

Mary Ward Oral History Interview
Returned Peace Corps Volunteer Collection
Administrative Information

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Biographical Note

Mary Ward served as a Peace Corps volunteer in Ecuador from 1984 to 1986 on a special education project for the blind.

Access

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Oral History Interview

with

Mary Ward

June 22, 2019

Austin, Texas

By Christeen Pusch

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

PUSCH: [00:00:02] Today is June 22nd, 2019. This is Christine Pusch. I'm interviewing Mary Ward, who was a Peace Corps volunteer in Ecuador from 1984 to 1986 in special education. Mary, can you tell us why you decided to join the Peace Corps?

WARD: [00:00:20] Well, I know there's a lot of people who say that they always wanted to join Peace Corps, and, you know, I think that's great, but it was sort of the last thing on my mind. I was working in one of those pink collar jobs where you have to have a whole lot of knowledge, but you're not really contributing that much. I was typing medical reports and I kind of felt like an extension cord. I wasn't especially good at the job. It did put food on the table. But after I got laid off and couldn't find another job, I went to an annual convention of National Federation of the Blind. I am completely blind myself and have been since I turned five in 1960. Anyway, I decided I'd go to this international meeting and there was a gentleman there named Mickey Fedor, who had run a or had worked in a Peace Corps

project called Blind Independence in I think it was the Gambia. And now they're going to do another one in Ecuador.

WARD: [00:01:26] So I kind of, after I saw that presentation, I kind of hemmed and hawed around for a couple of months and I finally just found the guy's phone number and called him in Washington. It turned out that just based on that phone call, he recommended me. So when I went to the Peace Corps recruiter, I had a recommendation on my file for that program. When I, the day I got accepted, though, on that very day, I also found out that he had died. I kind of considered not going. I sort of got the idea that our program had also fallen apart. There were a lot of reasons for that, namely missteps, not by him, but by other people that were involved with the project. That some of the people that had been trying to put in a place where really maybe not the people that should have been doing it.

WARD: [00:02:26] And so we lost our program, but they put us in special ed. There were five of us, three blind people that came, two others that came in with me, and two that had gotten there earlier. So and they stationed us around different parts of Ecuador after the training.

PUSCH: [00:02:50] So you said, what program was it that had kind of fallen through?

WARD: [00:02:54] It was called Blind Independence. And the goal of our program had been to train some leaders of the blind community in some skills and train them. And then have them go out and be teachers and trainers in the community so that the project would live without us.

PUSCH: [00:03:16] OK.

WARD: [00:03:16] And in some ways, in a really roundabout way, I think that's actually what happened, but not in the formal way that that project was going to do it.

PUSCH: [00:03:26] OK. So I'll ask you more about that later. But so did you have, because I like to go chronologically.

WARD: [00:03:33] Sure.

PUSCH: [00:03:34] So, sorry. The application process, you said, was pretty straightforward. You already had that recommendation. They knew what program they wanted you for, right?

WARD: [00:03:43] Yeah. And I told, yeah, so they knew what program. And I was really lucky because I probably wouldn't have gotten accepted without him recommending.

PUSCH: [00:03:52] OK. Do you think that a blind person can still be accepted into the Peace Corps? How difficult is it, do you think?

WARD: [00:03:59] It is. Now, I haven't talked to anybody who tried in the last 20 years or so, but it sounds to me like at least in the past, it was pretty arbitrary. If the recruiter had positive attitudes about people with disabilities, they might let them in, and if they had negative attitudes about it, they might not. And I saw, I talked to some young people who tried to go as a couple and they were turned down because they had not lived on their own. And that's something that would never happen to somebody who didn't have a disability. And I actually think that those two kids could have made it.

WARD: [00:04:45] But I also saw an error happen in the other direction. One of the people that came in with me was this absolutely amazing woman who had, you know, she'd survived the Spanish flu of 1917. She was like 69 when she came in. I mean, you had to hand it to her for bravery and for just being a great person. But expectations for blind people when she was growing up were different, and I tried to show her better about how to get around her neighborhood. And then I understood that if I drew the city block in her hand, you know, she didn't understand why you wound up at the same place. And I mean, I have a lot of trouble with understanding spatial concepts too. But, you know, I have enough compensation to sort of plan for it and work with it. But she hadn't really had that to the extent that I had, and it was really going to be a problem for her. But then she also got sick and realized that, you know, her health needed some attention.

WARD: [00:05:53] So I saw errors go on in both ways. And I think the only solution to that would probably be for Peace Corps and, you know, some of the, not just special educators, but even more importantly, groups that are of people with disabilities to have some kind of dialog. You know, so that the right people would be sent and people wouldn't have to go through the trauma of realizing they're going to have to go home because they don't have the skills. But on the other hand, not turning down people that they shouldn't have worried about. I don't know how that could happen, but I think it, you know, if Peace Corps wants to diversify with people with disabilities, that's, you know, what would really have to happen for it to occur.

PUSCH: [00:06:44] And so what was your, I'm going to go back. But yeah, I think those are amazing things you're talking about. And so, I mean, really pretty much just saying that, you know, not everyone with a disability is capable of doing Peace Corps or is a good fit. I mean, not everyone without a disability is not.

WARD: [00:07:01] Right. That's pretty much it.

PUSCH: [00:07:03] But there are some people with what we consider disabilities who might be really good fits. So I really want to get into your service and your experience in the country.

WARD: [00:07:14] Oh, sure.

PUSCH: [00:07:14] So kind of wanting to first start off with the training.

WARD: [00:07:19] The training was.

PUSCH: [00:07:19] What did you guys do for training?

WARD: [00:07:21] We had a lot of Spanish. I didn't really know much Spanish when I went, but I think that for me, learning Spanish was one of the most fun things that I had ever done in my life. I just completely loved it. And

they used to give us the FSI exams and I came in at a zero plus and left with a four. But I'm not that skill level now, but, you know, four out of five.

PUSCH: [00:07:50] Right.

WARD: [00:07:50] But it was, um. We had a morning of that. They put the blind people all together though when we were, there were three of us and I think we were at six different levels.

PUSCH: [00:08:03] OK.

WARD: [00:08:03] So that was sort of frustrating.

PUSCH: [00:08:08] Wait, how many of you guys were there?

WARD: [00:08:10] What's that?

PUSCH: [00:08:10] How many of you guys were there?

WARD: [00:08:10] There were three of us in my Omnibus.

PUSCH: [00:08:13] OK, OK, continue.

WARD: [00:08:14] There were two that were already there. And then there were the three of us and our language levels were not the same and did not develop the same. And it was really kind of hard for me being in the class where. You know, I think it was probably frustrating for all of us because, you know, there's one trying to go faster, one trying to go a whole lot slower, you know.

PUSCH: [00:08:34] Were you the one going faster?

WARD: [00:08:36] Yeah, unfortunately. Usually I'm not. But that time I was. And then, you know, there was the poor guy in the middle.

PUSCH: [00:08:43] Well, I'm sure he, I don't know. I feel like, yeah, for all the reasons.

WARD: [00:08:49] And he was kind of an interesting case, too, because he was multilingual already, because he was a Palestinian American. He had come over. He was like, you know, first generation. He'd been blinded in a car accident.

