catholic priest. And it would be better if we tried not to. But of course, if we had a really serious problem, we could go there.

KLEIN: [01:36:15] Yeah. Did you have a Peace Corps medical kit where you could?

MEHRER: [01:36:18] I'm sure we must have.

KLEIN: [01:36:20] Obviously, your health generally was, other than fleas.

MEHRER: [01:36:23] I had good health. Jan had a series of problems which they. She had ear infections and I think she had some gastric problems, too, at some point. And they did fly her, actually the week of my wedding, they flew her to Panama for these ear infections. But we, I don't know what we were supposed to do if we were sick all the time. I don't remember. I mean, I'm sure they told us, it's just that I was generally fairly healthy, so it didn't.

KLEIN: [01:37:02] A related matter. How did you get food? I mean, each day?

MEHRER: [01:37:07] Well, we bought food in the local market. And then when we went into Loja, which wasn't very often at first, but later became once

every two weeks, we could bring back hamburgers and hot dogs or what amounted to that. Now, we had no refrigeration, so we learned that hamburgers will keep two days and, I mean, ground beef, and hot dogs would keep three days. And Linda had made, or Linda and Jim had made an oven out of a kerosene can that you put on top of your Coleman stove. We had a little Coleman stove. And you could buy the gas for the stove in town. And they put the oven up on top of it and would make sometimes things like cakes, but most often pizza. And as I say, there weren't very many things in town. What we did was bring back the hamburger and hot dog for a couple of days, and then we bought peanut butter in Loja and brought it back and canned tuna fish, which would keep forever, and oatmeal. And I figured that we got all of our protein that we got from those three things.

KLEIN: [01:38:14] Could you get eggs and bread locally?

MEHRER: [01:38:16] You could get eggs. Yeah, you could get bread. We didn't really like the bread. It was, uh, a lot of people do now, but it was like pita bread. And not loaf bread.

KLEIN: [01:38:28] Did you have any kind of personal servant or helper?

MEHRER: [01:38:32] No. Actually, we did in a sense. We sent our laundry out.

KLEIN: [01:38:37] Oh, OK.

MEHRER: [01:38:38] There were local people who would go down to the river and beat the clothes on a rock, and it was so inexpensive. We never spent our hundred dollars a month. We couldn't. We couldn't spend it. There wasn't enough to buy to spend it on. And whereas people in Guayaquil couldn't live on a hundred dollars a month. They were very hard put to do it.

KLEIN: [01:39:03] Did, I mean, obviously you weren't working seven days a week, but did you begin?

MEHRER: [01:39:07] Well, we were.

KLEIN: [01:39:08] Oh, you were? OK. Any socializing, recreation, did you begin to get to know Ecuadorians on an unofficial basis, you know, just as friends?

MEHRER: [01:39:25] We did that. Let me finish my last project.

KLEIN: [01:39:29] Yeah, that's fine.

MEHRER: [01:39:30] Backtrack a little bit. At one point we had a project of taking each. This is something Linda and Jim had started, I think. Each area, Indian area, a community had a school. And usually taught by a white, quote unquote. And we started getting those areas and taking the children in the back of a truck. We got the *consejo municipal*, the mayor's office in Loja, to bring up. We'd get the kids, put them in the back of a truck, take them down to Loja and take them to the TB clinic where they would get x-rays. And if they had TB, and the chances with a young child were about 50-50. Older people, 100 percent, that they had TB. They would be given pills, which would calcify the tubercles in the lungs and keep them from growing. And if they kept taking the pills, they would get rid of it. But they'd have to go back to Loja the next time on their own and get the pills themselves. I don't think they had to pay anything, but they had to show up at the clinic and ask for it. So I don't know whether they continued to do that. But we did that with one clinic after another.

MEHRER: [01:40:43] And after we took one group in, we'd take them to the playground, the city playground. They had never seen a playground. Here you've got these little Indian kids about two and a half feet tall, and they're all dressed in black, just like they're adults, black ponchos, black Bermuda shorts for the boys and black skirts for the girls with a little white blouse. And they would stand quietly and watch these kids on the swings and the slides and the merry-go-round thing. And they just. And finally, the white kids in town got off and just sort of moved away. And the black, the black, they were all dressed in black. They reminded me of a flock of blackbirds with the little points on their ponchos when they held their hands out. And they just swooped in and they had such a wonderful time at something we take so much for granted.

