

**Howard Ellegant Oral History Interview**  
Returned Peace Corps Volunteer Collection  
Administrative Information

**Creator:** Howard Ellegant  
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**Biographical Note**

Howard Ellegant served as a Peace Corps volunteer in Colombia from 1964 to 1966 on an architecture project.

**Access**

Open.

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Oral History Interview

with

Howard Ellegant

June 14, 2009  
Evanston, Illinois

By Robert Klein

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

KLEIN: [00:00:03] Today is June 14, 2009. This is Bob Klein. I'm interviewing Howard Ellegant, who was a Peace Corps volunteer in Colombia, 1964 to '66, in a project involving architects and engineers. So let's go back about a year before you joined.

ELLEGANT: [00:00:26] So that would be '63 and I would have been starting my fifth year in architecture at the University of Illinois in Champaign-Urbana. So my last year of school.

KLEIN: [00:00:41] And so you've been in college then five years?

ELLEGANT: [00:00:46] Yeah, I mean, that would be been my fifth year straight.

KLEIN: [00:00:49] Where had you grown up?

ELLEGANT: [00:00:50] I grew up in Chicago, Illinois.

KLEIN: [00:00:53] Went to high school?

ELLEGANT: [00:00:54] Went to high school at Austin High School. I grew up in the west side of Chicago.

KLEIN: [00:00:59] Brothers, sisters?

ELLEGANT: [00:01:00] No. Only child, which is the source of many of my problems.

KLEIN: [00:01:06] We may get into some of those. And during your high school years, did you study a foreign language? Did you do any travel, any volunteer work in summers?

ELLEGANT: [00:01:20] I did. I did. I studied Spanish in high school. I think that was probably the most common language that everybody studied. Not that it did me much good, but I studied it and I got good grades. I guess I did some volunteer work I'm trying to remember. Or did I? I was involved in some community activities, Jewish community activities, Jewish Community Center, track stuff. Traveling, to that point, not really. I go back a little bit. My mother's a whole other interesting story. My mother's sister in 1945 or 6 had married a Russian Jew who had immigrated to Cuba in the thirties, I believe. And they met here and they got married and they moved to Havana, back to Havana, where he had a business. And so as I was growing up for, from when I was about four or so until I was about 11, we would go visit them every year. They'd take me out of school at Christmas time. Instead of two weeks, I'd be gone four or five weeks or whatever. And so we'd go, you know, spend time with my aunt and uncle.

KLEIN: [00:02:42] On the visits, did you have a chance to speak English or Yiddish or Spanish?

ELLEGANT: [00:02:47] I didn't understand much of anything.

KLEIN: [00:02:52] OK.

ELLEGANT: [00:02:52] But I guess I got acclimated to it.

KLEIN: [00:02:54] But you were in the Spanish speaking environment.

ELLEGANT: [00:02:56] A Spanish speaking environment, yeah.

KLEIN: [00:02:59] So when you're finishing high school, what was your goal at that point?

ELLEGANT: [00:03:04] At that goal, I had decided I wanted to study architecture, and so I went to Champaign-Urbana and enrolled in. And I got a kick out of it because these days it sounds like there's such competition to get into state universities. I mean, back when I went to school in '59, it was, oh, you want to come to the University of Illinois? Fine. When can we expect you? And so it wasn't, it was not a problem at all to get into universities.

KLEIN: [00:03:32] What was it that led you to architecture?

ELLEGANT: [00:03:36] I thought I wanted to start study engineering. I just, I'm not exactly sure why, but I just kind of felt that way. You know, I had an erector set when I was a kid and a Lionel train and Lincoln logs and all of those things. And I went to Austin High School, which at that time was one of the three or four public high schools in the city of Chicago that had a technical education component.

KLEIN: [00:04:05] Oh, OK.

ELLEGANT: [00:04:06] So it was there was mechanical drafting, there was architectural drawing. They had shops and foundries and the whole nine yards. And so I, in addition to taking a general college prep curriculum, I also took shop and mechanical drawing.

KLEIN: [00:04:25] Yeah. So you applied to school and were admitted.

ELLEGANT: [00:04:32] There was a minute.

KLEIN: [00:04:33] Right. So now you were doing essentially an engineering curriculum or?

ELLEGANT: [00:04:39] No, I was doing architecture. I had.

KLEIN: [00:04:41] From the get-go?

ELLEGANT: [00:04:42] From the get-go. Yeah, I just I had decided that engineering probably wasn't going to be for me. I had gotten involved in some architectural drawing classes in high school and I liked that a lot. And then when I went down to Champaign, I actually enrolled in architectural engineering. And that lasted for two years, and then I switched over to the straight architectural curriculum, aiming toward.

KLEIN: [00:05:11] Would it still be five years to the market?

ELLEGANT: [00:05:13] So, yeah, it's still five years, but it would be a BA instead of a BS. That was the only difference.

KLEIN: [00:05:20] And again, during your college years, travel and any volunteer work?

ELLEGANT: [00:05:29] No, nothing. Well, you know, I'm just trying to remember that in school, I mean, summer jobs. I had summer jobs as a camp counselor. Then I eventually had summer jobs in architectural offices.

KLEIN: [00:05:43] Did you continue language studies?

ELLEGANT: [00:05:46] No, not in college. I didn't. I didn't take any language in college. It wasn't a requirement in the architectural or engineering program to take a language. But what I did miss though, in which I subsequently made up in an MA program, they missed all the things that you didn't have time to take when you were doing a technical curriculum. Because, I mean, from the get-go, I had 16 hours a semester. And it was like going to school, you know, 8:30 to 4:00 or 5:00 every day, practically.

KLEIN: [00:06:19] So do you remember when you first heard about Peace Corps?

ELLEGANT: [00:06:23] Yeah, I do. It was. I started college, because Chicago at that time had, you could start school in either September or February. And I had started in February because that's when my birthday was. And so my first semester of my fifth year was February to May. Must have been, you know, it was '63. And so my second semester was going to be following the summer to the following February, and it was one of those really lovely spring days, kind of like today is. And it was late in the semester and I was walking through the Quad in Champaign from, I think, from the union back towards, I don't know if I was going home or where. I walked by one of the buildings. And there was a sign outside that said, Peace Corps recruiters or, you know, something like that. And I said, I don't know if I even heard of the Peace Corps at that point. And I don't know what the sign said, but it enticed me to go in. And, you know, I found out about it and I said, well, it sounds interesting. So I sat down and took the test right there.

KLEIN: [00:07:48] Oh, OK.

ELLEGANT: [00:07:49] So they were actually giving the test. So I don't remember if I came back and took it or if I took it right there, it seems to me I just took it right there.

KLEIN: [00:07:57] Could be. Now this is in your last year of school?

ELLEGANT: [00:07:59] This is my last year. My last year of school, my second to last semester.

KLEIN: [00:08:03] And if you took the test at the same time, you must have filled out the application. Do you recall that? One of the things in the app, a couple of them. One, they ask if you have a preference for area assignments. And two, they may ask also if you have any, feel you have any confidence in the foreign language. Do you remember?

ELLEGANT: [00:08:24] I don't remember the area. If I answered it, I have no idea how I answered it. And then I remember there was kind of a foreign language competency component to the test.

KLEIN: [00:08:34] Yes.

ELLEGANT: [00:08:35] It was kind of a nonsense skipping syllables or whatever.

KLEIN: [00:08:39] It was actually Urdu.

ELLEGANT: [00:08:44] Was that what it was? Oh, now I know 40 years later. So, you know, I took it and they're saying goodbye, whatever, you'll hear from us in whatever and.

KLEIN: [00:08:59] How far away from graduation are you at this point?

ELLEGANT: [00:09:01] Oh, it's the summer and then another semester.

KLEIN: [00:09:04] Oh, OK.

ELLEGANT: [00:09:05] So it's the June, July. June, July, August and September to January.

KLEIN: [00:09:11] At that point, had you begun thinking about what you were going to do when you got your degree?

ELLEGANT: [00:09:16] Yeah. And I didn't know. I was sort of like, you know, where am I going to get a job or am I going to work? What kind of an office do I want to look at, big office, small office, you know? And I really, really didn't know what I wanted to do.

KLEIN: [00:09:32] In '63, '64, was the draft an issue?

ELLEGANT: [00:09:35] The draft was an issue, yeah.

KLEIN: [00:09:38] You had been getting deferments?

ELLEGANT: [00:09:40] I'd been getting deferments for school.

KLEIN: [00:09:41] At the point when you applied, did you mention it to your family and your friends, you recall?

ELLEGANT: [00:09:50] I don't. I don't remember. I really don't remember.

KLEIN: [00:09:53] OK. So take the next step.

ELLEGANT: [00:09:57] OK, so the next step, you know, I go to work during the summer. I come back to school in the fall. I don't remember if it was during the summer or during the fall, but I got a letter from Peace Corps. And it said, thank you for taking the test. We know you did it. Oh, we're so sorry, we've lost it. If you're interested, would you, you know, reapply in the application and you know. I'm thinking, oh god, what a crummy organization this is. You know, it's the government. And at that point I said, oh, I don't know, you know? And I just forgot about it. And then sometimes, and then so I go back to school. And then sometime in the fall, I get another letter for Peace Corps. It says, congratulations, you've been accepted. Didn't even mention having lost it before. You've been accepted. We've got a program starting up for architects and engineers to go to Colombia, and training is going to start right after my graduation, like February '66. Would you be interested? Well, yeah, I think I'm interested. I don't know what else I'm going to do.

KLEIN: [00:11:14] And at that point, you didn't have, it wasn't like you were choosing Peace Corps over two or three other?

ELLEGANT: [00:11:20] No, no. I hadn't even started to look, you know, I hadn't even thought about looking for a job or where to look.

KLEIN: [00:11:24] So at that point, you must have told people.

ELLEGANT: [00:11:27] Yeah, then I started telling people, right.

KLEIN: [00:11:29] Do you recall their reaction?



ELLEGANT: [00:11:30] Yeah, my mother's reaction was kind of, you're doing what? Where are you going and why are you going to do that and how long are you going to be gone and how far is it and where is it? So that was the big reaction.

KLEIN: [00:11:41] And you knew virtually nothing of Colombia at that point.

