

Kenneth Rizzi Oral History Interview
Returned Peace Corps Volunteer Collection
Administrative Information

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Biographical Note

Kenneth (Ken) Rizzi served as a Peace Corps volunteer in Botswana from 1986 to 1988 as a drought relief technical officer.

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Oral History Interview

with

Kenneth Rizzi

November 18, 2018
Ringo, New Jersey

By Candice Wiggum

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

WIGGUM: [00:00:01] Today is November 18, 2018. This is Candy Wiggum and I am interviewing Ken Rizzi, who was a Peace Corps volunteer in Botswana from 1986 to 1988 as a drought relief officer. Also with me is Christie Musa, president of the Returned Peace Corps Volunteers of New Jersey who will be observing. All right. The first question we generally ask is, why did you join Peace Corps?

RIZZI: [00:00:37] Well, I always wanted to. Ever since I was a kid, I always wanted to serve my country. And and I felt that this was a great way to do it. That was my my intent was always to go into the Peace Corps. I was not a college bound kid and the Peace Corps actually, you know, made me go to college and get my bachelor's degree. So I was going to be eligible for the Peace Corps.

WIGGUM: [00:01:05] Yeah, and how did your parents feel about it?

RIZZI: [00:01:08] They were supportive. Yeah, very much so. Don't bring home any surprises. My father's so. I'm the youngest of eight and my parents were older at the time. So I don't think my father would that, he wasn't not supportive. But he was had an old mindset. You're going to Africa and, you know, just don't come home with any surprises. And he was from the World War II generation.

WIGGUM: [00:01:37] So what kind of background did you have that ended up as a drought relief officer?

RIZZI: [00:01:43] So I went to college for business and I also had experiences doing electrical work. So my first placement was going to be into in the Philippines and that's when the Marcos were in power. And when we were just about going to training, there was a coup there. So my placement got squashed. And so I had to wait another couple of months. And this position in Botswana came up as a drought relief officer. So the position of a drought relief officers to manage a project not unlike the Civilian Conservation Corps. We had the depression where since there was this very severe drought at the time, we, the government, put farmers to work building civil projects, a really great program. And my job was to manage that program. So I had several villages. Every village got one project. I had a staff of 23 people. Some of them were truck drivers to deliver the equipment and some of them were accountants that paid the folks once a month. I would go on a 10 day trip to go inspect the projects. So it was an administrative job. But also really also it's like a civil engineering project, which I never had any experience with, but sort of building, building like a guesthouse, pit latrine, series of pit latrines, different kinds of wells. We built different projects like that. So it's really.

WIGGUM: [00:03:22] And you must have been fairly young at the time. And I imagine people who work for you were older. Was that?

RIZZI: [00:03:29] That's correct.

WIGGUM: [00:03:30] Yeah. How was that for you?

RIZZI: [00:03:33] I never thought of it, I never thought of it as being an issue or a problem. We were equals, right, so we were just I was that sort of my management style is that sort of I'm a team player and I would really just get my hands dirty also. So every Friday I would have I would call a slingshot session. I would sit in one spot and have my staff sit in an arc. We have got a soda because we were able to get a soda. And I would say, what's the problem? You know, where are the problems? Let's try to fix that, whatever the issues are. Am I managing OK, is everything going fine? How can we improve it? Those sorts of things. So I never thought of age. I think I guess the, I guess the truck drivers were probably in their 40s, but the accounting staff were educated and basically they were just going to pay. So they had a load of cash on them and they would pay. But I think they were probably educated. I don't think college, but they had a high school education. So they were probably. Maybe a hair younger than me. Yeah, yeah, I was 24, 23, 24. And they were probably in their 20s, early twenties. So I never I never thought of that.

WIGGUM: [00:04:53] How was the application process for you? How long did it take between the time you applied and the time you found out your assignment? Sounds like you had to wait then another couple of months.

RIZZI: [00:05:04] After I graduated college and I immediately applied. Graduated in June, had to wait until September to get the Philippines placement, and then I had to wait till I think October. Yeah, October before the Botswana placement. So it was a short time that time was stressful because your life is sort of in limbo. I was working and I had to get a job and, you know, although I was living at home, I had a car, so I had to sell it. I was selling the car, didn't have a car, then once I knew I was going and then so I didn't have a car, I was like for like, you know, six weeks or so. And then you really you're not thinking about career advancement at home. Right. So just I think I was working at an electrical warehouse, you know, some management training or something like that.