KLEIN: [01:41:36] Right.

MEHRER: [01:41:36] So when we went back, my big project was building a teeter totter at one of the local schools. And I got the agronomist to help me with it, help me find a board to put to make the teeter totter. They just loved it. And every day when school closed, they would take the board off the supports and put it in the school so that nobody would steal the board. So that was my.

KLEIN: [01:42:00] So you ended up in construction anyway.

MEHRER: [01:42:00] Right. That was my big contribution. And then we were going back again to meeting people. Well, wherever the Belotes went, they made friends. They had been there for a while. Lots of times it was a relationship where they were trying to teach people to sew or do something. But they were very outgoing people and they would sit and chat for hours with people and make friends. And so, you know, we were hanging around with them and we started doing the same thing. And we asked them, have you ever considered moving out of the village into one of these communities? And they said, well, we asked the Peace Corps if we could do that, and they said no, because they thought it might not be safe. We said, what? I mean, it's much, it's much safer out there. Not one of those Indians would ever harm you. They think the world of you. And they said, well, that's what they told us.

MEHRER: [01:43:00] So Jan and I exchanged glances, and once the Belotes left, we found a community that had an empty house in it, and we asked around and found out that the people who had been there died and their son was being raised by someone else. So we went to them and said, could we use your house and could we move out here? And we decided if we didn't ask the Peace Corps, they couldn't say no. So they said, sure, fine. And so we moved in and we stayed there just two weeks and we had some visitors. One young lady came and stayed overnight with us, just sleeping on the floor. We moved our bed out and our Coleman stove, and that was about it. And ever since that time, both Jan and I always test positive for TB because we didn't realize these people had died of TB. And the cracks in the adobe harbor, in the wet climate, will harbor those germs forever.

MEHRER: [01:43:59] TB germs don't die if people go away. So we don't have TB, but we're always, we always test positive. And then if we are hired for a job, we have to go get an X-ray that proves we don't have it. But we stayed out there a couple of weeks and people became even more friendly. The only time we were, only thing we were concerned about is if some white guys from town should follow us out there and attack us or something. Would the Indians actually fight the whites and come to our defense? Or were they so subservient after hundreds of years of being taught to be subservient that they wouldn't interfere? But fortunately, it didn't happen.

KLEIN: [01:44:41] As single females, did you encounter rudeness or aggressiveness on the part of males in town?

MEHRER: [01:44:48] No.

KLEIN: [01:44:49] Unrelated to your work?

MEHRER: [01:44:50] Some of the whites in town might have been typical Ecuadorians who would say things. They call it in the Spanish language *piropo*. It's a compliment, but basically it's what a guy would say who's leaning against the building, watching a girl walk by and they make comments about her. And in the culture, it's very hard for us to understand because we don't like that. I mean, women don't like that. But in the culture, a lot of women do like that. They look forward to guys saying nice things about them and the guys think that, I mean, it's perfectly OK. Most of us, as young Peace Corps volunteers, saw it as semi-threatening. Now I don't remember a lot of this going on in town, but there may have been one or two guys who might say something, but I really doubt it. It would go on in the big cities where we didn't know people.

KLEIN: [01:45:43] But yourself, you don't recall being uncomfortable.

MEHRER: [01:45:46] Not in our site. No. Not in our site. And I also started a cooking class. I didn't realize what the people wanted was this fancy cake, like wedding cake making. But they said *repostería*, and I thought that meant just cooking. So I started a cooking class showing them, for the whites in town, which had never been done, because nobody really wanted. The

people before me wanted to work with the Indians, and so did Jan. And but these people were also Ecuadorians, and they were also really curious about these new foreigners in town and wanted to get to meet us. So I started an English class and a cooking class. The cooking class was just for girls, but the best person in the English class was a young Indian boy and he was already bilingual. So learning a third language was a little easier for him than learning a second one for the young Spanish speaking people.

KLEIN: [01:46:45] On any given day during this period, how would you decide what you're going to do with your time?