PUSCH: [00:09:06] Oh wow.

WARD: [00:09:07] At five, you know? So anyway, there was the three of us and they put us. I really wish that we had had Spanish class. But, you know, because they used a lot of overheads and stuff, that's why they did it. But it was, it was the best they could do. But I found it frustrating. But then we had, sometimes in the afternoons we had different activities, and the woman that worked with us the most was really more of a specialist in deafness. And you know, it went pretty well. I don't. I have to say pretty honestly, that training was not my favorite part of this.

PUSCH: [00:09:44] OK. I think that's the case for a lot of people.

WARD: [00:09:47] Yeah, it's kind of like if you can survive training, you can survive Peace Corps. And you just have to remember during the training that if you don't like it, if you find that sometimes it's not as helpful as it could be. You just have to remember, look, this is temporary. This is just what I have to get through.

PUSCH: [00:10:04] Yeah. And so you said there was a woman who taught you guys or there were a few different people?

WARD: [00:10:11] Yeah, she didn't work, she was not a Peace Corps volunteer though. She was just.

PUSCH: [00:10:16] Where was your training?

WARD: [00:10:18] Our training was all in Quito, except that they did take us down to one of the little coastal towns called Portoviejo to do a seminar with a bunch of blind adults. And that seminar was really completely fun. I just totally fell in love with all of the people that we were working with. And I

still remember this one that we had a celebration at the end of it. And this one little girl who was maybe 14 or 15 and she was real shy and, you know, had not moved around a lot, I could tell because her hands are all stiff and things like that. So, and I don't dance here, but I remember that I saw Margarita and I said, hey, you want to dance? And I remember spinning her around.

PUSCH: [00:11:02] Oh, nice.

WARD: [00:11:04] You know, here's this big, tall gringo spinning her around. You know, it was so much fun. I'll never forget spinning her around, and she was just giggling and it was so fun.

PUSCH: [00:11:18] And so what did you guys do with the seminar? I mean, you guys danced.

WARD: [00:11:21] We did.

PUSCH: [00:11:23] Did you teach them anything?

WARD: [00:11:23] We did Braille. We did some cane travel, which is always scary to me because I'm not really that good. We did, um, I don't remember what kind of daily living skills we did. I don't think we did cooking, but I really don't remember. Yeah, I'm trying to remember what we did all day. It was so hot there that you really could only work in the morning. That place is hot.

PUSCH: [00:11:51] Yeah.

WARD: [00:11:51] And I remember us just sitting around and talking to them about what their experiences were as blind people in Ecuador. And you know, your family and, you know, how do you relate to the people around you and what do you need, you know, and things like that. And we weren't going to be able to solve a lot of those issues. Oh, and some of them were musicians. And so we spent time with just social activities, you know, to make sure that they knew how to do turn taking and things like that. Because sometimes the expectations of people with disabilities are really

low and you know, they don't expect you to participate in a normal adult conversation, you know, so we did things like that. And, you know, let everybody choose a song and, you know, things like that that didn't seem relevant, but they were.

PUSCH: [00:12:49] OK. So you mean like people who without disabilities have very low expectations?

WARD: [00:12:53] Of people with disabilities, yes.

PUSCH: [00:12:55] Like they won't be able to engage.

WARD: [00:12:56] They're not going to be able to engage in conversations. And, you know, *pobrecito*, you know.

PUSCH: [00:13:02] Poor thing.

WARD: [00:13:03] *Pobrecito*.

PUSCH: [00:13:04] So did you get any of that when you were in?

WARD: [00:13:07] Oh yeah. I mean, like even among all the special ed volunteers, no matter what disability group, they'd say, oh, the people at the school have a really *pobrecito* attitude.

PUSCH: [00:13:17] Oh, OK. A poor attitude.

WARD: [00:13:20] You know, like they feel sorry for the kids and don't let them do anything, you know?

PUSCH: [00:13:25] OK.

WARD: [00:13:26] A *pobrecito* attitude. And you knew that, oh my god, this is going to be one of those places where it's really hard to teach them any skills.

PUSCH: [00:13:33] Yeah. So I mean, what was, because you talked to the people in Ecuador, in Quito, about their experiences? What is it like being a disabled person in Ecuador? How are people?

WARD: [00:13:46] It is weird. You are so incredibly visible. Because one of us, the one who was an Arab American, probably could have passed for an Ecuadorian, even though he would have been kind of tall for one. But the rest of us, there was no way. And so you're really visible because of, you know, racial and ethnic things, you know, because of, you know, everything down to our body shapes are different. And so any volunteer stands out, but being one with a disability. I made sure that even though I'm not really good at traveling in really complicated places, but I made sure that I got seen. You know, no matter how well or how badly the work at my site was going, I made sure that I did things like go to the open air market and haggle for prices for my eggs and vegetables and stuff. You know, I usually got the price I named.

PUSCH: [00:14:56] Oh, really?

WARD: [00:14:57] Yeah, people didn't want to fight with me. I wish I'd been a little nicer, you know?

PUSCH: [00:15:04] Oh no, I think that's great. Giving you the price, you know?

WARD: [00:15:09] You know, it's going to be this, right? Yeah. Because I'd seen other people do it that way and there I was.

PUSCH: [00:15:16] No, but I was kind of wondering about, you know, your experience at that seminar. What kind of, did they tell you and did they share any stories about what their lives were like?

WARD: [00:15:25] They were hesitant. They really were. And that's. The trainer was really kind of upset about that. And I kind of. It was the eighties and some of the ideas that we had in the '80s really turned out to not be, well, you know, maybe we pushed things a little farther. Because, you know, in the eighties, people got pushed a lot about what their values really are and

stuff, stuff people were not really ready for. And in South America, especially up in the Sierra.

PUSCH: [00:16:04] What is Sierra?

WARD: [00:16:05] Mountains. People are very, very reserved. And I think that just meeting them where they were and trying to find out, OK, what are you willing to talk about? Would have probably been a better idea because they were pretty reticent and yet they still had fun with us. They just, I think that I kind of respect them for it. Even if I didn't like the way they did it, they were able to set their boundaries. And I think that was a good thing, actually, even if we didn't always like the result. You know, like, what's the most important thing to you? My faith. And you know that their faith is the last thing in the world they're thinking about most of the time, but you know, that sort of thing. And in the eighties, it seemed to be in the United States, people challenging that kind of stuff. But it's not the '80s anymore, thank heavens.

PUSCH: [00:17:00] I was in Honduras many years later, or 20 years later, and I feel like religion is still very important in Latin America.

WARD: [00:17:09] Yeah, it is. But I mean, people say it's more important to them than it really is. That's what I'm saying. But it's not really our place to challenge that. You know, yeah, most people are hypocritical about religion. Most people all over the world, including here, we're all hypocritical about it, whatever we believe.

PUSCH: [00:17:28] But there's some something to that. OK, so training. I mean, the most influential part of training was probably going to that seminar, right?

WARD: [00:17:42] That was, yeah, it was. That and, you know, just learning Spanish and finding out. I was afraid I was going to be scared to talk all the time. And it turned out I never shut up.

PUSCH: [00:17:53] Oh, good. I mean, you know, vision and speaking, have very, I mean, hopefully they're not really correlated.