ELLEGANT: [00:11:44] No. I think I looked at the map and I said, Oh, OK, there it is.

KLEIN: [00:11:50] So graduation and then fairly soon thereafter.

ELLEGANT: [00:11:56] Yeah, fairly soon after. Actually, I didn't go to graduation because they didn't have a, they didn't have a winter graduation. They had a they had one in the summer for everybody for the year. And you come back and I never got the graduation. Yes. And then we started training in February.

KLEIN: [00:12:14] And where was that?

ELLEGANT: [00:12:15] And that was in Los Angeles State. LA State in LA. California State University in Los Angeles. And I'm trying to remember what. But anyway, it was in Los Angeles and the training was there.

KLEIN: [00:12:32] Were you remember reporting for training? You must have flown out.

ELLEGANT: [00:12:37] Oh yeah, no, I do. That was the first time I was on a jet I think. Flew out to Los Angeles, had directions where to go, and everybody met in front of or at a hotel and somewhere in downtown LA.

KLEIN: [00:12:50] Not on the campus?

ELLEGANT: [00:12:52] Not on the campus. Then we all got bused to.

KLEIN: [00:12:56] About how many at that point were in the group?

ELLEGANT: [00:12:58] Well, there were two groups. We actually trained. I'm trying to remember. There were maybe there were eight or 10 architects and engineers. And then we also trained with a big group that was going to Venezuela in physical education. So we were together. I mean, we lived together. We did Spanish and the meals and all sorts of activities together. In our specialized training we were apart.

KLEIN: [00:13:28] So it was a relatively small group that you were with.

ELLEGANT: [00:13:33] I was, yeah, it was a relatively small group.

KLEIN: [00:13:35] What was your reaction to the others in the architects and engineers group? I mean, they joined the Peace Corps like you, and you must have made some comparisons.

ELLEGANT: [00:13:45] Yeah. And I, you know, like for the life of me, I can't remember. I think a lot of it was kind of like, you know, it's sounded like a really good idea. I didn't know what else I was going to do, and it sounded like an opportunity to travel and, you know, go away for a couple of years.

KLEIN: [00:13:58] And was that group all male?

ELLEGANT: [00:14:01] The architects and engineers were, yes.

KLEIN: [00:14:03] OK. So you're then, do you stay on the campus or do they find, were you would at a training site?

ELLEGANT: [00:14:11] No, we were on. We were on the campus, actually. We lived, they had an, there was an apartment complex that the Peace Corps had rented and we people roomed together in the apartment complex. That was kind of kind of fun. I mean, here you are. You're in California. It's February. Sun is shining, it's warm. You got a swimming pool on the complex. And then it was a walk to the campus. I remember now. The campus was on one side of this kind of a valley and the apartment complex was on the other side. So that was a nice downhill and back uphill walk. I don't know how long it took, maybe 15, 20 minutes.

KLEIN: [00:14:52] Do you recall who ran the program? Was it LA State?

ELLEGANT: [00:14:57] It was LA State as far as I remember. Yeah, it was the university we were at.

KLEIN: [00:15:01] So usually training has several components. It would have been different in your case. One, of course, would be language training. So let's start by talking about that and how that was organized.

ELLEGANT: [00:15:14] It seemed like all we did was have language training. I mean, there was it was so intensive and there was so much of it. Every day, I mean, we had. There was classroom instruction, there was the language labs of course. We had meals where we were only supposed to speak Spanish. And so those were the.

KLEIN: [00:15:37] Who were the instructors?

ELLEGANT: [00:15:41] As far as I know, there were, if I'm going to remember, they were university instructors.

KLEIN: [00:15:49] Not necessarily Colombians or Venezuelans.

ELLEGANT: [00:15:52] No, not necessarily. But I remember at least one, one was a native Spanish speaker.

KLEIN: [00:15:57] Right. So in going into the language training, does the training staff make it apparent that your getting into the Peace Corps would depend on your ability with the language?

ELLEGANT: [00:16:13] I don't think so. I don't remember that at all. I don't remember that as a criterion for, you know.

KLEIN: [00:16:21] And did your previous studies or time in Havana come into of any use?

ELLEGANT: [00:16:28] It, you know, it probably did, but I can't say for sure.

KLEIN: [00:16:33] Felt like going from square one.

ELLEGANT: [00:16:35] From square one, I mean, what I found out subsequent to that is when I finally came home and then went out to the world and started working and started traveling that I've got a facility for foreign language.

KLEIN: [00:16:46] So the language component was intensive and took up a good part of each day.

ELLEGANT: [00:16:58] I think we were in a language lab, probably for, I know it seemed like a couple of hours each day.

KLEIN: [00:17:03] Pretty much concentrating on conversation?

ELLEGANT: [00:17:07] Conversation. Yeah. Well, reading. I don't remember about writing, but certainly reading and comprehension and conversation.

KLEIN: [00:17:17] Did your group work by itself in a lab and then the Venezuelans were elsewhere?

ELLEGANT: [00:17:23] No, I think we're all, yeah, it was all mixed in.

KLEIN: [00:17:26] It was all mixed in. And what else went on at LA State then?

ELLEGANT: [00:17:35] Aside from the language?

KLEIN: [00:17:36] Right.

ELLEGANT: [00:17:37] Well, we had a lot of physical exercise, physical training. We had what then was called circuit training. We did a lot of that. You know, you move around. We were out in the field and you move from exercise to exercise. I mean, we did a lot of that stuff. Various exercises. We didn't have the kind of equipment that we have now. I mean, there were weights and ropes and all kinds of stuff.

KLEIN: [00:18:04] Did anyone try to define what it was, why you were doing the things you were doing? Say this is part of you need this for what's going to happen now.

ELLEGANT: [00:18:14] I mean, aside from the well, I mean, well. Let me tell you a little bit about the other kinds of things that went on. I mean, there were history classes and culture and about the countries that we were going to, about Colombia. So that was pretty obvious about why you're doing that.

KLEIN: [00:18:30] And that off by yourself.

ELLEGANT: [00:18:34] Yeah, right. The other group was going to Venezuela. And then we also had technology. I don't know what you want to call it. It was kind of like a huge industrial arts class kind of stuff we did, which was kind of fun. We didn't, um. We were all graduates, architects or engineers. I don't think. There may have been a couple of people that maybe had some work experience already.

KLEIN: [00:19:07] What, engineer is a generic term, what kind of engineer?

ELLEGANT: [00:19:11] Civil engineers, I think mostly, if not all civil engineers, which focus pretty much on construction. And so we did, I mean, we worked with people from LA State who were who taught those kinds of subjects and worked on projects. I mean, we did construction. I mean, we built a brick wall in the lab one day, which was funny. Wasn't that straight, vertically or horizontally.

KLEIN: [00:19:47] Well, did you find it demeaning? I mean, didn't you have these skills?

ELLEGANT: [00:19:50] No, we didn't have. I mean, I'll get off on the education in this country. But you know, because you study civil engineering or study architecture doesn't mean you've got any idea what happens in the field.

KLEIN: [00:20:06] OK. OK.

ELLEGANT: [00:20:08] So people that had some field experiences, it was different. But no, but I'd never built anything like that.

KLEIN: [00:20:14] So the intent of this was to give you some hands-on?

ELLEGANT: [00:20:16] Some hands-on, I think, and develop a couple things as I look back, develop an appreciation of really what it takes to do something like that, number one. Also, some team building and test how people work together. Just reactions and when things go right, when things go wrong.

KLEIN: [00:20:35] And that spills over to what was always a relatively speaking controversial, the selection process. How did it operate with the eight of you?

ELLEGANT: [00:20:48] I have no idea.

KLEIN: [00:20:50] I mean, you are aware of it.

ELLEGANT: [00:20:52] Oh, it was. Yeah, no. We were aware of the fact that there was a selection process and, you know, people were looking at what we were doing and how we were doing it. Criteria, etcetera.

KLEIN: [00:21:01] Did you have to go see psychiatrists or was there psychological?

ELLEGANT: [00:21:05] We had, we had group meetings with the shrink.

KLEIN: [00:21:10] Oh, OK.

ELLEGANT: [00:21:11] And everybody, we used to really laugh at those. We thought they were really funny.

KLEIN: [00:21:15] The group's small enough that it must have begun to coalesce as a group.

ELLEGANT: [00:21:19] Yeah. And I'm trying to remember if part of it was just our group or if it was the bigger group, you know, everybody together. I just

don't remember how those meetings worked. But I think once, once a week, maybe we met with the. We would always walk out there scratching our heads because it was kind of like, so how is your week? So what problems came out or what are the major issues? Huh, what, we don't have any problems.

KLEIN: [00:21:47] Do you recall if they asked you to do peer ratings? Because that's one of the things.

ELLEGANT: [00:21:54] I don't remember. I don't remember that at all.

KLEIN: [00:21:59] Two things. Well, another component of training, which I think it was still in place. It was called ASWAC. American Studies, World Affairs, Communism. Sort of a crash course in American history and the Cold War and supposedly.

ELLEGANT: [00:22:20] That I don't remember at all.

KLEIN: [00:22:21] Ok, OK. They may have dropped it by then.

ELLEGANT: [00:22:24] Yeah, I mean, a couple of the things that we did that were really interesting. Well, when we got our hands dirty, I mean, we actually build an outhouse, which I thought was kind of fun and funny. I mean, we are out there hammering together two by fours and sheets of plywood and stuff. One of the other things that we did is we went to Baja for a weekend, the architects and engineers. We went to Baja for a weekend to a small town called Catorce, fourteen, I guess, because it was 14 kilometers from someplace, I don't know. To just sort of, you know, experience what it was like to live in a rural Spanish speaking village with, you know, dirt floors and all this stuff that people were doing for themselves. It was a great time.

KLEIN: [00:23:13] But you were still living together as a group?

ELLEGANT: [00:23:15] Yeah, we were there as a group.

KLEIN: [00:23:16] Did you have much chance to use your Spanish?

ELLEGANT: [00:23:18] Yeah. Well, we tried. I mean, because the people there didn't speak English, so we had to speak Spanish.

KLEIN: [00:23:24] Yeah, yeah.

ELLEGANT: [00:23:25] I remember there was an American there who lived in the community. I don't remember if he was a minister, an older guy who had lived there for years and years and was sort of like helping in the community as kind of a community development kind of a person. I don't remember what organization he was with. So he spoke English. And of course, the people that were with us spoke English and Spanish.