WIGGUM: [00:06:00] So what kind of clearances did you have to get back then?
Medical, legal?

RIZZI: [00:06:05] Oh, we had to get the yellow fever, you know, and do the, you know, physical and we had this I don't know if you guys had this, but we had this intensive three day weekend where we went to Harpers Ferry, I guess it was what they were telling us, that this is how the CIA trains or FBI trains people. It was sort of psychological torture for like 48, 72 hours.

WIGGUM: [00:06:42] Wow.

RIZZI: [00:06:43] Yeah, it was. I was just thinking of all these scenarios they put you through and they try to, you know, really put you in a lot of stress about, you know, you be able to handle this. A lot of people dropped out, not a lot I'd say. But a couple of people didn't get the right to go to the Peace Corps after that weekend. So I didn't expect I was drained by the end of the weekend.

WIGGUM: [00:07:04] So what's the scenario like?

RIZZI: Role playing.

WIGGUM: Can you remember what it was though?

RIZZI: [00:07:12] I can tell you one thing where they put me in a room and they said, OK, tell us, tell us the real you or tell us, you know, tell us what you have or tell us, you know what what's wrong? What's wrong with you? And then there was no. And then we would sit, say there is nothing wrong with me, they just wanted to really just push your buttons, try to push your buttons and, you know, it was just a roaring silence in the room. And that was really very uncomfortable. Right. So I trying to figure out what they wanted. And I guess that's they wanted to sort of break you and say, OK, you know, why what are your ulterior motives for doing this or something like that? I really never got to know what the bottom line was. I guess they were looking for mental strength, you know, a little bit of mental stability

and strength, you know, so it was draining. I mean, maybe I'm making it out to be more than it was. But, you know, we were all drained. Beautiful place, though, Harpers Ferry.

WIGGUM: [00:08:21] Now, you found out first about the Philippines and then that dropped and then you found out about Botswana. What kind of training did you have? Did you have some before you left? Was most of your training in-country? What was your training like?

RIZZI: [00:08:36] So we, it was all in the country. Three months, maybe not. You know, I think it was like three months where we had intensive language training. We live with the family, didn't speak English. And every day we would go get various sorts of trade and cultural, I think, was four hours a day and language. Role playing, I think we did some role playing, like cultural role playing and. I know the days just flew by, but I believe it was mostly language, yeah, you know, most of the language. And then we had to live with the family who wasn't going to speak. No one's speaking English. So when they were we were living in huts. So it was really just fascinating that cultural immersion was just absolutely, you know.

WIGGUM: [00:09:24] Can you say more about that? What was your family like?

RIZZI: [00:09:27] What did I was I would say we lived in a roundabout, which is just a thatched hut, right, with the grass roofs. And I was really lucky because the house that I stayed in, there was actually a bed and the woman's son was overseas. He was in the Netherlands studying. So I was able to use his bed. But across from me, she would sleep on the floor with probably like eight or nine kids. And they would look like just they would all lay on their backs and they were all in a row. Some really wonderful to see that. And, of course, chickens in the house, too. And so it was pretty amazing, you know, the pit latrine outback, fantastic experience with the being immersed in that just sort of blowing can be blown away by. That was a lot of fun.

WIGGUM: [00:10:26] And then what happened when you went to the site? How did you live it on site? And was it a city? Was it a village?

RIZZI: [00:10:32] So was village Kasane, up on the border of Zambia and Zimbabwe. Three countries, four countries meet there in Namibia. It's on the same river. And I have to say, probably out of all the volunteers that have happened, I have to be my experience is probably in the top 100. I have such a great Peace Corps experience. So I went to Kasane, which again is right on the border of Zambia, and the people were very nice, you know, went ahead and started the project. I was relieving someone. So the project was established already. We had a fleet of trucks and projects and I would go around, like I said, once a month. And what we would go to the chief and say, what would you like your project to be? And we'd have a meeting at what they call a *kgotla*. Where, you know, half the town would come out and then decide on what the project was going to be. It was really great. And they picked a project. We gave them, over time, of course, we would deliver the materials and then I would just go revisit that once a week or once a month. I would go back and see how they're progressing. Hard working people. Really nice to see that. So on the weekends and of course, I didn't tell you this, is that both of the towns I lived in were immersed in the national parks.