WARD: [00:18:00] They want to learn more about us. Shut up a little more.

PUSCH: [00:18:03] OK, I want to hear more about that later. OK. So training. Anything else you want to say about training?

WARD: [00:18:12] No, it's sort of like, there's a lot about it that is best forgotten. But now that it's been that far, I do realize there really were some value, especially that seminar. I may not have liked the evaluation I got after it, but.

PUSCH: [00:18:29] Why? What was, do you want to talk about that at all?

WARD: [00:18:33] Well, just that I don't think. I think there was sort of a mismatch between us and the trainers. And I think that I might have gotten stuck in a power struggle that was not really about me. It was but it wasn't, and my approach to things. And if they had just said, look, you're expecting too much, that's not really where people are at right now. I figured that out quick enough. Boy, did I ever figure it out quick enough.

PUSCH: [00:19:09] But what?

WARD: [00:19:11] You know, and I think sometimes there might be a balance between, you know, a trainer telling you something and, you know, sometimes they have to. But also a lot of times you figure out pretty quickly that you need to change your expectations.

PUSCH: [00:19:28] So the power struggle, I mean, was that about just you trying to push things a little further? And the society not being ready for that? Or was it something else?

WARD: [00:19:40] I think it was that, but I'm trying to think. It's really hard for me to even remember what it was all about. But she, I think with the trainer. I remember my other friend in there saying, you know, that she had all these ideas of the kind of trainer she was going to get. She had idealized these volunteers, but these are the volunteers that she actually got.

PUSCH: [00:20:12] What was the idealized version of you guys?

WARD: [00:20:14] I think the idealized version of us was, you know, on the one hand, completely confident and able to really, really inspire everybody. And I just don't think it was.

PUSCH: [00:20:29] So there were pretty high expectations.

WARD: [00:20:31] Yeah, high, but not very specific.

PUSCH: [00:20:34] OK. Just that you would be these perfect volunteers.

WARD: [00:20:37] Yeah, we would be like perfect volunteers. And I got assigned to a job that was pretty much administrative. And they told us right out that if you can't adjust to anything that we put you in, then you don't belong in Peace Corps.

PUSCH: [00:20:54] Oh wow.

WARD: [00:20:55] Now these people, these trainers were not Peace Corps staff. I don't think that would ever happen with Peace Corps staff. I really don't. But they weren't, and I think that they lost the contract a couple of years later so you know.

PUSCH: [00:21:13] Where were they from?

WARD: [00:21:15] There was kind of a mix of Ecuadorians and some of them were Americans, and they, the ones that were higher up had been Peace Corps volunteers back in the sixties. And you know, it was the '80s now, and I think that there might have been some generational issues with, you know, that they thought that Peace Corps really should be back the way it was when they went in. At least, that was the impression that a lot of us had.

PUSCH: [00:21:45] OK, so how do you think it had changed from the '60s to '80s?

WARD: [00:21:50] I think that there might have been a whole lot more of attempts to put supports in place by the '80s. And, you know, like make sure that

you really have a counterpart, make sure that your site is safe, and things like that. They didn't just like dump you off the plane, you know, anymore. Some people really, really thrived in that environment of see what you can do out there, but some people really don't. But that doesn't mean they don't have anything to contribute. I think that Peace Corps became more diverse as far as styles go, which I think is a good thing. But there's always. I don't mean to complain about it either, because there's always kind of growing pains when things are changing. Something that's growing hurts, you know, and it just does.

PUSCH: [00:22:57] What I'm hearing, too, is that you're saying that Peace Corps actually started putting in more supports?

WARD: [00:23:01] Yes.

PUSCH: [00:23:02] I mean, to really help the volunteers.

WARD: [00:23:04] Yeah, and from what I was hearing the other night, it sounds like there's even more now. Like you really have to have a counterpart now, apparently.

PUSCH: [00:23:11] Yeah, yeah. And you get assigned to a specific project.

WARD: [00:23:15] Yeah.

PUSCH: [00:23:16] And that was, I mean, even ten years ago, for me, that wasn't really the case. I was, you know, in a sector, but I didn't get my project until later on. OK.

WARD: [00:23:25] And I got my first site. I didn't really do very well at all because I got assigned an administrative job where there really wasn't anything to administrate. And I'm not an administrator. I don't know why she put me there.

PUSCH: [00:23:45] So, OK, yeah, let's kind of backtrack a little bit. So training. When did you get, how did you get your assignment? And how did you first get into site?

WARD: [00:23:54] They gave us, I think at the kind of toward the end of training, they gave us our assignments. And they sent us to those places. And I didn't really know what to do with myself in this administrative office where there really wasn't anything to administer. I'd know more now, but I really didn't then. So even though it really was a failure and the report that the people wrote said it was a failure, they sent me there anyway.

PUSCH: [00:24:23] OK. How old were you when you?

WARD: [00:24:25] I was 29. I was old enough to know better. I was 29.

PUSCH: [00:24:28] Ok, so yeah, and you had worked before?

WARD: [00:24:30] Yeah, I had worked before, but I hadn't really worked in that. Yeah. So I was old enough to know better.

PUSCH: [00:24:36] OK. And so like when you got your site description or did you have a counterpart?

WARD: [00:24:43] Well, not really, no. And you know, I was supposed to like just get people together, you know? So now I know what I really should have done, like just, you know, go. And I did do it to some extent. I went to go visit. There was a school in Quito that I went to go visit and talk to them. I know they had mistrusted, there were not good relations between the Peace Corps and that school, so we didn't have anybody there.

PUSCH: [00:25:07] So, yeah, what should you have done? What do you think the ideal was?

WARD: [00:25:12] What maybe I should have done? Well, I'm almost thinking that if I couldn't figure out what to do with that job, maybe I should have gone home, but I'm so glad I didn't. If that makes sense, you know. It's just that then I went and I started to work, you know, with some kids, some teenagers. And you know, just like, work with them and see what their lives were like and, you know, encourage them to get out and to do things

and talk to me about what was going on in their classes if they had them and, you know, just things like that.

PUSCH: [00:25:53] And this was the same site?

WARD: [00:25:54] Well, it was the same city.

PUSCH: [00:25:56] Same city.

WARD: [00:25:57] Yeah. So I just I finally got to where I wasn't even going to the office anymore and I was just, OK, well, I'll just find something else to do, you know. And even though I think it was valuable, but my program director said, look, Mary, you can't do that as your site. Not here in Quito you can't, because there was somebody who was doing exactly that.

PUSCH: [00:26:19] Oh, OK.

WARD: [00:26:20] But not in the capital, you can't get away with that.

PUSCH: [00:26:22] So you were assigned to.

WARD: [00:26:23] He didn't say that, but I know that's what he meant.

PUSCH: [00:26:25] OK, alright. Yeah, yeah. So you were initially assigned to Quito, right?

WARD: [00:26:32] Yeah. And then I don't remember how I said, you know, I'm just, I'm not. This isn't working. I'm going to have to either do something else or go home. So they sent me to the school in Cuenca. Actually, they didn't send me to the school. They sent me to a, uh, because the director of that school was problematic also. They had some really bad schools for kids with disabilities. But they, there was a good teacher there, but they sent me to work with this club of blind adults.