KLEIN: [00:23:55] This whole period, how long was this period at L.A. State?

ELLEGANT: [00:24:00] Let me see. We start February, March, April, maybe was it two.

KLEIN: [00:24:05] Over two months.

ELLEGANT: [00:24:06] Two months and then we went to Puerto Rico too.

KLEIN: [00:24:09] Ok, before you get to Puerto Rico. During that two months, was there anyone from Peace Corps Washington or Peace Corps Colombia who visited and said, this is what the program, this is what you'll be doing when you get there?

ELLEGANT: [00:24:28] I don't remember. I don't remember, but I think some somehow we had a sense that we'd be working in local or regional offices of some kind doing working as a resource.

KLEIN: [00:24:44] So even though you're doing these team building activities, you were not going to go.

ELLEGANT: [00:24:47] No, we were not going. No. We were going individually to someplace.



KLEIN: [00:24:49] And that may have simply been underhanded selection process. Who knows?

ELLEGANT: [00:24:55] Yeah, I wouldn't. I wouldn't call them overt team building. Besides the way we think of it today, I mean, we are just trying to work together to get stuff done.

KLEIN: [00:25:05] So this phase ends, is there a selection board that meets?

ELLEGANT: [00:25:11] I, you know, I think there was because I don't, I remember a couple of people that got deselected and didn't go to Puerto Rico. And all of us that went to Puerto Rico then went in country.

KLEIN: [00:25:23] Those who weren't deselected, those who went on. Was there any protest, any concern? I mean, it must have been.

ELLEGANT: [00:25:33] There was a lot of head scratching about how, you know, why did? We don't get it. We don't understand why.

KLEIN: [00:25:38] And nobody gave you an answer?

ELLEGANT: [00:25:41] I don't even remember if the question was asked, or if it was the asked we probably didn't get a straight answer.

KLEIN: [00:25:48] So now you finished at LA State. Do you have a chance to come home at all or?

ELLEGANT: [00:25:54] Yeah, I came home first.

KLEIN: [00:25:57] And at this point, any second thoughts or?

ELLEGANT: [00:26:00] No. No, ready to go.

KLEIN: [00:26:03] And was the expectation after you finished it, Puerto Rico, you'd be going straight to Colombia.

ELLEGANT: [00:26:10] Oh yeah, right.

KLEIN: [00:26:12] So this visit, then you're sort of preparing to be overseas for a while. Was it a traumatic farewell or how did the family and friends go?

ELLEGANT: [00:26:22] No, I don't know if there was trauma. It wasn't traumatic for me. I know my folks had a party and it was, I don't remember. That must have been what it was. Yeah, I invited all the family and got together and had supper and, you know, dinner and what are you doing? Where are you going to go? You know, all the usual kinds of stuff.

KLEIN: [00:26:42] So you stood up and gave a bar mitzvah speech in Spanish?

ELLEGANT: [00:26:45] Yeah, yeah, right. In Spanish.

KLEIN: [00:26:52] Let's talk about Puerto Rico then and now. It's just six of you at this point.

ELLEGANT: [00:27:00] I think, yeah. I've got on my hand six, six or seven of us. I don't remember the exact number.

KLEIN: [00:27:07] And you're still as a group?

ELLEGANT: [00:27:08] We're still as a group.

KLEIN: [00:27:09] So architects and engineers for Colombia.

ELLEGANT: [00:27:11] Yeah. And then the people from Venezuela also went to Puerto Rico, too. So we stayed together in Puerto Rico.

KLEIN: [00:27:17] Ok, OK. Describe the Puerto Rico experience then.

ELLEGANT: [00:27:23] Really interesting. A lot of fun. I think there are two components to the Puerto Rico experience. One was the camp, the training camp, and the other one was actually going and living with Puerto Rican families for, I don't remember if it was a week or, but the two volunteers were assigned to go live with a, well. In my case, there were two of us. I think it was two.

KLEIN: [00:27:49] Yeah. And that had been arranged by the training staff?

ELLEGANT: [00:27:51] They had had been arranged by the training staff, to live with Puerto Rican families in small towns right around the area.

KLEIN: [00:28:01] Talk about that.

ELLEGANT: [00:28:04] The idea again was, you know, immersion in the culture, in the language, and also to just to meet people, see what kinds of projects were going on. I know at that time there was a big project in Puerto Rico for building small houses that were concrete block or poured concrete. I think they were block. But anyway, very much community based community development kinds of projects. The community would get together. I think it was the community that got together and built. The government provided materials and things, and they built these small homes.

KLEIN: [00:28:44] So the village you went to, was it just the two of you or?

ELLEGANT: [00:28:48] No, I think it was just the two of us.

KLEIN: [00:28:49] And did you have to get yourself there on your own?

ELLEGANT: [00:28:53] No, I think we were, they were dropped off. Yeah, yeah.

KLEIN: [00:28:58] What was your reaction to being with the family, how did that go?

ELLEGANT: [00:29:01] That went fine. I don't remember that much about the family, but I remember the coffee was amazing. And I said, oh, so this is what coffee is like. OK. Similar experience to going to Germany and saying, oh, this is what beer is like.

KLEIN: [00:29:19] So you had the village. Was it about two-week village stay?

ELLEGANT: [00:29:23] Yeah, I think it was about two weeks. And we lived in this town with this family and then every day we would get picked up by a staff person. I think they were Puerto Rican, I can't remember his name. But we got, you know, we sort of got a kind of an orientation to what was going on in the communities, what kind of programs were happening, how things were organized. You know, we met some local muckety-mucks and just kind of got acclimated.

KLEIN: [00:29:56] Was there any formal language training going on there?

ELLEGANT: [00:30:00] Not during those two weeks. There was there was formal language training in the training camp. Several hours a day we would meet.

KLEIN: [00:30:08] And what would be talked about in the training camp experience?

ELLEGANT: [00:30:12] Again, that was a real mix of, I mean, it was like going to summer camp. A lot more intense. You know, it was up in the morning. I don't know what time we got in the morning, six o'clock, and there was a mile run or something like that, you know. And breakfast and of course, doing our own, you know, we had army mess kits. I remember that. And so then, you know, I guess it was just like, I wasn't in the army, but I guess it was just like being in the army. When you're done with your meal, you went out and you did the dunk and the three, you know, washed your own stuff up and everything. And we. So it was very intense language training in the camp. There was also a lot of physical activity. We did a lot of swimming.

KLEIN: [00:31:06] Was that the drown proofing?

ELLEGANT: [00:31:08] I was just going to say the drown proofing. And the runs every morning.

KLEIN: [00:31:13] Rock climbing?

ELLEGANT: [00:31:14] We did. Yeah. Oh, the rock climbing. Yeah, that was an interesting experience too, rock climbing.

KLEIN: [00:31:19] What about people who couldn't handle this?

ELLEGANT: [00:31:24] I don't think there was anybody that couldn't really handle it. I mean, the instructors were really great, the ones that we had. I mean, I had a great. I had a very difficult time climbing.

KLEIN: [00:31:34] Yeah.

ELLEGANT: [00:31:35] But they were really good. I mean, very, very encouraging. And you know, and I think everybody, everybody did it, made it.

KLEIN: [00:31:44] Were the instructors former volunteers?

ELLEGANT: [00:31:48] We did have a, there was a native Colombian, funny guy, who was in the camp with language training and an instructor, and he'd been an airline pilot. Regaled us with all sorts of wonderful stories about crashing DC3s in the jungle and walking away, you know. It's going to be wonderful.

KLEIN: [00:32:07] So did anyone on the training staff at the camp try to justify or explain why it was you were going through that particular kind of discipline of training?

ELLEGANT: [00:32:23] I don't remember that.

KLEIN: [00:32:24] It was just assumed that that's what Peace Corps was all about?

ELLEGANT: [00:32:28] That's what Peace Corps volunteers did, I mean, that was the training. I mean, I think it was great training. I mean, it was, yeah, I mean, I left there. I was in the best physical shape I'd ever been in.

KLEIN: [00:32:36] Yeah, yeah. OK.

ELLEGANT: [00:32:42] The other thing that we did, which was really interesting. We went out in groups of three or four. We were given a map and a compass. Did you do that?

KLEIN: [00:32:56] No.

ELLEGANT: [00:32:57] A map and a compass and.

KLEIN: [00:33:01] Poncho.

ELLEGANT: [00:33:02] Poncho and sleeping bag and, you know, packs and food and some money. You're here now, the campus here, we'll see you in two days. And that was, actually that was a lot of fun. That was frustrating and it was fun and it was a great thing to do.

KLEIN: [00:33:23] You didn't do it solo, though.

ELLEGANT: [00:33:24] No, not solo. We did it in a group of maybe three or four. And again, I mean, I've got stories about that stuff. I mean, the decision making, you know, you're sort of like, we have no idea, where are we, you know, anybody know where we're at? Got no idea. What do we do now? Where do we go? Did you bring the matches? And then, I mean, some wonderful things happened on that trip. I mean, we.

KLEIN: [00:33:51] So at the time, at the time where you were going through this, the survival, whatever it's called. You didn't resent it or you didn't feel, you know what in the world does this have to do with being in the Peace Corps?

ELLEGANT: [00:34:05] No, I don't think so. I don't think anybody.

KLEIN: [00:34:08] Don't let me put words in your mouth.

ELLEGANT: [00:34:09] No, I certainly, I mean, it was kind of like. I'd been a Boy Scout and I'd gone to camp, and I just loved being outdoors. And there was a lot of fun and it was kind of like, you know, oh, this shouldn't be a problem at all. Of course it was. But, but no, I mean, I just felt it was part

of. Well, just sort of part of developing yourself to deal with stuff that was going to happen.

KLEIN: [00:34:40] Yeah. And nobody was saying, it wasn't like there was pressure about getting making it, in other words, being selected or not selected.

ELLEGANT: [00:34:51] No, I don't think so. I think I'm just trying to remember if we met with psychologists in Puerto Rico too. But uh, no, no, I don't think anybody. I certainly wasn't concerned about it. It was kind of like, oh, you know, good morning. What are we doing today? Let's go do it. Kind of stuff.