MEHRER: [01:46:52] Well, the Indian mission had a routine that they would go to Lagunas on Monday and Kishkincheer on Tuesday and Canicapi on Wednesday. And we would go with a home economist and we worked at that five days a week. But then the rest of the time we were, we were on our own. I would say as far as a community development person goes, it was working. I mean, you're out. You're not holed up doing nothing. You're out with the people all the time. Um, and that's the other times when we would arrange the other the lessons, the cooking classes and things like that.

KLEIN: [01:47:30] Was it tiring? I mean, it sounds like it sounds to me like you're on seven days a week.

MEHRER: [01:47:33] Emotionally it was tiring. At first, when you're in new situation, you don't have any of your support systems.

KLEIN: [01:47:41] And the altitude doesn't help you.

MEHRER: [01:47:43] No, I don't remember that as being so much of a problem if I wasn't hiking. But I'm sure there were aspects of it. The fleas were the worst thing. I would get. I would count them. And when I got up to 150, I'd stop because it was too depressing. And they were, the kind with me, the kind of flea bites I had to scratch until they were open, and even then I kept scratching them. I probably have scars on my ankles from that. When we went into Loja, they had public showers where for the equivalent of

twelve American cents, you could take a hot shower for as long as you wanted. And that's where I'd count my flea bites and get rid of them I hope, the fleas. And that was just pure bliss, because back in Saraguro, there was a cold shower outside at ten thousand feet where it's cold. The only time either Jan or I used that was after a hike and I came in and I was really hot and I thought, I'll hop into that while I'm still really hot. And I did it once and I would never do it again.

MEHRER: [01:48:44] So what we did was we bought the largest basin that you can buy for washing clothes in. It was about this big around, about three feet across. And we would take turns taking a bath. One of us would sit in it cross legged like a Hindu priest or something, and the other would pour warm water heated on the Coleman stove over the top of the bathing person. Needless to say, this is not a daily ritual. Took quite a lot of time and gas just to heat up the water.

KLEIN: [01:49:17] Was it a wrench when the married couple finally left?

MEHRER: [01:49:21] No. I think we were ready for them to go and be on our own.

KLEIN: [01:49:24] That was two months they were?

MEHRER: [01:49:26] Yeah, and we thought we would miss them. We knew we would miss them and we did. And not to have somebody around who is completely fluent in the local languages and who understood what was going on a better level than we did. I mean, we didn't, we didn't understand.

KLEIN: [01:49:43] Did anyone from Peace Corps come out to visit during this transition time?

MEHRER: [01:49:47] Yes, the director came down one time. Not the director of the country, but the local, the regional rep, he came down one time. And we had had, I don't know how the Peace Corps grapevine works, but it's faster than lightning, and we had advance notice that he was coming. So I don't know what we did, made a pizza or something. He said, that's OK, I'll take you out to lunch, but there's no place to go out to lunch. And I don't

think he stayed overnight. He had a jeep, so he could have gone home. His home was five hours away, so he didn't come very often.

KLEIN: [01:50:23] Well, might that have been a problem if you had a male staying overnight with you? Would that be noted?

MEHRER: [01:50:29] By whom?

KLEIN: [01:50:29] Anyone in the village? Anyone?

MEHRER: [01:50:31] Oh, oh, um.

KLEIN: [01:50:33] The Inquisition crowd?

MEHRER: [01:50:36] I don't know. I don't know what they would have said. I mean, it was probably like in Elizabethan times in England. You didn't talk about it, but it got done. I mean, we didn't have any males come and sleep overnight in either innocently or not innocently. But I'm sure that among the whites that went, that sort of thing happened. People got pregnant who weren't supposed to. But I don't know how it would have been viewed, but we wouldn't. We wouldn't have had him in the same room. Well, we rented a room from this family, and if somebody had stayed over, they would have stayed in the other room.

KLEIN: [01:51:13] In the meantime, what's happening with your engagement?

MEHRER: [01:51:17] In the meantime, I was getting a letter a day and writing at least a letter a day.

KLEIN: [01:51:24] Have you kept those letters?