PUSCH: [00:27:01] OK.

WARD: [00:27:02] And mainly what I was doing, I didn't really have enough hours, but I helped them a little bit with paperwork they were going to try to like have these little kiosk things that they sold things in. And I taught mainly Braille to the kids. But if they asked me about other skills like, you know, how to read a watch or something like that, I would teach the kids, almost all of them boys, but I would teach them Braille. And I had this one kid that came out from one of the provinces to Cuenca. He may have been a Quechua speaker, I'm not really sure. He did speak Spanish, but with a really heavy accent from out in the tulis, and he had never been to school of any kind and he was 17.

PUSCH: [00:27:50] Wow.

WARD: [00:27:50] So he didn't. It was really a big challenge for me to try to teach him, you know, what reading was like and how sounds are separate. But he worked so hard, but he didn't really understand what it was he was supposed to be learning, and I was feeling so frustrated that I couldn't help him. And then one day I show up to class to work with him. And, you know, I kept making more materials and things, and I walk in and he reads the page.

PUSCH: [00:28:19] Oh wow. So you taught him how to read?

WARD: [00:28:21] Well, I didn't. But that was one of those instances where I think the other kids did.

PUSCH: [00:28:27] Oh, wow.

WARD: [00:28:28] But I don't think it would have happened if I hadn't been there, so I kind of feel like sometimes you succeed by failing. Because, you know, he was always telling me why you're so patient with me, you know, because they were used to teachers yelling at them. That's just the way it's supposed to be. The teachers yell at kids. I didn't yell at him, and the poor kid would be like his hands all stiff and he's shaking and palms are all sweaty, you know. And I did like hand over hand because we both needed for it to be that way and he didn't know what his hands were doing. And, you know, he was just, he wanted to do it so bad. So he must have gone

to the other kids and say, you gotta help me. I really feel embarrassed by not being able to do this for her. And so whatever they did, you know, it's possible that the way that I was trying to teach just wasn't the right way for somebody that is pre-literate and an adult. But I don't look at it as a failure. To me, it's a big success. You know, that it happened because I was around.

PUSCH: [00:29:36] Yeah.

WARD: [00:29:37] You know, sometimes that was the most successful failure I've ever had, I think.

PUSCH: [00:29:43] Ok. Yeah.

WARD: [00:29:44] And it's just a real valuable experience.

PUSCH: [00:29:49] Yeah. And so, OK. So you were administrative assistant in Quito and you were working with teenagers. Were the teenagers?

WARD: [00:29:55] That's what I really did. They weren't affiliated with my assignment.

PUSCH: [00:29:57] Yeah, yeah. You were assigned as an administrative assistant. There was nothing to.

WARD: [00:30:03] Yeah, I was supposed to just pull everything together and work miracles, apparently.

PUSCH: [00:30:07] And the teenagers you were working with, were they also blind?

WARD: [00:30:09] Yeah, they were blind. And then they were, you know, like a couple of girls. I can't remember. There were a couple of college students that we saw a lot, that helped us a whole lot to learn the lay of the land. A lot, most of the blind people, if they were out at all, were begging.

PUSCH: [00:30:28] Oh wow.

WARD: [00:30:28] And that became a problem at my site in Cuenca.

PUSCH: [00:30:31] Yeah, I was going to ask you about that transition.

WARD: [00:30:34] Yeah, that was partly my fault really. But it wasn't all my fault by any means at all. But I got upset because they were. I knew that my kids were probably going to have to beg because they didn't really have anything to live on. But with them begging in the name of the group, I kind of had a big issue with that. Maybe, I think now that I probably should have just let it slide, but it really upset me because my name is attached to this thing. And you know, they were going to the church and making money. And actually that one kid, I saw the papers that he was writing. He actually, in Braille, he was keeping pretty good records of what they got from the streets.

PUSCH: [00:31:15] Oh, wow.

WARD: [00:31:15] But you know, he was good, you know, smart kid. But I didn't like that and somebody got really mad at me and they complained to Peace Corps. Then after I left, they complained to the Peace Corps that they took me away.

PUSCH: [00:31:29] Oh, really?

WARD: [00:31:30] Yeah. Same people. They could be kind of difficult.

PUSCH: [00:31:35] OK, so you were working, this is when you were working with Blind Independence. Is that?

WARD: [00:31:39] Yeah. Well, actually, I was still in. So we were sort of in special ed, but we weren't, you know. We kind of tried to do some of what they had originally said for us to do. And I heard about the school in Loja, so I just went down there and talked to them and talked to the director, and I knew he was problematic too. But I went back up to Quito and said, I want to change my site. And I kind of had some, yeah, I realized that part of this was my fault. But it really, it was just really troubling to me that, not that

they were begging, but that they were begging for the organization. That really bothered me.

PUSCH: [00:32:21] Wait, how are they begging for the organization?

WARD: [00:32:23] Well, they were saying in begging for the Home for the Blind, not in their own name. They weren't just begging alms, and that bothered me. I think now that I should have just let it ride. But I didn't think that at the time. You know, I was still young and kind of idealistic, and you know, that it bothered me. I should have let it ride and pretended I didn't know.

PUSCH: [00:32:47] And then the organization was fine with them actually doing that?

WARD: [00:32:51] Oh, they wanted it. That was how they kept the organization there. It's dependent on begging, it depended on the very thing that we were trying to get them away from. But there's not, you know, I should have said, look, Mary, there's no Social Security. What else are they going to do, you know? And I got kind of. I think that the thing that upset me the most, though, was that they hadn't told me. You know, that that I find this out after I've been there for eight months.

PUSCH: [00:33:20] Right. I mean, and I think I'm putting words in your mouth, but I think that like if a kid spends a lot of time begging they are not developing skill sets. And I think it's just part of a bigger problem, right? That that was kind of where they were going to go.

WARD: [00:33:36] Like I said, that one kid. He was keeping track of all of the finances and he was doing a great job. I don't even know whether I told him that. I should have. I hope I did. Because he was, he kept track of how much money they got and from where.

PUSCH: [00:33:50] Do you have any idea what happened to any of these kids?

WARD: [00:33:53] No, unfortunately I don't. I didn't have addresses for a lot of them. And my kids in Loja, after I finally got a formal change there, they, it was an elementary school. But there were like 20 kids, and they ranged in

age from six to 19. And I think there was one year that we didn't have any. I think we didn't have any fourth or fifth graders. So like because they didn't want to have a grade just for one kid. The sighted teachers were pretty much trying to teach them to write Braille without ever having seen it. So really what was happening is by the time they got to the blind teacher in third grade, he had to teach him everything, you know, and I tried to encourage them. Look, you know, I'll help you do this, but we've really got to make some materials for them, because they, you know. I'll even help you do it. I'll even do it.

WARD: [00:34:57] But they can't learn to read, to write something that they've never experienced at all. If they haven't seen it, how are they? They don't understand what it's all about. So we wound up having to teach them from the beginning in third grade, and it was amazing how well they caught up, you know? Yeah, they were, because they sort of knew. And I would go there and work with just, you know, whoever you know worked with the kids. And, you know, sometimes in the afternoons, sometimes we would prepare. We were preparing a, writing a book for third grade, you know. And I had to make five copies in Braille of a book that we were using for a third grade text. And, you know, so we worked together on that.