KLEIN: [00:35:05] And there wasn't anyone who said, I don't need this, I quit, you know?

ELLEGANT: [00:35:09] No. There wasn't anybody in our group. I don't know about the other. Well, but actually, this was the interesting thing because there were remember, there were three or four of us in this cross-country thingy and two of us were from the Colombia group and one or two were from the Venezuela group. And so they mixed us up.

KLEIN: [00:35:29] Right. How long did the training camp take?

ELLEGANT: [00:35:37] I think we were in Puerto Rico for a month, I guess. I can go back and look. So it was maybe about three weeks in the camp and a week with a family.

KLEIN: [00:35:46] And then how does the training ramp up at that point?

ELLEGANT: [00:35:52] I don't remember if there was any kind of a formal, I think we all went out and drank a lot of beer that night or something.

KLEIN: [00:35:58] Yeah, but up to this point, had you met anyone who'd served as a volunteer in Colombia or was on staff in Colombia or was a Colombian with whom you might be working?

ELLEGANT: [00:36:11] Not anyone with whom we might be working. There was one staff person that I remember who was a Peace Corps staff, who was a native Colombian and was working in the training camp.

KLEIN: [00:36:26] Not in Colombia?

ELLEGANT: [00:36:28] Not in Colombia. He was this guy that had been the pilot. Yeah, I don't remember about the others.

KLEIN: [00:36:36] So, now you're all finished training. You really don't have much of an idea of what you're going to do when you get to Colombia, right?

ELLEGANT: [00:36:43] Right.

KLEIN: [00:36:43] OK. So what did you do?

ELLEGANT: [00:36:49] Well, the first thing. Well, one of the interesting things was by this time, we all thought we were pretty good Spanish speakers. You know, this has been like going on for. This was maybe April and has been going on since February and all this intensive language training. And we get off the plane in Bogota and somebody says something to us in Spanish. We all look at each other, what the hell did he say?

KLEIN: [00:37:15] So now that the seven of you fly from Puerto Rico to?

ELLEGANT: [00:37:21] To Bogota. And we got, you know, we landed and we got ourselves, uh, they put us up in a hotel.

KLEIN: [00:37:32] Who greeted you when you arrived?

ELLEGANT: [00:37:33] Peace Corps staff from Colombia.

KLEIN: [00:37:35] Finally. You don't remember who was director at that time?

ELLEGANT: [00:37:41] Was Chris Sheldon director then or was he already gone? I can't remember. So we met, you know, and we're in the hotel at night,



and at some point we hear this boom. It wasn't thunder, and I don't remember what or what was going, where or when or how or what was happening, but I think the report was a couple of bombs had gone off somewhere in the city and blew up that night. But anyway.

KLEIN: [00:38:19] Now at any point in training had there been a discussion of the political situation in Colombia?

ELLEGANT: [00:38:25] Oh yeah, oh no. We had a lot.

KLEIN: [00:38:27] When you were at L.A. State?

ELLEGANT: [00:38:28] Yeah, in L.A. state and probably Puerto Rico, all I remember. But because this was the sixties and Colombia was just coming out of the La Violencia period where, you know, there was an agreement between the liberal and conservative parties to switch the presidency every whatever it was, to try to mitigate the violence. So that was very, very much part of the conversations that we had on the political situation and the history of politics in Colombia.

KLEIN: [00:39:01] But did anyone talk about you might be being put in an area where you're at risk?

ELLEGANT: [00:39:07] No.

KLEIN: [00:39:08] OK. So you were just, you were aware of generically.

ELLEGANT: [00:39:12] Generically. And then the other thing that was really starting to happen that I wasn't aware of and very peripherally until I started reading the newspapers was the rise of the guerrilla movement, the communist guerilla movement in the '60s, that was starting to happen in Colombia as well.

KLEIN: [00:39:27] Right. Let's go back to your arrival now. You're in country, you're realizing that there's more than one kind of Spanish.

ELLEGANT: [00:39:39] Now I'm trying to remember, I know that Sam and Maureen, they were in a community development group. And they didn't train with us. Well, I have to go back and look at my pictures, but anyway, when we got to the Peace Corps office the next morning, it wasn't just us. There was also this group of community development volunteers.

KLEIN: [00:40:04] Right. A larger group.

ELLEGANT: [00:40:06] A larger group. Yeah. And I don't know, whatever speeches were made and the welcoming and the whole whatever it was all about and everything. And then we were probably introduced, I'm guessing to, you know, to staff and talked about the procedures and the Peace Corps doctors and whatever. And then eventually then they started assigning people to their destinations.

KLEIN: [00:40:30] Do you recall if there was a swearing in ceremony?

ELLEGANT: [00:40:33] Yeah, there was. And I don't remember where it was. I don't remember.

KLEIN: [00:40:37] Sometimes the ambassador does that. You just know it happened.

ELLEGANT: [00:40:42] Yeah, I forgot until you mentioned it, but I said, oh yeah, there was a swearing in ceremony.

KLEIN: [00:40:48] So now the business of being in Bogota is to get your assignment

ELLEGANT: [00:40:56] Right. Well, be welcomed in country and meet the staff and get our assignments.

KLEIN: [00:41:02] Did they take you aside and begin interviewing you about, do you want to be assigned alone, are you more interested in this kind of work, that kind of work?

ELLEGANT: [00:41:10] No, I don't remember that. Not for our group anyway. Because there are eight of us and we all went, the eight of us went to different places.

KLEIN: [00:41:17] OK.

ELLEGANT: [00:41:18] Or whatever the number was.

KLEIN: [00:41:20] How was that decided?

ELLEGANT: [00:41:21] I have no idea. I mean, you know.

KLEIN: [00:41:25] Well, talk about getting your assignment.

ELLEGANT: [00:41:27] The architects got assigned to work with Colombian architects, government architects in some kind of government program. And I don't remember how many architects we were, were we only. Maybe there were six of us. There were two architects and four engineers. Um, so anyway, so I got assigned to go to Medellin.

KLEIN: [00:41:57] All right. Is that a regional headquarters or a district headquarters?

ELLEGANT: [00:42:03] For?

KLEIN: [00:42:04] Well, like state?

ELLEGANT: [00:42:05] Oh, well, it's a state capital. Medellin is the capital of the province of Antioquia.

KLEIN: [00:42:09] OK. Yeah, that's what I meant. Yeah.

ELLEGANT: [00:42:13] And at that time was a city of about 500,000 people. And I went to work in an office that was funded by the Alliance for Progress. And it's charter was a comprehensive educational development program. So in that office, there were Colombians and there were volunteers. They were writing curriculum. They were writing and

publishing textbooks. They were designing and building schools. They were training teachers.

KLEIN: [00:42:41] Were these Peace Corps volunteers or other volunteers?

ELLEGANT: [00:42:44] No, there were some Peace Corps volunteers, but it was Colombian government funded, I mean, you know, yeah, running the office and the programs. But there were volunteers that worked in the office.

KLEIN: [00:42:55] So how did you get from Bogota to Medellin?

ELLEGANT: [00:43:00] We got on a plane.

KLEIN: [00:43:01] We now?

ELLEGANT: [00:43:03] I mean, everybody, whatever the other volunteers that were going to Medellin because.

KLEIN: [00:43:08] So you were the only architect?

ELLEGANT: [00:43:10] I was the only architect

KLEIN: [00:43:11] And there may have been some community development, maybe an engineer.

ELLEGANT: [00:43:14] No, it was just community development and myself.

KLEIN: [00:43:18] Now was there any kind of wrench in your group finally breaking up? You must have become pretty tight all through training.

ELLEGANT: [00:43:27] A wrench? I don't remember I was kind of. I mean, it was kind of like, well, can we stay in touch, yeah, we can stay in touch, or whatever.

KLEIN: [00:43:40] Right. And what about, classically people talk about culture shock at some point.

ELLEGANT: [00:43:49] Yeah.

KLEIN: [00:43:49] You're suddenly aware that you are in an environment, a very different cultural environment. It doesn't happen to everyone, but.

ELLEGANT: [00:43:57] No, good question. That's a really good question. I mean, the reverse culture shock when I came home was very apparent. But the culture shock being there, I don't know. When did that? I mean, when did I really?

KLEIN: [00:44:13] Was there a point you said, well, you know, this is just, this is not like Chicago or this is exactly like Chicago?

ELLEGANT: [00:44:20] Yeah, it was, you know, it was warm and sunny every day. It's not like Chicago. Yeah.

KLEIN: [00:44:29] So go ahead.

ELLEGANT: [00:44:31] Maybe some things I think if we keep talking will come to my mind.

KLEIN: [00:44:37] OK, because we'll talk more about language. Talk about your first three or four days in Medellin. I mean, you have to find a place to get a place to stay.

ELLEGANT: [00:44:48] OK. There was already a volunteer who was working in this office. So he was already there and he had had a place and I moved in with him. Because there was room, so I just moved in with him. And I don't remember, I just, I don't remember the first day in the office or. I guess I was met, I guess I was met by the volunteer leader. I think. The volunteer leader. So we talk about staff, so it was the volunteer leader I think that met me and probably took me to where I was going to live. May have taken me to the office to meet the architect that was in charge of the office and the other people, I don't remember that. Certainly took me to the Peace Corps office to meet the Peace Corps staff that was there.

KLEIN: [00:45:50] Now, in a way, you were different than other volunteers, being the first architect to come into the Peace Corps program there. Am I correct?

ELLEGANT: [00:46:03] Oh, I'm just thinking. There had been, there was an architect already working there. A Peace Corps volunteer architect living there, working there.

KLEIN: [00:46:09] Yeah, but that wasn't the person you roomed with.

ELLEGANT: [00:46:11] Yeah, that was the person I roomed with.

KLEIN: [00:46:13] OK. And you were both assigned to the same?

ELLEGANT: [00:46:18] Right, to the same office.

KLEIN: [00:46:22] You had an apartment. Did you do your own cooking? Did you have some?

ELLEGANT: [00:46:26] Yeah, we did our own cooking. We lived, actually, we lived in a very blue-collar neighborhood that was probably a, in those days, maybe 20-minute bus ride from the center of Medellin, from downtown Medellin. We did our, yeah, we did our own, well. We did our own cooking. We lived on the second floor and the landlord had a little store in the first floor. And we'd go down there in the morning, usually buy a couple of eggs from him and some baloney and a couple of oranges or whatever and make breakfast in the morning and go to work. I mean, it was, you know, it was like a nine to five job, except it wasn't like a job.