MEHRER: [01:51:25] Yes, I kept the ones I got. My husband didn't keep his. And my husband had got, at that point future husband, had got a job with Acción, which was, Acción in Venezuela, which was working in urban community action in Venezuela, which is more of an urban country. If you can categorize a country as urban, and less of an indigenous culture sort of thing. I was not anxious to leave Saraguro. I loved it there, except for the

fleas. I mean, they were such a big deterrent that I have to mention it, how strongly I felt about it, because they were bothering me. I was at the point of asking my parents to send flea collars down so I could wear one on each foot. But that wouldn't have helped entirely, just would have kept 'em off my feet.

MEHRER: [01:52:20] At any rate, he made plans to come down and visit. And we both thought separately, I'm sure, we didn't discuss it, but it might be a good idea to set eyes on this person before you actually marry them, because we hadn't dated. And so he came down in May and I took the bus up to Quito, 23 hours. I sat next to an epileptic who had two seizures on the way up, which were kind of frightening at first. But then I felt very guilty for not putting my hand in his mouth and holding his tongue down, which is the wrong thing to do. But I thought it was the thing to do at the time, and I just wasn't brave enough to do it, which was fortunate because I have all my fingers now. Anyway, so I met Mike and he gave me a ring, which I hadn't expected. And um, we made plans to get married. We took a little vacation, went down to visit where some of the other volunteers were in our group and got to meet them, and they were all very surprised because I hadn't told them. I'd only told two people about the engagement.

KLEIN: [01:53:32] But people knew Mike.

MEHRER: [01:53:34] They all knew Mike, right.

KLEIN: [01:53:37] Because he'd been in the training.

MEHRER: [01:53:37] And they were all surprised that I was still in touch with him and that we were getting married and that we were an item at all.

KLEIN: [01:53:43] Yeah, yeah. So how long was the visit all together?

MEHRER: [01:53:48] A couple of weeks, I guess. Or maybe one week? I can't remember.

KLEIN: [01:53:53] You had to leave time coming or vacation time coming?

MEHRER: [01:53:56] Yeah. And we had thought maybe to go down to Peru because I'd always wanted to go to Peru, but we didn't have enough money or time to do all of that. So we thought, well, he told me to apply to Acción. Acción didn't want to be in the position of having recruited someone who was an active Peace Corps volunteer. So he said I had to apply and tell them why I wanted to work with them and get accepted. So I did all of that.

KLEIN: [01:54:26] Acción being in Washington?

MEHRER: [01:54:30] No, Acción in Venezuela.

KLEIN: [01:54:31] OK, so you were flying directly to?

MEHRER: [01:54:34] To Acción in Venezuela in Caracas, right.

KLEIN: [01:54:37] OK. And with information provided by Mike.

MEHRER: [01:54:40] Right. And so then he left and we had plans to get married if I got, assuming I got accepted, I mean, we didn't see any reason why they wouldn't accept me. I was a little nervous about that. What happens if they don't, you know?

KLEIN: [01:55:00] At this point, how long had you been in Ecuador?

MEHRER: [01:55:04] Two months.

KLEIN: [01:55:05] That's all? OK.

MEHRER: [01:55:06] Yeah. Two or three months. And, um.

KLEIN: [01:55:16] Applied to Acción.

MEHRER: [01:55:18] Right. I'm trying to think, where do we go from here?

KLEIN: [01:55:21] Yeah, well, what happened? I mean, you applied.

MEHRER: [01:55:25] I applied. They accepted me and we made plans to get married. Uh, we sent out invitations, but we only sent them to Peace Corps volunteers and not in our parents' name, which was unheard of in those days.

KLEIN: [01:55:37] But at that point, what did you, what was your relationship to Peace Corps and what did you say and what happened?

MEHRER: [01:55:45] Well, when Mike was still there, when he was visiting me, we decided to tell a Peace Corps what was going on. So it was kind of amusing. We had an argument. Mike said, you know, as the person, you know, he wanted to take the brunt of it and be there with me and support me when this was informed to the Peace Corps operations. And I hadn't done very many things on my own before, I was only 22. And I wanted to be, this was my job. This was my doing and I thought I should be the one to tell the Peace Corps what I'm going to do, not him. And we couldn't get past this. So I finally said, OK, I'll meet you at 10:00 at the Peace Corps office and then we'll do it there. And so I went there at 8:00 and I talked to the director and I told him that I was going to leave the Peace Corps and that I was going to marry Mike and that, if I got accepted, and that I was going to move to Venezuela and work in urban community action.