WARD: [00:35:57] Sometimes I would do things like teach them, you know, oh, how do you do a clock face? So I got somebody here to send me this toy clock that had the little numbers around it that were raised that you could, you know, I think you could take them off, and the great big hands, you know, and explain how, you know, with a big hand, they're five minutes instead of one. And you know, so, you know, just things like like that. And I would teach them. And they all wanted to play with my cane.

PUSCH: [00:36:27] Oh, really? Did they not have any?

WARD: [00:36:29] Well, they had some. They were not really as nice as mine, I hate to say, but they weren't. But they did get some. I can't remember where they got them from. And they all wanted to play with it. Cane is a *bastón*. And they, you know, I had this little game I would play with them, you know, because I was always kidding around with them. And they'd

say, *bastóncita, bastóncita*. And I'd say *bato, bato*, which is like a, you know, I'm going to beat you up.

PUSCH: [00:36:58] *Bastóncita* would be a little cane.

WARD: [00:37:00] Oh, can I see your little cane? And then I'd say, I'm going to whoop your butt, you know? So we would always like laugh, you know, how when you're kid or anybody really, and you laugh at the same stupid joke every day?

PUSCH: [00:37:15] Yeah.

WARD: [00:37:16] And you know, we had little. On Carnival, you know, like, it's Mardi Gras here, the director. Oh God, the director is really sort of, I hate to say it, but really awful human being. But he told us that morning that, you know, I know that people throw water balloons for Carnival, but you guys are not supposed to throw water balloons. Well, we knew he would be leaving at noon. So I came back in the afternoon and we threw water balloons. And the woman that was sort of the caretaker and cook and everything, she actually would, she was actually helping us to do it, like helping us find each other and stuff, you know? So yeah, you can get him in the butt right now, if you do it. You know, about waist high, you know, and whatever. So she actually helped. You know, because I thought I have to throw water balloons with the kids. I just have to, because they don't get to do stuff like that.

PUSCH: [00:38:23] Yeah, yeah, yeah. That's cool.

WARD: [00:38:24] And bless her heart, she must have had a lot to clean up. Good woman.

PUSCH: [00:38:30] Yeah. And so I mean, all the kids you worked with were blind, right? They didn't have any other disabilities?

WARD: [00:38:36] Well, there were some that did. There was one girl that seemed to be nonverbal and. Sweet, sweet kid. But she did not speak and she was very small for her age. I would have thought she was six or seven, but she

was actually 11 or 12 and was starting to develop. And then, you know, sort of like a developing six year old. So I don't know what her other disabilities were. Really sweet kid. And there was one that I kind of think had a learning disability because you just couldn't get her to sit still. But we didn't have any deaf blind kids. I'm sure they were deaf blind people. But that would just be awful to live in a place like that and be deaf blind.

PUSCH: [00:39:20] Right.

WARD: [00:39:20] It'd be awful to be deaf blind anyway. You know, I'm sorry. I know a couple of people that are deaf blind, and you know, they're really, you know, they're not completely deaf or completely blind, the ones I know. But it's a hard row to hoe. It really is.

PUSCH: [00:39:36] Yeah, I can see that. Definitely. I mean, it's probably hard enough being blind, right?

WARD: [00:39:40] Yeah. Well, either being blind or being deaf is hard, but you compensate for the one sense with the other one. And then to lose them both, two dual sensory, you know? That's just, it's more difficult and the world is not set up for you.

PUSCH: [00:39:58] OK. So while you were at site, I mean, you really just. Yeah, I mean, you were in Cuenca and you worked with the Blind Independence and you worked.

WARD: [00:40:07] And I worked with kids, and I worked at the school. I think I did have a slight problem there in Loja, that school. You know, they told me that you're going to have some trouble with this guy. He's difficult. But I was able to stick up for myself and do what I was supposed to be doing. He wanted me to, he wanted to not have to pay. He wanted to have me be one of the regular teachers and teach regular subjects, which was verboten. And he wanted me to. Yeah, we were not supposed to do that. And not have to pay one of the teachers.

PUSCH: [00:40:42] Uh huh.

WARD: [00:40:43] And I said, OK, are you going to go down to the Ministry of Education and tell them that? Or am I going to go down to the Ministry of Education and tell them that? Because I think that they might find it interesting, you know. So I did get him to back down, you know, but it was a bit of a fight. But mainly with Lucio, the thing to do with him was to just give him a wide berth. You would give him a wide berth.

PUSCH: [00:41:14] What?

WARD: [00:41:14] Give him a wide berth and, you know, just stay out of his way and do what you needed to do. He was kind of corrupt. Unfortunately, that sort of thing happens in a lot of charities. And you know, I would consider a school like that a charity. He had gotten away with some embezzlement. And yeah, that was sort of awful. But I learned that a lot of times people like that can be worked around. It's a valuable lesson to know that sometimes these really terrible obstacles can, you can. Life can still go on.

PUSCH: [00:41:54] Yeah, OK. You know, I want to ask you. I ask everyone kind of just what your community was like. And I was just curious, how would you? Because usually I ask and it's like people love the mountains or, you know.

WARD: [00:42:06] I love the mountains.

PUSCH: [00:42:07] OK, you do. So I was just wondering, what was it like experiencing your site, I mean, as a blind person?

WARD: [00:42:13] One of the things that, well, it was weird. There were days that I just couldn't go outside.

PUSCH: [00:42:20] Why's that?

WARD: [00:42:20] I did have those days because I just can't deal with, you know, the combination of the language and blindness and being a foreigner. I just can't do it today. You know, so it's just all too much. So there were days like that, but a lot of times I would just go for walks. You know, there are a lot of places that I couldn't walk because I couldn't get around them.

But the places that I did go, I went pretty often. Just go for a walk and pretend like I'm not this visible. And I liked being able to go places on the bus. I was a little bit bad about not really telling people when I was going down to see my friend in Guayaquil. I would say I'm going to Guayaquil, but I might have been hard to find if something had happened. I had never had that kind of freedom.

PUSCH: [00:43:11] Really?

WARD: [00:43:13] Not really like that where nobody, where I'm not responsible to anybody. And I took advantage of it a little bit. You know, like riding overnight busses and things like that. God, that was fun and it was a little scary. There were a couple of times when, you know, because I hadn't told anybody what bus I was on or anything. Like if something had happened and we'd all gotten killed, it would have been a while for them to figure out it's me. You know, but. And I know Peace Corps tells you never to do that, but I did it. But it's just, it was too tempting. It just was. And you know, when I was going crazy, when Lucio was driving me nuts or something like that, I would go visit somebody or go back up to Quito or something like that. So just being able to travel.

PUSCH: [00:44:08] OK.

WARD: [00:44:09] People in the mountains too, they weren't really used to somebody walking around with a white cane. There were a few people that said nasty things. I did get nasty comments from men occasionally, but most people were really sweet and I'd get up to the corner and, you know, wait to cross the street. And I could actually tell when to cross, but somebody would always take my arm, you know, so almost in like a half hug and walk me across the street. And then just kind of, this little tap on the hand. And you know, they just did it, you know. And I was not going to turn them down. I'd say, thank you. That's very kind. And then, you know, smile at them. And I thought, you know, I'm probably getting more, you know, really kind of interesting intimacy with people that other people may not be getting, just because of that, you know. So I was not going to take offense with that.