KLEIN: [00:47:09] And to get to work, you would take the bus?

ELLEGANT: [00:47:11] I'd just get on the bus, walk a couple of blocks to get on the bus and get off a couple of blocks from the office.

KLEIN: [00:47:16] Along with this other architect. So you sort of had an in-between center, to smooth the way?

ELLEGANT: [00:47:24] Right. Yeah, absolutely.

KLEIN: [00:47:27] Let's talk, if you can, about your settling into working in that office, what you were doing and with whom you were working.

ELLEGANT: [00:47:38] The office was doing a lot of schools, designing a lot of schools. Our particular job, the other architect and myself, was to work on the rural schools. The office was also doing the urban schools around the city and environs. And the schools that we were doing were typically one-room schools with a little living quarters for a teacher. What I like to say when I talk about rural, I'm talking about, you know, two hours by train, an hour by bus, and another 45 minutes by horse. I mean, it was really rural schools.

KLEIN: [00:48:25] And this is going to be concrete block construction?

ELLEGANT: [00:48:27] And they were schools in areas where there were community development Peace Corps volunteers working with the community. And the community, you know, they said, we want to build a school. Ok, we'll build a whole school. So Howard comes out, Peter comes out, we look things over and then we design a school.

KLEIN: [00:48:48] Was the funding of the construction materials through USAID?

ELLEGANT: [00:48:54] It came from the Colombian government. And I don't know, you know, if it was, I suspect it was the Alliance for Progress money. But anyway, it came from, all the materials came from the government, the Colombian government, and pay for a supervisor or superintendent came from the government.

KLEIN: [00:49:17] So now initially, you're sitting in this office in Medellin. I mean, how complicated is it to design a one-room schoolhouse? Are you doing all the detailed drawings?

ELLEGANT: [00:49:30] Yeah. Oh yeah.

KLEIN: [00:49:31] Everything.

ELLEGANT: [00:49:31] Everything. Well, it wasn't that complicated, except I was working in the metric system, so I had to learn how to do that, which was, actually it was pretty good.

KLEIN: [00:49:41] Yeah. Did you have a Colombian counterpart?

ELLEGANT: [00:49:44] Well, I mean, yeah, I mean, there were two other architects. Raul Gonzalez, who was the head of the office. And then his name may come to me. And then he had an assistant, Dr. Morales, who was also a Colombian architect. So there were four architects in the office.

KLEIN: [00:50:02] Got it. Now the question, why were you needed there? Why couldn't someone Colombian do it?

ELLEGANT: [00:50:16] No, that's a good question. I have no idea, I mean, I, you know, whether it was because the remoteness of the sites and the non-desirability of, you know, rolling up your sleeves after getting a degree from a Colombian university as an architect and going out and doing that stuff. I remember that I, either while I was there or, there was a program that had been initiated for physicians to go out and work in the rural towns. It was a mandate that they had to do that. But it hadn't, I guess, spilled over to other professions yet.

KLEIN: [00:50:59] Yeah.

ELLEGANT: [00:51:00] Because I mean, because these, as I said, these sites were really, really out there.

KLEIN: [00:51:07] Well, let's go back to the work you're doing. How long was it that you stayed in the office before going out to a site?

ELLEGANT: [00:51:15] I don't know. It, you know, probably wasn't. I don't know. I've looked for, I know I brought home a copy of my monthly reports. I don't know where it disappeared. I've got my termination report, but that



doesn't have, you know. But it was probably within the first month, I'm sure, or six weeks or so before I went out someplace.

KLEIN: [00:51:41] During that initial period, what was happening with your Spanish, with your language?

ELLEGANT: [00:51:48] Well, I was, you know, using it every day. I had to use it every day. I had to speak, you know, except at home.

KLEIN: [00:51:55] How did you use it?

ELLEGANT: [00:51:55] Well, communicated in the office and communicated on the street and on the busses and the restaurants.

KLEIN: [00:52:05] And how did it go for the first? You recall getting on the wrong bus or getting?

ELLEGANT: [00:52:09] No, I never got on the wrong bus. I never got the wrong food. I think it was just that, you know, there was there was a lot of, could you please repeat, that I didn't quite understand you. I think about six, seven, eight months after I got there, I finally said, oh god, I'm thinking in Spanish, I'm not translating.

KLEIN: [00:52:35] Yeah, but that's six, six, eight months.

ELLEGANT: [00:52:38] Yeah, yeah, no. It took a while. I mean, there's no question about it. It took a while.

KLEIN: [00:52:42] In the initial stages, the Colombians you meeting on the street, the bus, the store, what was their perception of who you are?

ELLEGANT: [00:52:57] Um, well, let me put it this way. Colombia is a Catholic country. The hierarchy was something like Kennedy, the Virgin Mary, the Pope, and God.

KLEIN: [00:53:11] Yeah, yeah.

ELLEGANT: [00:53:13] So Kennedy, I mean, people were just enamored with Kennedy. And so you're an American. Did you know Kennedy? You know, that kind of stuff.

KLEIN: [00:53:24] So you immediately perceived as American?

ELLEGANT: [00:53:26] Yeah.

KLEIN: [00:53:27] In other words, not a Colombian.

ELLEGANT: [00:53:28] Not a Colombian. No, somebody from the United States. So yeah, very, very accepted.

KLEIN: [00:53:33] Yeah. Was it your language that was the giveaway or your appearance?

ELLEGANT: [00:53:38] Probably my red hair and white skin, sunburned skin. And yeah, and the language, I'm sure too.

KLEIN: [00:53:45] Yeah. Let's take stay within the first couple of months. There must have been some free time. You didn't work seven days a week.

ELLEGANT: [00:53:59] No. Evenings were free. I mean, again, it was a nine to five job. I didn't have meetings to go to in the evenings, you know, like. So I mean, so there was always getting together at restaurants for dinner, meeting other volunteers.

KLEIN: [00:54:14] So pretty much what emerged was you socialized with other Peace Corps volunteers.

ELLEGANT: [00:54:19] For the most part, socialized with other Peace Corps volunteers, sometimes with other Colombians. It just depended on. But mostly with other volunteers.

KLEIN: [00:54:28] Was there any pressure? It became a big issue at various times that that's inappropriate, you're here because you're supposed to

be involved with Colombians, you should be. If you have free time, you should go and build a latrine in the backyard or something like that.

ELLEGANT: [00:54:46] No, not. I don't think so. Not for us.

KLEIN: [00:54:48] OK. OK.

ELLEGANT: [00:54:50] Not for us. I mean, I think if you're. Well, let me back up, I left out something completely. Before I went to Medellin, I went to a small town in Antioquia for a couple of months, and lived with a volunteer, a community development volunteer who was already there. So that I could, again, acculturate, acclimate language, and also find out about how the community development process and programs work. So there we really did spend a lot of time with Colombians because he and I were the two Americans in this town of 1,500 people.

KLEIN: [00:55:39] Right, right. Were there any construction projects going on at that time?

ELLEGANT: [00:55:44] Not there. No.

KLEIN: [00:55:45] OK. So you were pretty much free just to explore what the town was like.

ELLEGANT: [00:55:51] Yeah, yeah. I mean, but he had stuff going on, and I just sort of fell into it. Working with the local, the coffee federation had a counterpart community development person that he was working with. And so in that town and in several other, you know, going around there. He'd been there. Jim had probably been there maybe a year and a half, I'm guessing. Yeah, at least a year, maybe a little more than a year.

KLEIN: [00:56:19] So this, in a way, was additional training.

ELLEGANT: [00:56:23] Oh yeah, this was additional training. I mean, I just.

KLEIN: [00:56:25] Another two months?

ELLEGANT: [00:56:27] Another two or three months, yeah. And so that was really good, I mean, and then like I got used to the transportation system, such as it was. We'd go into, I mean, we'd go into Medellin and catch the bus going to Medellin in the morning, maybe stay there one day, maybe come back the same day. I mean that those days it was a two, three hour bus ride. And I had a horse. Had my horse.

KLEIN: [00:56:55] At what point did you get the horse?

ELLEGANT: [00:56:57] In this small town, because that's how we got around from the.

KLEIN: [00:57:01] Was that a first for you?

ELLEGANT: [00:57:04] It wasn't the first time I'd ridden a horse. It's the first time I had a horse, I mean, and took care of it.

KLEIN: [00:57:09] Not many people in Chicago.

ELLEGANT: [00:57:10] Right. Yeah. And then I learned, you know, I learned how to saddle a horse.

KLEIN: [00:57:17] You didn't have to care for the horse, did you?

ELLEGANT: [00:57:20] No, it was kept in a stable.

KLEIN: [00:57:21] OK. So now you're back in Medellin.

ELLEGANT: [00:57:29] Then I went to Medellin.

KLEIN: [00:57:30] Yeah, then and you've done, you're working in the office, you're socializing somewhat with other Peace Corps people.

ELLEGANT: [00:57:39] Yeah. And we met, you know, we'd meet other Colombians somehow or other young people. People know people. And you know, you go to a party once in a while, you meet other people and stuff like things.

KLEIN: [00:57:50] But you wouldn't, you inviting Colombians to come into your apartment?

ELLEGANT: [00:57:57] No. Our, where we lived, the apartment came with a Colombian. Or a Colombian came with the apartment, I don't know how you want to phrase it.

KLEIN: [00:58:11] Yeah.

ELLEGANT: [00:58:12] Very interesting guy. And this story goes back to a little story during training. A lot of us got fuzzy at the camp during training and then we went out on our little two-day hike, you know, they said, shave. No facial hair. Because the, you know, the guerilla stuff was, you know. Castro and Che and the whole nine yards. So let's go back to Colombia. So the men are all, they've got mustaches, but nobody wears a beard. Except for our *companero* Picasso Gorallo, who had his full beard. He almost looked a little bit like a dark Fidel. But anyway, he just, as it was explained, he just kind of came with the house.

KLEIN: [00:59:14] Was he a spy for the government?