MEHRER: [01:56:56] And there have been a lot of negative things said about Gene Baird, but I have to say something very positive. He said, I understand the situation. We're sorry to see you go. But when you decide when you're leaving, you know, we will keep you until you decide you're leaving. And when you decide, write a formal letter and send it to me here and explain that you're not quitting because you can't hack it, you're quitting because the reasons you're quitting and that you're going to be working in Latin America in this field. And I appreciated that so that it wouldn't go on my record as just quitting. And I've truthfully always felt very guilty about quitting because the major part of the Peace Corps' financing is, well, four months of training was not cheap, but the airfares going down. And but then I gave a daughter to the Peace Corps too, so it worked out anyway. So then we got married in August.

KLEIN: [01:58:05] Did you have a fallback position if Acción didn't accept you?

MEHRER: [01:58:09] I was going to stay. Oh well, I thought I was going to stay. I think now I was going to stay. I'm not sure whether I was going to.

KLEIN: [01:58:15] But it seems to me that it ended up that you were really getting ready to marry.

MEHRER: [01:58:19] Yeah, yeah. I think maybe we had decided. I think maybe Mike had said that if I didn't get hired by Acción that I could go there, I mean, get married, go there and then find a job doing teaching English or something. I wasn't at all sure about that because I hadn't traveled in Latin America. I didn't know there were jobs everywhere teaching English. But he did.

KLEIN: [01:58:41] Where did you get married?

MEHRER: [01:58:42] Guayaquil. Big port city that's the largest city in Ecuador.

KLEIN: [01:58:48] So it was in Ecuador. Did family come?

MEHRER: [01:58:50] No, the only people who came were Peace Corps volunteers. Some Peace Corps staff. And my, the lady that I rented the room from in Saraguro came down. She had relatives to stay with. And it turns out that one of the guys in our group, one of Mike's roommates when he was in training, worked for an Episcopal missionary priest. And so we decided that would be the best way. I would rather have gotten married in Saraguro, but it wouldn't be by the Catholic priest that everybody hated, and it shouldn't probably be by the missionary. I think he was out of town anyway, the missionary. I might have considered that. But the only way anybody would come to our very remote site, you know, the only way people would come to our wedding would be if I went to a major city. And more people worked in Guayaquil. Quito is much nicer, but we went. I stayed with two of the girls from my group who were roommates in Guayaquil. We had the reception in their apartment.

KLEIN: [01:59:54] So at that point when you came up to Guayaquil to get married, you left Saraguro.

MEHRER: [02:00:00] Right.

KLEIN: [02:00:01] I mean, they knew your assignment was over and?

MEHRER: [02:00:04] Well, they knew I was quitting one way or another.

KLEIN: [02:00:07] That you weren't going to be coming back. Did Jan stay on?

MEHRER: [02:00:11] Jan stayed on. She was only there a couple of months more before physical infirmities caught up with her, the constant ear infection and other things too that I don't remember. She got another roommate for a while and I don't remember. I mean, I didn't hear much about it.

KLEIN: [02:00:29] But in effect, at that point, your connection with Ecuador and Peace Corps was kind of ended and you moved on to other things, Venezuela and lots more after that. But you, after that time, did you work for the Peace Corps at all? Or did just Mike?

MEHRER: [02:00:48] No, I didn't work for the Peace Corps again.

KLEIN: [02:00:50] Yeah, OK.

MEHRER: [02:00:52] And my husband became a desk officer for five countries in 1970, I guess it was, in D.C. And then in.

KLEIN: [02:01:03] But he was never a volunteer.

MEHRER: [02:01:05] No. Trainee.

KLEIN: [02:01:07] He was just competent.

MEHRER: [02:01:09] Well, he became acting director of Latin America at the end of the.

KLEIN: [02:01:14] In the seventies?

MEHRER: [02:01:15] Yeah, we were. We were allowed five years on staff, no more than five, because of the way Peace Corps was set up.

KLEIN: [02:01:21] In, up and out.

MEHRER: [02:01:22] Yeah. And he was desk officer for a couple of years. By then we had two children, one born in Peru, and then we went back to Peru. And he was director of Peru for two years and we had our third daughter.