PUSCH: [00:45:05] Yeah.

WARD: [00:45:06] It was just, I thought it was just really sweet. Because even though people are reserved and they don't want to give you a lot of information about themselves or their culture, they are very kind and really sweet, kind of shy. It's just people down on the coast are, you know, kind of more outgoing and boisterous and loud.

PUSCH: [00:45:30] Oh, really?

WARD: [00:45:31] But up in the mountains, it's. I really liked that culture a lot. And it's just, I don't know. I just found the people to mostly be really sweet, even though, yeah, there were problems. And one of the things that I remember the most, it wasn't about people, was there was a smell in the air that came down from the mountains that I'm not sure what they were burning. It might have been eucalyptus leaves or something. It was sort of like a burning cedar smell, but I've never smelled that smell again. It's just Ecuador mountains smell.

PUSCH: [00:46:07] Did you like it?

WARD: [00:46:09] I totally loved, was completely in love with it, that fire smell. And it was probably had something to do with agriculture, but it was just always there. They cultivate the Andes up pretty high because the timber line's at like thirteen thousand feet. And they cultivate up to it. And that's actually kind of a problem, too, because some of the soil's pretty washed out. But I don't know. It's just so special. It's hard to say what I was so in love with, but the reason I didn't go home at the end of my, you know, when we swore-in was just because I was too in love with the place to go.

PUSCH: [00:46:53] Yeah, because you said you stayed an extra few months.

WARD: [00:46:56] Yeah, I finished the school year at the school in Loja. I didn't want to leave in the middle of a school year. And I think a lot of what I remember about working in that school is me kind of crouched down next to a kid sitting in a desk and me watching what their hands are doing when they're reading braille and telling them not to script their finger up and

down. Now go back to the. I didn't have any formal training in how to teach things, and some of my instincts were right on and some of them not as much.

PUSCH: [00:47:33] OK. I mean, that's tough. You really were thrown in there. I mean, we all kind of are.

WARD: [00:47:40] Yeah. Well, sometimes you don't know what you don't know. Sometimes it takes the whole two and a half years to not know what you don't know.

PUSCH: [00:47:48] So do you feel like you impacted them? I mean, what do?

WARD: [00:47:50] I actually think so even though I didn't have enough working hours at any of my sites. Just getting out. When we got there, there were a few people that would walk around with white canes and stuff. But when we left, there were way more. And I know it wasn't just because of us. It's more like we were part of a movement that was already there. And so I think that we helped what was already going on. That's what I think, is that no, we weren't the cause of it, but we were kind of in the right place at the right time. So even just going to the market and stuff was something, you know. And having to carry my market basket on one hip and use my cane with the other one. And, you know, go walking down Huayna Cápac and seeing all those carts.

PUSCH: [00:48:42] Where?

WARD: [00:48:42] You know, the street called Huayna Cápac. Huayna Cápac, which was the main street in Cuenca. And I'd have my basket on my hip. And, you know, so all the people driving by, I had to see me walking with a white cane and a big heavy market basket. And, you know, just things like that. They don't seem like they matter, but they kind of do in a place like that. And it really seemed like it encouraged people to go ahead and get out. And there were some university students so. And it was kind of a roundabout way to make an impact. But I kind of felt like even if we were not, you know, like totally successful. I didn't, like, I never had enough hours, for example. Sometimes I wasn't clear what I was really supposed

to be doing, you know, that kind of stuff. But even so, I feel like it was impactful.

PUSCH: [00:49:42] OK.

WARD: [00:49:43] And maybe not in some of the ways that Peace Corps would have wanted, but. Actually, though, they were pretty tolerant of it with us. Because the other two people at their sites, a lot of their work really turned out to be social.

PUSCH: [00:50:01] OK. Like what kind of work do they do?

WARD: [00:50:03] Well, like there was this one guy who was working with a group of blind adults in a city called Ambato, and I think he might have gone back last year, or he said he was going to. I need to send an email to the email address I have and see if he did go back. But he was working with this group of guys that were trying to run little kiosks in that town. It sounds like a made-up job, but there are plenty of people without disabilities who run little newspaper kiosks and stuff. And they were trying to get a special program going to where they could do that as a way for them to make money besides, you know, in ways that weren't begging or prostitution and stuff. So he was working with them, and I really don't know what all he was doing, but everybody in the whole town knew him. It was Dr. John this and Dr. John that.

WARD: [00:50:59] And, you know, even though somebody complained about him that he wasn't doing his job and they sent us to see what's he really doing. And I'm going, you know, for somebody who's not working, he's just damn effective. He's like got this whole town going, you know? Because it wasn't really about him. It looked like it was about him, but it really wasn't. You know what I'm saying?

PUSCH: [00:51:27] Like how so?

WARD: [00:51:28] Well, because like he's going around with his cane, and so he's getting the other people to go around with their canes. And if he can do it, other people can do it. Because it never really stops at oh, isn't this person

amazing? Yeah, that's usually a barrier that you have to get past. But he was, you know, he was totally blind and he was like, going everywhere. Going everywhere, talking to everybody in his really terrible Spanish. Oh my god, his Spanish was awful. But people understood him and teased him. And you know, and I kind of feel like there's a lot of ways. For not working, he was probably the best one of us all.

PUSCH: [00:52:13] Yeah. Well, and I mean, so much of the Peace Corps is also about that social interaction.

WARD: [00:52:17] Yeah, it really is. And if I could look back at my younger self now, I would say, you know, quit worrying about it, quit comparing yourself to the local super volunteer just because some of the trainers were into that. You don't have to buy it just because one trainer told you that, you know, you can just. And that's one of the things I would want to tell, especially young people too, is yeah, you expect a lot out of yourself, but you also have to really cut yourself some slack because you don't know how much impact you're having.

PUSCH: [00:52:53] Yeah.

WARD: [00:52:53] And sometimes you're having the most when you think it isn't working. And you know, so and I probably wouldn't have had that big fight with them in Cuenca if I had just stopped worrying about it, you know, and it was because I had expectations for myself. And that was something that I've kind of learned from, is that sometimes our expectations of ourselves can kind of spill into expectations of others without us really meaning to do that. And that's not always a good thing if you're a Peace Corps volunteer.

PUSCH: [00:53:32] Yeah, I mean, I think that's really good advice for a lot of different volunteers.

WARD: [00:53:35] Just quit your worrying, you know, and don't let anybody else try to make you worry about it either.

PUSCH: [00:53:42] Yeah, I mean, OK, I feel like, OK, no, actually. I feel like that's a great way to end this, but there's more questions I have. Well, I mean, I

guess just kind of how. I guess that's pretty much all. I mean that that really sums up your experience in Ecuador, right?

WARD: [00:53:58] Yeah. Just, you know, if I could do it again, I would just not worry.

PUSCH: [00:54:03] Yeah. And then I kind of have a question of like how this impacted your life. What did you do when you got back from Peace Corps? How was your life different, readjustment, all of that?