RIZZI: [00:11:59] So I was able to traverse and be in the national parks most of my two years there, which is just really fantastic living in Kasane. So I would hitchhike on Saturdays to Zimbabwe, which is where Victoria you know, Victoria Falls, the town of Victoria Falls, and I would get my lettuce and my a few vegetables and then, you know, hitchhike back. And I understand now that this town is really built up, just like any other town that I was in. So I was in Kasane for six months. And that was I try wanted to transfer because I knew my most of my friends were going to be in Maun. So I transferred to a town in common. That's where I spent a year and a half and I had that's when I had seventy five villages. And I work with the Basarwa people, the bushmen and and so, you know, the people who speak with the clicks and stuff. So I really had a great experience with that same thing going around to the villages, sleeping out. There's

nowhere to sleep. You're sleeping on the ground. You know the tent, mosquito net. And then visiting the projects in the daytime, seeing other progressing, dealing with the issues and problems. And that's why my experience was, you know, fantastic.

WIGGUM: [00:13:20] What language did you use?

RIZZI: [00:13:21] Setswana.

WIGGUM: [00:13:23] And you got relatively fluent in that?

RIZZI: [00:13:27] Yeah, it was like one of the highest scores because I wasn't a school teacher, so I had school teachers speaking English. English is the official language. But I was with the then, you know, the more local folks and the adults. So I didn't have an experience with children. I had experience with adults, was a little bit unusual, I would think. Yeah. You know, in a young country like that.

WIGGUM: [00:13:52] So what was the hardest thing about your Peace Corps experience? What was what was your biggest or some of your biggest challenges?

RIZZI: [00:14:04] You know, potential corruption, so I had a I had a person who that sharing all of us when it was sort of the person who would the native speaker. And although I was the technical officer, this person was the liaison to the villages and also to see the projects were going OK or whatnot. So they would always although I was in charge of the the trucks and the staff. And so this person and several times not only this person, but several people would want to bring load up the trucks with other persons things, personal construction materials for just private people. So that was my biggest problem. I just would not let that happen. And it was a bone of contention. You know, so, as soon as I was leaving, my the person to replace me, I was really sad. But I said, you make you make that decision. And they decided that they were going to let that happen. So you can't win them all. So that was a stressor. That was definitely a

stressor. But I tell you, I think that was one percent of the great experience that I had.

WIGGUM: [00:15:21] Well, what are you most proud of?

RIZZI: [00:15:24] That we got these projects done. I mean, these projects would not have happened and the people were paid. It really, really worked. We also had food distribution. You know, that was part of my job on the trucks. We'd load up a lot of food because there was just absolutely nothing to eat. People were eating bark off trees and things like that. So it was just this bad. This was the time during apartheid in South Africa, the neighboring country to the south. The counselor, which is an elected position, he got this fax at the time, there was only faxes, so that said that there were, you know, people. The government of South Africa had heard that people are eating the bark off of trees, and would you like assistance and at that time was really an embarrassment for the country, for Botswana, because they were adversaries, right. They didn't want that. They would never take help from South Africa. They didn't want that. So it was embarrassing. So we had to go to this village. We had like 14 hour drive straight away and figure out what they were doing. But it turned out that they did not have food, and they were eating the bark. But that's something that was in their cultural thing. That's what they did. The bushmen people. So we we gave them, you know, rice and donor bags and food and things like that. So. That was the big, that was like a big challenge. That was a big, big problem we had.

WIGGUM: [00:17:00] Were you ever sick while you were over there?

RIZZI: [00:17:05] No.

WIGGUM: [00:17:08] So you never had problems with malaria?

RIZZI: [00:17:10] No, there wasn't. I had to stop taking the chloroquine. I just did not. I didn't. I was hallucinating. I took it for three days. They wanted us to take that. I just never took it. I don't even know if they still have that I was

in an area where there was tsetse fly and. No, I never really got sick, I got you know, when I was traveling home, I got sick.

WIGGUM: [00:17:34] How often did you see other Peace Corps volunteers?

RIZZI: [00:17:39] I lived with, uh, I had a place where I was given a big house and I invited other Peace Corps volunteers who weren't in a good living conditions to live with me.

WIGGUM: [00:17:55] So Peace Corps at that time didn't provide you housing?

RIZZI: [00:17:59] No, it was a government house. It was a, I guess it was an old colonial house. It was just this cement square. But it was big and like three, four bedroom ranch, of course, all just concrete, concrete. Everything was concrete. It had a wood burning stove. There's no electricity and rain water collection thing. But we did have we did have running water.

WIGGUM: [00:18:28] So you had indoor plumbing?

RIZZI: [00:18:30] Yes. For that house. Yeah, so.