ELLEGANT: [00:59:17] No, he was the nicest, gentlest guy. Yeah, and talk about language. I mean, he was, I'm not sure what his education was. His work was he was a body and fender man. But, I mean, we would go to parties and he would come. He'd put on a sport jacket with his Levi's and we'd go to parties and people would ask them what university he taught at or what his subject area was because he was so well-spoken. And for the two years that I knew him, he was still reading Don Quixote. But he was. I mean, so yes. So we spoke, I mean, a lot of Spanish because he didn't speak English. Or he spoke a little English. But he was great because he would really help us with our Spanish. No, no, you don't say this. What you want to say is, so he'd correct me.

KLEIN: [01:00:07] Kind of like an informant or mentor to the culture.

ELLEGANT: [01:00:12] Yeah. And he would. I mean, he lived there. It was interesting. We had an apartment on the second floor. We had a kind of a small living room and there were two bedrooms and a little alcove was kind of a dining area and a small kitchen, and the shower was on the roof. It was one of these, you know, make sure you have the water running before you plug it in showers. And there was kind of a little bench up there and a little sheltered area, and that's where he slept. He lived up there.

KLEIN: [01:00:36] Was he related to the family that you were renting from?

ELLEGANT: [01:00:52] No, I don't believe so. I mean, the story was that actually he was related to a very wealthy family in Colombia that was a soft drink manufacturer. I mean, his name or his last, his mother's name, was of that family. But I, you know, it was kind of hard to get stuff from him. But anyway, so he was. And he took care of the place. I mean, he swept up the place and whatever. And so he had friends. Sometimes they'd come over and, you know, we'd have parties.

KLEIN: [01:01:26] And how were you being paid by then?

ELLEGANT: [01:01:31] Did we get a check or was it just? I guess the answer is poorly.

KLEIN: [01:01:37] But that's directly from Peace Corps?

ELLEGANT: [01:01:39] Directly from Peace Corps. Yeah, we were paid directly from Peace Corps.

KLEIN: [01:01:41] Yeah, but the poorly was intentional.

ELLEGANT: [01:01:44] Oh yeah, no, that's right. Absolutely. Although it wasn't so poorly that we couldn't eat out really well.

KLEIN: [01:01:52] Yeah. During the first couple of months, how was your health?

ELLEGANT: [01:01:58] My health. My health while I was there was was great, except for one episode that I had. My health was good. In Puerto Rico it wasn't too bad. I was having a terrible allergic reactions. So I don't know what was going on there.

KLEIN: [01:02:18] But let's go then to getting you out from Medellin to some of the sites where you've been doing these drawings. Describe your first early trips out.

ELLEGANT: [01:02:36] I'm sure I went with my roommate.

KLEIN: [01:02:39] With Pete?

ELLEGANT: [01:02:40] Yeah, with Pete. Did we fly? No, I think the first trips were within the department and it was there. There were sites where volunteers were working, actually built two schools, two schools or three schools, for the same volunteers in different communities they were working in.

KLEIN: [01:03:06] What did you do when you went out, when you go to the village?

ELLEGANT: [01:03:09] Well, we went out. We went out once. One time we went out, we surveyed. Oh, I know. We went out and we surveyed for a water line, that might have been the first trip that we had made, actually.

KLEIN: [01:03:21] That's not an architect's job.

ELLEGANT: [01:03:23] Well, it is, if you can do a survey, and I can't. But he could so. So we went out. We did. It's the first trip out to this area was actually with my roommate to survey for a water line. And then eventually we went back and and we looked at a site for a school and I designed the school and then went out.

KLEIN: [01:03:52] This was relatively close to Medellin?

ELLEGANT: [01:03:55] Well, yeah, two hours by train, one hour by bus, 40 minutes by horse or so. That's relatively close.

KLEIN: [01:04:03] You didn't carry your horse on the bus.

ELLEGANT: [01:04:04] I didn't carry, no, no. They had a horse at the other end. Then went out and, you know, helped them lay out the foundations for where the school and then the community did the work with the, you know, the volunteers helping them get their organization. And we had, I don't know how many times we met, but our group of architects and engineers met in Bogota several times, just as they get together.

KLEIN: [01:04:36] Who did?

ELLEGANT: [01:04:37] The Peace Corps. How are you doing? What are you doing? What are the issues? What are the problems and what's working? What's not working? And one of the times that we were there, we went to, I think it was the University of the Andes, but one of the universities in Bogota, where they have what they call the CINVA Center, where they had developed what they call a CINVA-Ram press, which is a machine, a hand operated press, to make building blocks from soil, soil and cement blocks. And for the most part, that's what was used in constructing these schools. They would, the government would send a machine, one of these lock presses, out and then people would go around digging up the soil and make the blocks.

KLEIN: [01:05:28] So the first part of the project was producing a thousand blocks?

ELLEGANT: [01:05:32] Producing, yeah, whatever it was. And they'd go out and see all these blocks lying out there curing. And then they would build. And they were about the size today of a concrete block that we're familiar with. And the interesting, the fun thing about it was that the blocks took on the color of whatever the local soil was. So the buildings were very much colored by.

KLEIN: [01:06:00] Reddish.



ELLEGANT: [01:06:02] And yeah, I mean, if it was clay, it was reddish. If it was not, it would be gray or whatever.

KLEIN: [01:06:07] Like with this first visit you mentioned, you were helping lay out the site. Once construction began, did you return to that same site?

ELLEGANT: [01:06:18] Yeah. I went out a couple of times. I never, interestingly enough, I never saw a completed building. A completed building. I think they had begun, they were initiated after I'd been in country for quite a while, and the process took long enough. And I never, I mean, I got back to the site several times, but never when one was finished. I mean, I left before they were actually finished.

KLEIN: [01:06:45] Were the follow-up visits kind of quality control?

ELLEGANT: [01:06:50] I mean, I think honestly was more to get out to the country and see the sights. But just, you know, check on the building. And I liked the volunteers with whom I was working. The program was designed that way. And the people, the Colombians that they worked with, were a lot of fun. And so it's nice to meet, you know, get together with them.

KLEIN: [01:07:10] On these visits, usually you would stay overnight in the village?

ELLEGANT: [01:07:12] I'd stay overnight, stay overnight with the volunteers.

KLEIN: [01:07:15] Yeah. So we're going through the first year now. You begin, you're working still, you're working in Medellin at the office.

ELLEGANT: [01:07:25] Right.

KLEIN: [01:07:26] And once a week, once a month, you go out to a site? Any pattern particularly?

ELLEGANT: [01:07:33] Maybe a couple of times a month, go to different places.

KLEIN: [01:07:37] Who decides where you're going to go?

ELLEGANT: [01:07:38] I do.

KLEIN: [01:07:40] Based on what?

ELLEGANT: [01:07:41] Based on communications with the volunteers, finding out what, how the project was progressing. Also, well then also going out and seeing other sites. I mean, I went to a whole variety of different places.

KLEIN: [01:07:54] How did they communicate?

ELLEGANT: [01:07:58] I think communication. I don't remember much by phone. So it was probably written. Sometimes probably through the Peace Corps office. And I think, I mean, the requests from volunteers and other places could have come from the Peace Corps office.

KLEIN: [01:08:17] Even though this was, you were working for a Colombian?

ELLEGANT: [01:08:21] Well, this, the office that I worked with was charged with doing work in one state, department, and I did some projects in other places. And I don't remember exactly if the somehow the volunteers in those places got to me through the Peace Corps office or through a volunteer leader or somebody.

KLEIN: [01:08:45] But because within the country there were not that many Peace Corps architectural engineers.

ELLEGANT: [01:08:50] No, there weren't.

KLEIN: [01:08:50] And I gather that under the Alliance for Progress, there were considerable number of these projects contemplated, in the works.

ELLEGANT: [01:09:00] Um, you know, I did the schools in Antioquia, in the Department of Antioquia, which was, of which Medellin was the capital. I also did a school in the Choco, which is a Pacific coast department.

There were volunteers there, and they were working with some teachers. They wanted to build a school. So I went out there and I, you know, did the school out there.

KLEIN: [01:09:26] When you say you did a school, I mean, you did the survey?

ELLEGANT: [01:09:28] I did, yeah, I designed a school out there.

KLEIN: [01:09:31] And now was your design and therefore approval needed before it could work its way through the ministry?

ELLEGANT: [01:09:40] I'm not even aware it had to go to the ministry. I think it was just, I mean, I.

KLEIN: [01:09:45] You were the one, you were the man, so you went out there.

ELLEGANT: [01:09:48] Yeah, I mean, I, you know, I don't even. You know, that's an interesting question. I have no idea what the process was after I said, here are the drawings.

KLEIN: [01:09:57] Yeah, OK.

ELLEGANT: [01:09:58] If they then had a, you know, I'm making a leap, that the volunteers at a site worked with a counterpart from the, a Colombian counterpart from the coffee federation. Somehow, between them and their counterpart and whatever officials were in the town, they conveyed the request and they got the money and the materials. I think that was the easy part. I think the harder part was getting teachers to be assigned to the schools once they were done.

KLEIN: [01:10:36] You said once you signed off on the drawings, you handed them in.

ELLEGANT: [01:10:42] I gave them to the volunteers.

KLEIN: [01:10:44] But you left them?

ELLEGANT: [01:10:46] I think I gave them to the volunteers, which was, you know, giving them to the community, but through the volunteer on the site.

KLEIN: [01:10:49] Right, right. OK. Yeah. It didn't go through your office in Medellin?

ELLEGANT: [01:10:54] No, no. I mean, I would get advice and you know, some conversations about what we were doing and ways of approaching it, etcetera.

KLEIN: [01:11:06] At a point in the first year, was there a point when you suddenly, well, you thought to yourself, I'm a Peace Corps volunteer working in Colombia. I mean, it actually is happening.

ELLEGANT: [01:11:20] Oh, yeah, yeah. No, I don't know when again when that happened, but yeah, it just is.

KLEIN: [01:11:27] And you feel within after about six months, you would really started to become comfortable with the language?

ELLEGANT: [01:11:32] Six or seven months, eight months. I think I finally, I don't know if I was sitting on a bus. Maybe I was. Maybe that's what it was. I was sitting on a bus, waiting for the bus to start moving in the bus station, and I suddenly realized I was unconsciously eavesdropping on conversations that were going on.