WARD: [00:54:13] I didn't. Oh God. I don't have. I actually did not, I was one of the few people who didn't have a degree. And I remember one night when I was still in Loja waking up and I thought, oh my God, I'm going to have to go back to college. And I literally went and threw up because, you know, because I was so upset about having to go back to college. And you know, Mary, you're never going to get anywhere if you don't. So I came back. It took me a year to even. I was pretty traumatized because of some things that happened down in mostly in Loja.

PUSCH: [00:54:49] Do you want to talk about those?

WARD: [00:54:51] Well.

PUSCH: [00:54:51] Don't worry about it.

WARD: [00:54:52] You know, I got robbed like eight times because I shouldn't have moved in with that other volunteer because our house was not safe. And somebody at the school, it turned out, was stealing from me. And it turned out I was afraid it was one of my kids trying to get attention. Turned out it was a teacher.

PUSCH: [00:55:09] Oh, wow.

WARD: [00:55:10] Yeah, it had to have been a teacher because it happened when the teachers were the only people in the room, and the kids were gone. You know, we were not with the kids. And so that was kind of upsetting. And, you know, I had kind of a another, you know, couple of things

happen that were kind of abusive. And so I was kind of, I had gotten to the point of feeling kind of paranoid. So it took me a while to adjust back. Now I'm not saying that just because that happens I wish I hadn't gone. There's no way. I mean, I would do it again. But I took some time to adjust back. I expected it to be easy. I expected Disneyland. I was thinking about buying rice with, and beans with no rocks, and eggs that weren't all cracked by the time you got them home.

PUSCH: [00:56:07] OK. So I was going to say too, I would say one the things I missed the most was food. So I know.

WARD: [00:56:16] Yeah, vegetables that were like even and stuff. And you know, just a real meat counter that where you didn't have to deal with somebody cutting up a carcass or something, you know. Yeah, they do it, but they do it nice and in the back where you don't have to see it, you know? So I had this Disneyland idea of what it was going to be like here. And the pace is so different, like the pace of conversations is so different. I kind of felt like, what's the deal with these people? They're half dead. They don't talk. They don't.

PUSCH: [00:56:50] Oh, here?

WARD: [00:56:52] Here. Yeah, like people are dead. You know, because even though the people up there in the mountains are kind of shy and reserved, but the pace of conversation is still quite a bit faster. And when you come back here, it feels like all these damn gringos, they're just like ice, you know?

PUSCH: [00:57:14] Can you? Because that's something I never observed. I mean, I guess when you speak Spanish, you speak more quickly. Or but it was, I mean, it's more than that, right?

WARD: [00:57:22] It's a cultural thing. Yeah, it's a cultural thing. And that must be it must have something to do with the way that the Spanish European culture mixed with the culture down there.

PUSCH: [00:57:34] Uh huh.

WARD: [00:57:35] It kind of has to be that and then what's developed over at the time. You know, people argue and they, you know, all kinds of stuff more than. It's just a different discourse style, but it's really jarring. It's not jarring when you go to a foreign place, you expect it, but when you come back home, you expect it to feel comfortable and familiar and it doesn't. And it threw me for a loop.

PUSCH: [00:57:58] Yeah.

WARD: [00:57:59] And so it took me a while to get used to being back. I took off a year and then I went back to school. I was, my plan was to go into teaching English as a second language and get the hell back out of the country.

PUSCH: [00:58:18] OK.

WARD: [00:58:18] That never ever happened. I went, the first class that I went to at University of North Texas to just to go ahead and get my undergrad degree and finish it this time, was I had to go to this linguistics class. And I thought, well, let me just get this crap out of the way. I totally fell in love with it from the first day. So I got a master's in linguistics, even though we were in the English department. And then I tried to do a PhD here at UT. But you know, some things were really kind of hard for me to do. Like some of the kind of research, I could probably do it now, but at the time I just felt like I had obstacles that maybe somebody else could have overcome them. But I couldn't. You know, having to do with how the text was, and I wasn't able to overcome some of the disability related obstacles in that program. And the reason I'm saying me is because maybe somebody else could have done it, but I couldn't.

WARD: [00:59:26] So I ended up working with blind people again, and for a while I taught technology, you know, like one on one. It was because my husband was doing it, so I got into it for a little while too. And then I took a job teaching it at a rehabilitation center that's here in Austin. And then I went and I got a degree in rehabilitation counseling, and I worked in that job for a while, but I really didn't like it. And when a job came open for a teacher, I

even told her, look. She didn't give me a cut, but I told her I would take a pay cut to go back to being a teacher. I really don't like this other job. I don't like it, and I'm not. Usually when I don't like something, I'm also not good at it. I've noticed that about myself and I wasn't. There was a part of it that I was good at. But, you know, like the part where you assess somebody and figure out what they needed.

WARD: [01:00:22] But I didn't really like managing a budget and calling employers. And yeah, that part was kind of awful and, you know, divvying up my budget and you know, the things that you don't tell the people that you're working with. So then I retired from teaching, and most of I either got to work with groups or with individuals. I tried to get assigned to people that, you know, spoke Spanish, but I didn't always. We had a refugee and I tried to get assigned him, but they didn't assign me to him. I wish they had. So I retired from there a few years ago, and after the 2016 election, I kind of got involved in some political stuff with the Indivisible group. And I might, I'm thinking about doing some things with some groups that I've heard about here at this conference.

PUSCH: [01:01:26] Yeah. That's awesome. OK. How do you think that Peace Corps impacted that path in life? Or how do you think that it impacted you later on in life?

WARD: [01:01:38] Well, Peace Corps. You know, as far as like what I guess that's that second goal or third goal. The thing that I think is most valuable and I haven't even talked about this, is it changed my view of the world. I think it would be really good if we had especially young people, you know, have to go and live in other cultures. I grew up during the Cold War and there was this us and them mentality. You know, that everybody was either going to be democratic or be, you know, communist, you know, totalitarian. And it was sort of like a good and evil thing. And, you know, it didn't really sound true, but most of us sort of accepted that.

WARD: [01:02:34] And you know, we were supposed to be vying with the Russians for control in these countries, you know? There was never any thought of maybe these countries didn't really want either one of us

running their country. Maybe they wanted to do things on their own, but found themselves stuck because of economics and stuff.

PUSCH: [01:02:51] Yeah.

WARD: [01:02:53] Well, when I got off the plane in in Quito, what was the first thing that I encountered? American cigarette ads. Yeah. So we couldn't have cigarette ads. We hadn't had them for quite some time.

PUSCH: [01:03:08] Oh, OK.

WARD: [01:03:09] But they were all over the radio. I didn't see any Russian anything anywhere. I mean, yeah, they had Aeroflot Airlines and there were a few Russians that, you know, I found within the whole two and a half years. But I thought, you know, the story that I have been taught is totally divorced from real people's lives. It's not, you know, it has nothing to do with anything. For one thing, if there is a fight between us and the Russians, we've won and that may not be a good thing, you know. I mean, we may not have, you know, maybe some of our good ideas have won, but so have some of our bad ones. That's kind of what I mean. And I'm not saying, oh yeah, I hate America or I love America. I'm saying that we have. But I kind of felt like what I learned was I could look at my culture the way that somebody else would look at it. I could see the bad things and the good things.