WIGGUM: [00:18:34] Vacations, did you take?

RIZZI: No hot water though. We were able to heat the water through some sort of hot water heater, then transfer it to the shower, you know, something like that. You could take a warm shower, but you had to take two hours to make a fire and get the water hot.

WIGGUM: [00:18:55] Did you take vacations while you were there?

RIZZI: [00:18:57] Yes, we took a we went to a safari. We flew on an airplane just like a little tiny airplane. It just a few miles into the into the bush. And that was fun. Just we went on these canoes and it was just wonderful just being on the ground. And then you sleep and you hear the lions at night.

And this is just wonderful. And, you know, a couple of times in Zimbabwe is a beautiful country, Zimbabwe would always go to, you know, it was right next to Zimbabwe. So we went there are a lot of times I went there. So once I went to Chimanimani national park, which borders Mozambique, and that was when there was a big civil war going on. You could hear, you know, the shots, you know, the blasting of the guns and pretty, pretty wild. In that same place where we would we slept in a tent on the lawn of a hotel and they would give you tea service in the morning. So some guy would come out with, like, all dressed up to your tent with, like, tea and biscuits or whatever was really, really pretty funny.

WIGGUM: [00:20:13] Did you go home at all during that time?

RIZZI: [00:20:15] I did. My mother developed leukemia. So she was sort of it was touch and go whether she was going to pass away. And it was about it was only about six months into my stay there where the Peace Corps flew me home. I stayed for three weeks. Then I flew back and she survived. She survived. So it was good. But it was really great to do that. I didn't you know, it wasn't a great thing to go home, but I had to do it.

WIGGUM: [00:20:41] How did you keep up communication while you were in Botswana with people at home?

RIZZI: [00:20:47] Letters. There was no, um. In the capital there was a way to call and I did one Christmas. That was just what I did one time.

WIGGUM: [00:20:59] What would be the turn around like if you sent a letter and they'd send one back?

RIZZI: [00:21:02] Oh, probably six weeks. Yeah, this is, I mean, you can't even think of that now. I can't believe the Peace Corps volunteers have like Facebook and all this communication. And it's not the same experience. It's not you know, I can't imagine it being the same, but that's fine.

WIGGUM: [00:21:19] What did it feel like when you knew your time to leave was coming?

RIZZI: [00:21:22] They wanted me to stay another year. They really wanted me to. But I didn't want to start over. It was time to go. It was terrible. But you had to sort of break with that, right? You had to come home. I had so much fun and a great experience. It's great to be at the age that I was doing what I did. Absolutely the greatest years of my life, no question about it. And you just can't live, it's time. You know, you have to know when to change that.

WIGGUM: [00:21:50] So have you been back at all?

RIZZI: [00:21:52] I want to. I'd really like to go back. I love to take my family back because the cultural immersion is amazing, you know? And now the thing is, I've been looking on it's completely different. It's completely developed. And we just had it was really rough living that's really developed. Botswana is pretty rich country because the diamond, because they discovered diamonds, so they put tarmac down and then the Maun, where I was, it's become like a tourist hub. So I know it wouldn't be, like it's hard, it would cost us ten thousand dollars, bring a family of five. So I have places I could stay, but it's not going to it wouldn't be I don't know if it would be the same experience that I had. So I just don't know if I want to do that because of that.

WIGGUM: [00:22:38] Yeah. Have you kept in touch with people?

RIZZI: [00:22:41] I do. I did. I got of fact right now, some of the locals, one person started a rape center and she's asking me for a laptop. So I'm trying to work with health care who I work with to get me that laptop has taken them a long time, but hopefully we'll get them the laptop they want. It's pretty. So she sent me all the all the you know, the what do they call it, the NGO information. It's like an official organization. So tell me all the all the fliers and it's pretty great. So what they do is they take parents who have died of AIDS, they take the kids in and shelter them and I don't know

where they go after that but. And then rape victims, sort of like a place for, you know, women's shelter sort of thing.

WIGGUM: [00:23:35] Have you had more interactions with Botswana or are you have you sort of had this history of sending things over or helping people over there?

RIZZI: [00:23:43] No, no. It's because of Facebook that they contacted me. They found that they found me and it was that, the messenger. So we have been able to communicate. It's a matter of fact, I did a Facetime with someone which blew me away. I was able to Facetime someone and the person I'm talking about, we were able to communicate. This is fantastic. So I guess it's like Skype, but I just never thought of it. And then it was just amazing for that to happen. So I woke her up at 2:00 in the morning because the time difference, who would know? I didn't think of it.