KLEIN: [01:11:51] During this period. Well, going out into the village, did you encounter political problems or corruption problems? I would think if there's money coming in for construction, that would be a temptation.

ELLEGANT: [01:12:11] I had. No. I mean, if there was anything, I didn't know about it and I don't remember having conversations about it with the volunteers.

KLEIN: [01:12:18] You were sort of insulated against it because of your role.

ELLEGANT: [01:12:20] Yeah, I think, you know, the conversations that we had were more like, you know, Don so- and-so is really being pigheaded about this

thing and or so-and-so is difficult to work with, so-and-so is really easy to work with, and he's really helping us get the thing done. You know, those kinds of conversations, but I'm not aware of any of the others.

KLEIN: [01:12:43] Were you disappointed you didn't have a larger role to play? I'm not denigrating what you did.

ELLEGANT: [01:12:48] No, no, not particularly. I mean, my disappointment was not seeing the projects finished. I mean, a lot of projects that I saw that were mostly done and not finished.

KLEIN: [01:13:04] So let's, we're coming now to the end of the first year.

ELLEGANT: [01:13:06] Yeah, OK.

KLEIN: [01:13:09] And was there any break between first and second year? How many months did you serve altogether, because you were training for a long time, including in-country?

ELLEGANT: [01:13:23] Well, I left. We left Medellin in February of '66. Got there probably in, well, I got to Colombia in the spring of '64.

KLEIN: [01:13:37] Okay, so shy of 20 months.

ELLEGANT: [01:13:41] Year and a half at least in the country, a year and a half in Medellin.

KLEIN: [01:13:48] It's pretty clear, I think. Is there anything further about the particular job you were doing? Did it change?

ELLEGANT: [01:13:55] No, it didn't. I mean, it didn't change. I mean, I think, I mean, the variety of things that I got to do besides the schools. I did a church in another community. A volunteer had a community and they wanted to build a church and came to me and I said, sure, you know, I designed this church and I've got pictures of it under construction, but not completed.

KLEIN: [01:14:18] Was that, it's not also CINVA-Ram, is it?

ELLEGANT: [01:14:21] I think it was brick. Yeah, masonry and wood. And then at the time, Sam Farr's father and a sister had come to Colombia to visit him. Maureen, who was absolutely wonderful in terms of her mobility through the society and the bureaucracy, had become very good friends with the son of a former president of Colombia, Alfonso Ospina. And they had a cattle ranch in another department west, north of, a very wealthy family, north of where we were in Medellin. Sam's sister fell from a horse when they were visiting, and she subsequently died. Very, very tragic.

ELLEGANT: [01:15:26] And but Alfonso then funded a school, wanted to build a school for his workers and named it after her. And you know, and I designed it. I don't know if it was ever built. It's very strange. So, but anyway, but I went up there and spent some time there and designed the school for them.

KLEIN: [01:15:51] It was just because of all the connections involved? And things were loose enough or flexible enough that you could do that?

ELLEGANT: [01:15:58] Yeah, yeah.

KLEIN: [01:16:01] Did you have a sense that you were accountable to anyone? You know, you had an office, you were working.

ELLEGANT: [01:16:07] Yeah, I mean, I think. No. No, I didn't. I mean, you know, I was doing monthly reports and we had a director and the Peace Corps office and the architect with whom I was working, for whom I was working. Yeah, the local architect was, I think he was pretty loose about everything and there wasn't any real sense of, you know, wanted to know what we were doing and but no real strong control over things. I'd say, Raul, you know, Thursday, I'm going off to Yali, I'll be back in the office on Monday or Tuesday. He'd say, that's OK.

KLEIN: [01:16:58] So at any point, let's go into the second year, was there a break between the first and second year? You must have had some leave time.

ELLEGANT: [01:17:10] Oh, well, yeah, I mean, there was.

KLEIN: [01:17:12] I mean, the Peace Corps has it built in.

ELLEGANT: [01:17:13] Yeah, no. I did take a vacation, but I don't remember when that was. But yeah, the couple of us that were in. Actually one of the people, one of the volunteers in Medellin was friendly with, was still very, very friendly with one of the volunteers from Venezuela. I think that's how it worked.

KLEIN: [01:17:38] Yeah.

ELLEGANT: [01:17:41] Anyway, I remember the three of us took a trip, an overland trip, to Quito from Medellin to Quito, which was a lot of fun and very interesting. Lots of stories about that thing, too. And then one of interesting parts about that was that on the way, wherever we stopped, made a couple of overnight stops we made was finding the local Peace Corps volunteers and crashing on their floors, which was perfectly natural?

KLEIN: [01:18:11] Normal custom.

ELLEGANT: [01:18:13] That's right. Yes. I mean, so that was the big, um.

KLEIN: [01:18:20] During the first year, had you been communicating back to friends and family?

ELLEGANT: [01:18:25] Yeah. You know, writing letters.

KLEIN: [01:18:28] Mostly to family?

ELLEGANT: [01:18:29] Mostly to family, a couple of friends. But you know, mostly family.

KLEIN: [01:18:33] And do they still exist?

ELLEGANT: [01:18:36] Yeah. I think they do. I think I've got them.

KLEIN: [01:18:40] OK.

ELLEGANT: [01:18:42] The other interesting thing was, we had a telephone in our apartment, which just sort of came there. I talked to my parents once or twice, in maybe the two years I was there.

KLEIN: [01:18:51] No family crises.

ELLEGANT: [01:18:53] No, no, no. Just a call Sunday morning or something.

KLEIN: [01:18:57] Yeah, going in. There's a break and you're sort of going into your second year and it'll be 10 months or whatever. Do you recall the break, and at that point probably you're aware that you're not going to be in Colombia permanently? There's an end. And sometimes some volunteers will then say, well, before I go, I really would like to at least achieve this or get this done.

ELLEGANT: [01:19:32] No, I don't think I had the feeling.

KLEIN: [01:19:36] That you're aware of going into your second year.

ELLEGANT: [01:19:39] Probably. But you know, and I know we had a. I should say, no, we probably had a conference, you know, went to Bogota and all met at the end of the first year. And we had one of these little mini get togethers. Yeah, what's happening, what's going on?

KLEIN: [01:19:57] And when you got together, how did your experience match up to that of the others from your training group?

ELLEGANT: [01:20:07] I'm just going to say probably pretty similar in terms of the kinds of, relatively speaking, the kinds of work we were doing and who we were working with and how the work was going.

KLEIN: [01:20:17] And there weren't people who said, you know, it's impossible to work with these people.



ELLEGANT: [01:20:21] No, I don't remember that at all.

KLEIN: [01:20:23] OK. And no one went home that you know?

ELLEGANT: [01:20:26] Not in our group. No, no one went home from our group.

KLEIN: [01:20:32] In relation to the second year, I was thinking whether was there any point that you thought maybe it would be good if I could train a Colombian to be doing some of what I'm doing?

ELLEGANT: [01:20:45] I don't know. That's a very good question, because somewhere during my second year, I don't remember what the timing was. My roommate's time was up. So he was getting ready to leave, but there was another fellow that came to work in the office after that.

KLEIN: [01:21:05] Another Peace Corps?

ELLEGANT: [01:21:06] Another Peace Corps volunteer, yeah, another architect. And so Peter left. And I mean, Bill came before Peter left and then Peter left and Bill was there and then I left, and I don't know what happened after that.

KLEIN: [01:21:18] So the continuity?

ELLEGANT: [01:21:19] There was continuity.

KLEIN: [01:21:21] And Bill moved in with you I assume.

ELLEGANT: [01:21:23] Yeah, he moved in. Right.

KLEIN: [01:21:24] Yeah. So now as you're coming near the end, oh, another. During your time there, were you aware of political problems in the country? Did they impinge at all?

ELLEGANT: [01:21:41] They didn't impinge. I remember, and I don't remember exactly when it was, although if I look at my, I don't think it'll be on the

film all. I remember one evening being out in Medellin and martial law has been declared, *estado de citia*, martial law, and I saw troops and tanks in the street in Medellin and I looked at them and I was kind of looking closely and my thought was, Christ, this stuff all came from the United States. Yeah, but that didn't last. I don't even remember what the issue was. I don't know if it was around an election or.

KLEIN: [01:22:26] And you didn't feel threatened?

ELLEGANT: [01:22:27] No, I didn't feel threatened at all. Not at all. It was interesting. I just had this sense of something's going on here.

KLEIN: [01:22:34] Was Peace Corps office in Bogota in touch at all about what was going on or giving advice or suggesting an evacuation plan?

ELLEGANT: [01:22:46] No, I don't remember anything like that happening.

KLEIN: [01:22:48] OK. Go ahead.

ELLEGANT: [01:22:52] No, no. The whole time I was there, I mean, there were, there was, again, you know that we had discussion about there was a guerilla movement that was nascent and going on, but it wasn't here. It was somewhere out there in the jungles or whatever was happening.

KLEIN: [01:23:08] Well, when you went out to the boonies to do the site visits, did you get any sense of unrest?

ELLEGANT: [01:23:16] No, no. I didn't have any sense of it. Of course, just wasn't in the right places, I guess.

KLEIN: [01:23:23] Well, for the most part, they were communities that had coalesced enough to be able to commit to a building project, which may say something about that.

ELLEGANT: [01:23:32] Yes.

KLEIN: [01:23:36] So as you're coming to the end of your tour, what are your feelings about what you had accomplished, whether it had been worth it?

ELLEGANT: [01:23:50] Yeah, I think I felt that it had been worth it. I mean, I certainly enjoyed my time there, and I felt that professionally I had gotten a lot of experience that I never would have gotten if I had just gone to work in somebody's office right out of college here in the States. There's a lot of, you know, the opportunity to design and see built or at least started a lot of different projects, different types of projects. And I had responsibility for doing them. I'm not sure I knew much more right, but I certainly had a sense of accomplishment, both professionally and as well as working for the people that I was, you know, working with.

KLEIN: [01:24:34] And now with this fabulous experience.

ELLEGANT: [01:24:37] Now with this fabulous experience, I went home.

KLEIN: [01:24:42] To face the draft.