KLEIN: [02:01:35] Peace Corps director?

MEHRER: [02:01:36] Peace Corps director. Yeah, yeah. Peru didn't accept him as overall director. And we happened to have taken a vacation in September of '73 down to Chile, which I'd always wanted to visit. They had a coup. I was pregnant. I was having contractions. I thought, what happens? I have a history of dropping the babies early and I was a little concerned. But they, Peace Corps had contingency plans. And there are coups and there are coups. We were in Peru during the '68 coup, the Belaúnde coup, where the military knocked him out. They put him on a plane to the United States, where he lived in a penthouse in Chevy Chase and taught at universities. But Allende coup in Chile was a whole different kettle of fish. We heard machine guns every night. There was a curfew. And we heard in the day we'd go out and we'd see blood on the streets. It was a very frightening time.

KLEIN: [02:02:31] So did you have the baby in Chile or?

MEHRER: [02:02:34] I ended up able, I got the first plane that we were allowed to be on by the government to go north. I walked out to the airport and I was so afraid that these guys, 17 year olds, they looked like, with machine guns and they were very stern looking. And I was so afraid they might shoot me that when they looked at me and asked me something, I'd put my hands up in the air, like in the Westerns. But we got on the plane and got up to Peru, and I was so glad. At that point, we had a couple of maids. We had a maid and a cook. And I had asked a Peace Corps couple who were in Lima to stay with my kids while I was gone. And I was so glad because I

knew the maid would have frightened them to death about their parents being in Chile.

KLEIN: [02:03:20] Yeah, yeah. Interesting. Anything else about the Peace Corps?

MEHRER: [02:03:25] Well, the last.

KLEIN: [02:03:28] Your daughter? Go ahead.

MEHRER: [02:03:29] Well, the last thing. We came back from Peru in '74 and for Mike's last of the fifth years as a staff member, he was director of Latin America for Peace Corps. Then our kids, we've had the good fortune to live in three countries in South America, and Mike's traveled through all of the countries except French Guiana, I think. And people are constantly coming through our house, Spanish speaking and Portuguese speaking people. And friends of mine from when I was a child in Japan, or friends of other friends who are from different parts of the world, and our kids have been influenced by this. And our oldest daughter has always liked the idea of going overseas and has liked foreign people and is more attracted to things that are unusual. She ended up graduating from college in 1990 and going into the first Peace Corps group in Hungary. She met one of the Spanish, the Hungarian language instructors, and fell in love with him. And at the end of two years, she did finish her term, she married him.

KLEIN: [02:04:37] Oh, lovely.

MEHRER: [02:04:38] And we have, they are now back in the States and we have two Hungarian American grandchildren. The youngest is too young to speak, but the oldest is bilingual, and she has maintained the cultural aspects of living in Hungary as well. She goes back every summer and stays with her in-laws for as long as she can. She teaches English as a second language and this is her 10th year, I guess. And she's, um, or maybe it's her 12th. I can't remember. Anyway, she speaks, insists on speaking Hungarian at home when nobody else is around so that the kids will learn. Her husband is not as anxious to speak it strangely enough, but the kids are growing up with a feeling of what it's like in Hungary. Because they go back every year and live in a two room house or three room house and see their

Hungarian cousins and play with them and learn how life in Europe, Eastern Europe, is very different than life over here.

KLEIN: [02:05:45] Getting a sense that the world is a little bit bigger than what you see out of your front window.

MEHRER: [02:05:49] Yeah. And it's interesting to think, to imagine what they will bring to life as an adult when they have, they can see both sides pretty clearly from an insider's viewpoint.

KLEIN: [02:06:00] Well, we pin our hopes for the future on people like that and the fact that those experiences are still possible. Anyway, anything else we can?

MEHRER: [02:06:11] Well, I think before. I think back to times before Peace Corps and what the average, we're not even going to talk about the Indian people, but we're going to talk about the average Ecuadorian or Peruvian or Afghani knew about America. They have television, so they see Gunsmoke and Bonanza. That's what they know about America and the news programs where we invade Grenada and bomb Libya. That's what they know about Americans. They see Dallas. This is what we were exporting, this or.

[END OF INTERVIEW]