PUSCH: [01:04:05] Mm hmm.

PUSCH: [01:04:06] And it's important to see both. And I kind of, whole worldview just changed because of interacting with somebody, with people that were different from my experience. And you know that it just happened right when I walked off the plane. It's kind of, wait a minute, wait a minute. This is not the world that they have taught you about.

PUSCH: [01:04:32] How did you gotten to travel before, really?

WARD: [01:04:34] A little bit, but I hadn't really noticed it to that degree. I'd been in Mexico and I had been in England and Ireland, but it wasn't really quite the

same somehow. And it's, you know, just because I wasn't going to work in those places. And it was just, I know it sounds really naive now, you know, the Cold War sort of being over or whatever it is. But we have, you know, a whole lot of ideas that need to be questioned and going into Peace Corps will help you question those ideas.

WARD: [01:05:18] It will also help you to see what's valuable about our culture. Like, one thing that I thought was really valuable was just the way that Peace Corps volunteers interacted. Like we had water volunteers, for example, and the Ecuadorian engineers would stand outside and yell at all the workers. The American, you know, the Peace Corps volunteers would be down in the ditch. That is a good thing about us, you know, that we will do that. We'll get our hands dirty. You know, we are, you know.

PUSCH: [01:05:51] You think we'll get our hands dirty more than the Ecuadorians?

WARD: [01:05:54] Well, in the sense that we don't feel like we're too good to have to get our hands dirty, if we're in a job like that.

PUSCH: [01:06:07] And maybe I mean, is it do you think it's all Americans or do you think it's Peace Corps volunteers?

WARD: [01:06:11] It's hard to say because I know it's, I'm not trying to say that we are a classless society because we're so aren't. But class doesn't really work the same way here than in places like that. It's kind of a lot more stratified in a really formal sense. Like if you're the engineer, you know, you're the engineer so that you don't have to like, get all filthy and you know.

PUSCH: [01:06:40] In Ecuador, right?

WARD: [01:06:40] Yeah. And that's, you know, it kind of passes down families. It does here, too, but just not in the same formal sort of way. We sort of, in fact, we have a little bit of a problem of pretending it isn't there when it really is. But there, it was kind of like. We pretend it isn't there. They, a lot of them seem to think it should be there. And we don't like looking at the fact. You know, it's a different set of problems. But we have that. You

know, Americans are really good at figuring out how to, you know, get something done instead of like sitting in a meeting and talking about it and nobody taking any responsibility like happened at some meetings that I was at. You know, we were all at meetings like that. I think a lot of times people were just kind of afraid or who knows.

WARD: [01:07:37] There are good things about us, but there is a whole lot that we needed to learn about like relationships. You know, about valuing everybody, about, you know, just how we interact. And so, you know, when I first got back too, it seemed like all anybody really seems to care about is getting the latest new and shiny.

PUSCH: [01:08:07] Yeah.

WARD: [01:08:09] That faded. You know, that feeling faded. But at first it just really kind of hits you. And the vegetables didn't really taste better than the ones in Ecuador. I thought they were going to, and they didn't.

PUSCH: [01:08:29] Aww. Sometimes I feel like, again this is me. But the fruits or vegetables in other countries, they may not look as nice, but they taste better.

WARD: [01:08:37] Oh my God. Oh, and we had so much fruits and vegetables. We couldn't find peanut butter. We had to make our own peanut butter.

PUSCH: [01:08:45] Oh, nice.

WARD: [01:08:46] But you know, most of us, if we lived in a place where we had electricity, which I always did, we would make our own peanut butter in the blender. I remember having to do it in shifts because those blenders aren't really made to do that. So I would do it till the motor got hot and then I would leave it and then come back in an hour and blend it some more. Yeah, you know, that's a Peace Corps thing.

PUSCH: [01:09:10] Yeah, yeah. So some of the, yeah.

WARD: [01:09:16] Making your own peanut butter. They probably, you can probably get Skippy now, you know, but back then you couldn't.

PUSCH: [01:09:22] It might be. Yeah, might be difficult. Yeah, in bigger cities.

WARD: [01:09:25] Yeah.

PUSCH: [01:09:26] I mean, it's not necessarily the best way to end this, but I think we've covered everything. But it's very typical of Peace Corps, right?

WARD: [01:09:34] Yeah, that is a Peace Corps thing.

PUSCH: [01:09:35] You get innovative.

WARD: [01:09:36] Making your own peanut butter. And those are the things that when you have parties with other volunteers, they either see them doing it or they teach you things.

PUSCH: [01:09:44] Oh yeah, yeah.

WARD: [01:09:46] And then one of the kid's families, his brother brought him to my house, and I know that that kid's brother is who stole my Swiss Army knife.

PUSCH: [01:09:58] Oh, why?

WARD: [01:10:01] Yeah, but I couldn't really do anything about it, I mean, I wasn't going to. But it was there on the table and then after they left, it was gone. And I think that was the bro.

PUSCH: [01:10:12] Do you think, so people took advantage of your blindness probably more?

WARD: [01:10:15] Every once in a while.

PUSCH: [01:10:16] Probably more in Ecuador than here?

WARD: [01:10:19] Um, I don't know that it was more. I think one of the scariest experiences that I had was one time I was visiting someone and I left at 9:00 and I realized as I was walking out the door that I did not have any money. And it was kind of late. It was in Cuenca. And so I couldn't really call a taxi. Or, you know, I don't remember how I used to get a taxi flagged down, but I would usually find somebody. Could you help me get a taxi please, you know? But anyway, I was walking down the street that was fairly busy. I thought, well, at least the street I have to walk down is pretty busy. But what happened was just, I don't know how they got there, but there got to be two men, one on each side of me. First they were just talking, you know, to get me to trust them. And then they started to go on and on about how I was really, really selfish for not going someplace with them. And I was becoming really, really afraid because I was going to have to turn down a street that wasn't very busy, and I was afraid if I screamed, they were going to beat me up. And I just didn't know what to do. And I will never know what happened because I couldn't see it. I didn't hear anything. But all of a sudden they were gone.

PUSCH: [01:11:33] What? OK.

WARD: [01:11:34] They were just I have a feeling that they didn't run, you know, I thought they would run, but they didn't run. I think they, what they did was they kind of casually walked off and pretended they weren't doing it.

PUSCH: [01:11:43] Oh, OK.

WARD: [01:11:44] So I think somebody might have been on to them or suspicious or something. Whether it was a policeman or just another bystander or somebody that drove by, I'll never know. But somebody saved my life. And you know, whoever it was that saved my life I'm always going to be grateful to them because I know that that's what happened. They saved my life, whoever it was.

PUSCH: [01:12:05] And I think maybe that is a good place to end, right?

WARD: [01:12:08] Yeah.

PUSCH: [01:12:09] Because you mentioned people helping you cross the street, you know.

WARD: [01:12:12] And somebody kept me alive.

PUSCH: [01:12:14] Exactly.

WARD: [01:12:15] Even if it was just by looking and seeing that there's two men that are a little bit too close to this woman, you know?

PUSCH: [01:12:22] Well, thank you very much. Very interesting.

[END OF INTERVIEW]