ELLEGANT: [01:24:42] To face the draft, right. I mean, one of the interesting, I mean, there are so many interesting little little things that happen, as you know, when you're a Peace Corps volunteer. One of them was going home. And so we had a choice of, at that time, of flying from Medellin to Miami, either on a jet or on a Super G Constellation or whatever. And if you took the Super G Constellation, it was a slower trip. It was less costly and you get the difference in cash between the two tickets. So guess what? But that was kind of fun because there we were in the back section of this, going to Miami, and I don't think Maureen was there. Sam was there, a couple of other volunteers, and we were just having a party going back to Miami.

KLEIN: [01:25:30] Yeah, yeah.

ELLEGANT: [01:25:33] So then I came home, and it was. Vietnam is happening and I don't want any part of that particularly. And I went up and applied for a job in the Army Corps of Engineers in Chicago, and I was hired as an architect.

KLEIN: [01:25:50] While you were in Colombia, ere you aware of what was going on with American foreign policy?

ELLEGANT: [01:25:57] Um, you know, what I read in the newspapers and in Time magazine. We got Time magazine over there. And I think it was in Spanish, but I usually picked up a copy of Time almost every week.

KLEIN: [01:26:11] Do you remember if people you worked with, Colombians, were aware of the Vietnam War or not?

ELLEGANT: [01:26:16] No, I don't. I don't remember at all. I don't remember at all.

KLEIN: [01:26:21] One question about Medellin, of course, because it later became prominent in the drug trade. Were there any inklings of that or?

ELLEGANT: [01:26:32] No, not when I was there. I mean, I'm fond of saying that the biggest cash crop at that time was coffee. And it was, personally, it was a great disappointment to me what happened and I still don't quite understand it because out of all, in my understanding, of all the other countries in Latin America, Colombia when I was there in the sixties, probably had ten centers of population of 100,000 or more, which is, you know, a good size. I mean, Evanston is 78,000. I mean, it's a good middle. And they had a tremendous middle class. I mean, it's true, there was a lot of rural poverty. There was a lot of urban poverty, but you had three cities. It wasn't like some of these other countries where you've got one city that continually grows because everybody's coming into those urban areas. I mean, Medellin was a half a million people. Bogota was probably a million. Cali at that time was 300,000. So these are three really good sized cities. Plus a lot of other cities scattered around the country, there is a big middle class. And I think we all felt very, very hopeful for the country, that there was this great middle class, that community development's going on, you know, and stuff. It all went to hell in a handbasket for a while.

KLEIN: [01:27:50] Right. From the time you left, how long did Peace Corps stay?

ELLEGANT: [01:27:55] Maybe, I want to say '82 maybe.

KLEIN: [01:28:02] So it was there continuously through the sixties.

ELLEGANT: [01:28:04] It was there continuously through the sixties, maybe up until '82.

KLEIN: [01:28:07] Oh OK. Few questions following up. You came back to Chicago. You went to work for the Corps of Engineers. Were you able to maintain any contact with friends back in Colombia?

ELLEGANT: [01:28:27] No, I didn't. A couple of Christmas cards here and there, and it just sort of petered out.

KLEIN: [01:28:34] Were you able to make use of your bilinguality? I mean, it must have been a curiosity to come back into the uni-lingual of American society.

ELLEGANT: [01:28:45] Well, in 1966, there was not as much Spanish being spoken in this country as there is today. So that's kind of. But yeah, buy you know, I started to travel. I went to Mexico, went to Spain several times. Went to Israel and had a conversation with somebody who spoke Ladino. And so.

KLEIN: [01:29:10] Yeah. But within the work environment here, the fact that you knew Spanish.

ELLEGANT: [01:29:18] No. And it really hasn't been until maybe the last, until the nineties, really when I run across situations where I could use the Spanish in the city.

KLEIN: [01:29:33] It's obvious you've also been able to stay in touch with some of the people who served with you.

ELLEGANT: [01:29:38] Yeah.

KLEIN: [01:29:39] And you mentioned that recently you made a trip back.

ELLEGANT: [01:29:44] Yeah. In February 2008, in Cartagena, there was a conference for volunteers that had served in Colombia.

KLEIN: [01:29:52] Who organized the conference?

ELLEGANT: [01:29:55] It was a joint effort between the Colombian Embassy, Colombian government through their embassy in Washington, and Friends of Colombia, the organization of returned Peace Corps volunteers.

KLEIN: [01:30:06] And I gather that Peace Corps is currently in Colombia?

ELLEGANT: [01:30:10] They're not.

KLEIN: [01:30:11] It is not. OK.

ELLEGANT: [01:30:12] But President Uribe recently sent a letter to the Peace Corps requesting Peace Corps volunteers return to the country.

KLEIN: [01:30:20] Going to the Cartagena conference, was there a sense that this was to be PR, that maybe to bring a little light to the idea?

ELLEGANT: [01:30:31] Maybe that was, I don't know if that was overt, but I mean, I think two things happened. First of all, there were over two hundred people that came to the conference from all the States and a lot of.

KLEIN: [01:30:44] All returned volunteers?

ELLEGANT: [01:30:45] No, not at all. But I don't know what the total number of returned volunteers was, but they brought family. I mean, kids, friends,

KLEIN: [01:30:56] CIA agents, probably.

ELLEGANT: [01:30:59] But I mean, but having 200 people come to that conference and some people like myself haven't been back to Colombia since they served.

KLEIN: [01:31:05] Right.

ELLEGANT: [01:31:06] And people were just so overjoyed to be back and to be there. And so I saw two of the people, two of the other people that were in my group who were there and we reconnected. We sort of, you know, maybe had a little contact, but not a lot. You know, once every 15 years or something. But we reconnected and that was nice. And um, but President Uribe spoke. He came, we had. I guess if we were diplomats, you'd say we had briefings by people in the Colombian government. I mean, we, the defense minister spoke to us about the situation, what's going on in Colombia. We had commerce and we had people from NGOs that spoke about what their programs are, what's going on. So I mean, we had a really big overview of what's happening in Colombia.

KLEIN: [01:32:14] Did you get a chance to get to Medellin?

ELLEGANT: [01:32:16] Oh, yeah, yeah. We went, there was a group of us that went to Medellin.

KLEIN: [01:32:19] What was your reaction to being back?

ELLEGANT: [01:32:24] Well, it was, you know, it was not that things change. They now have a metro and it's above ground, so it's very obvious. It goes through the center of the city where we used to hang out. And the center of the city where we used to hang out and the street where we used to hang out in the restaurants is a pedestrian, is a pedestrian mall. And where we used to be is now thought of as not the best place to be. And that's moved out to what used to be kind of a little suburban community that was just a little little tiny place.

KLEIN: [01:33:05] How was your Spanish when you went?

ELLEGANT: [01:33:06] About half of my Spanish was fine. Yeah, I mean, I was. Maureen, when she was a volunteer in a community up in the hills above Medellin, had helped her community build a school. They named the school after her and she has been actively involved with that school for

quite a while now. I think there was a time during the big drug stuff going on where she was not going there, but now she goes, she goes back, maybe once or twice a year, maybe twice a year. That school is becoming a model for bilingual schools. It's a grammar school.

KLEIN: [01:33:53] And bilingual being?

ELLEGANT: [01:33:55] English and Spanish. She's done a tremendous job in terms of getting money for the school, for teacher training, for technology. She started one laptop per child in that school. She got, I think it was Hewlett Packard donated a whole bunch of computers and went there, and these kids are, these kids.

KLEIN: [01:34:15] And so you visited the school.

ELLEGANT: [01:34:17] We visited the school. A bunch of us visited the school.

KLEIN: [01:34:20] Now is Friends of Colombia now supporting the school or helping?

ELLEGANT: [01:34:26] I don't know. I don't know if the organization, but anyway, but the Spanish. So what I wanted to say was that so when we were there, they had a ceremony, you know, looking back on the volunteers in Medellin and the newspaper was there and they interviewed me and I had no problem with it, the conversation.

KLEIN: [01:34:44] Good.

ELLEGANT: [01:34:46] Yeah. So the Spanish came, you know, came back. And well I've been using it, speaking it.

KLEIN: [01:34:56] Mm hmm.

ELLEGANT: [01:34:58] Yeah, so the language has been very useful.

KLEIN: [01:35:03] So sort of to wrap up, what do you think the impact of the Peace Corps service was on your own life? [tape break]



ELLEGANT: [01:35:19] And where they live. So we become much more sensitive to other cultures and to how people get along with each other based on their cultural framework or context, you know, things are just different. And it certainly gave me a desire to travel, which I and we've done a lot of, yeah, a lot of traveling. I love it, you know, going different places. It gave me the language which is, you know, fun and useful. It also. The thing that came to my mind, which is really, I suppose, good or bad, I'm not indifferent to, but I can ignore somebody sitting on the street cross-legged with their hands up and their hat out.

KLEIN: [01:36:32] Oh yeah.

ELLEGANT: [01:36:34] I mean, there was just so much of that. I don't know what your experience was in Ghana. There was so much of that going on in the, you know, in the cities in Colombia in the sixties, you know.

KLEIN: [01:36:48] Have you particularly followed Colombian affairs or it's not that easy?

ELLEGANT: [01:36:54] Um, I have, you know, from time to time. I mean, when I first came back, I subscribed to a magazine, maybe it was Decision, that was published in Latin America. Anyway, it was kind of like a Latin American Time magazine. And there's a lot of, or Colombian Time magazine. And you know, I did from time to time. And it's interesting because I mean, the drug war, that whole drug thing is kind of like, you know, I. Yes, I've seen programs and how it started and everything, but I still don't understand how it got a foothold. And then with all this stuff that's going on in Mexico, I commented to Carol, I said, Mexico sounds like Colombia 20 years ago.

KLEIN: [01:37:47] Yeah. But based on your own experience of Colombia, it's the puzzle. It's hard to understand.

ELLEGANT: [01:37:57] Yeah. Well, maybe next. I don't know.

KLEIN: [01:38:02] Would you recommend, if a young person came to you today or an old person, would you recommend they join the Peace Corps?

ELLEGANT: [01:38:07] Absolutely. After a lot of hesitation. It's great. It's great. We tried to get. My son wasn't interested. Daughter wasn't interested. It was kind of like, you know, absolutely wonderful.

KLEIN: [01:38:22] Anything else you'd like to say to the National Archives?

ELLEGANT: [01:38:26] Thank you!

[END OF INTERVIEW]