WIGGUM: [00:24:15] So how has your experience in Peace Corps impacted the rest of your life?

RIZZI: [00:24:20] So, as I said, it was great. Best years of my life and completely changed the trajectory of my life and the thing is I had a really hard time adjusting when I came back. So, I mean, when I say a hard time, it's just a month, you know, maybe. And I've lived, you know, a different life because of it. So you guys, you know that, it's different. The thing is, it could be lonely at times because you don't know. Nobody really knows what you you did and what you lived. And, you know, who's it for you to say you're you know, everybody gets to live their life. But I want them to I just want them to know that this isn't the greatest, this isn't the best life that you can possibly have. There's just too many conveniences or whatever.

WIGGUM: [00:25:11] So did it change what you were going to do as far as a vocation for your life?

RIZZI: [00:25:18] Yes, absolutely. So because of the food distribution, I got into health care and I did a lot with working with the clinics there as part of my

job. So I wanted to get into public health when I came back. So I went to get my master's in public health and I wanted to be a health officer, you know, county health officer. But that didn't work out. And really, I didn't like the public sector. It just was not, too slow for me. So I ended up working, doing epidemiology and, you know, health care, like looking at, you know, preventive care and things like that through data. That's what I do.

WIGGUM: [00:25:56] How has it affected your parenting or your relationship with your family, do you think?

RIZZI: [00:26:01] I think so very greatly. I try to shine that light on my kids that there's, you know, a different way. There's you you're really lucky to have all these conveniences, but try to impart on them. Just to, you know, be humble and you're blessed with all these things, but, you know, it could be taken away like a snap of a finger. So you really have to be well versed in living and you have to just be able to, you know, live with very little means because you don't know what the future of your life is going to be or the future of this country. So I try to part that isn't working. I'm not sure. But we'll see. Yeah. So that's that.

WIGGUM: [00:26:56] Is there one particular adventure you remember that stands out for you and your Peace Corps time?

RIZZI: [00:27:12] No, not really, because it was just, you know, when I say fantastic series, it was a fantastic experience. I got to tell you this, I can tell you this story. So I did work with the Basarwa, the bushmen, and these people live. If I showed you the pictures, you know, just in these grass huts that are about this high, you know, really, really primitive living, they had rice like those donor bags or 50 pound bags of mealie meal, we called it, and sorghum that were donated from different countries. And we would give it to them. And then I would go back to the village and they'd be wearing them like the girls, the woman would be wearing these, like, nylon bags. That's how. And so, you know, if you know about the bushmen, they were hunter gatherers. They would go out into the bush for three weeks and they would, you know, shoot the poison arrows and, you know, get a

giraffe and then just bring it. You know, I don't know what they do from there, but they invited me to go and hunt with them.

RIZZI: [00:28:16] And I and I, you know, sincerely like, I am not worthy to be in your presence. Like, I am not worthy. I am not worthy to be, you know, in your I'm not allowed to do this because I don't feel like, you know, I deserve your being with you. You know, I'm not I don't know how I'm articulate now, but trying to convey that I just felt lower than them, like I didn't deserve this great experience. So, you know, I turn that down. That was probably I don't know if that answer your question, but that was pretty intense. I think that's something I remember. It was an honor for them to ask me. And I just I didn't feel like I was really worthy of this beautiful thing that they do like, you know, being with them for, you know, several days just out in the bush. And, you know, whether or not I can keep up either. So I don't know. But that was what I felt at the time that I didn't deserve to go out with that, you know.

WIGGUM: [00:29:20] Is there anything else that you feel like you would like to tell us about your experience in Peace Corps?

RIZZI: [00:29:28] So I think that the I think I probably have a different perspective because of the project that I was in. So I feel that, you know, especially in this political like everything so political, this political culture where everything's so heated. And I believe that, um, when I what I experienced is that hard work is the way, hard work, you know, hard work. I've seen it. These people did not want to take anything, like, no handouts. They have to feel like they worked. They didn't like the handouts. So and what it gave them is this is great freedom. Like I gave them that just. They felt noble enough to, they felt good about themselves, and so I do have a probably a different perspective on what I would probably say that, you know, most RPCVs are left leaning or left. I didn't. I do not. I'm probably completely because I feel that what I saw definitely is in my heart, that I think it's just better off to have people have a better experience in life than just, you know, try to help out people as much as possible. I think it kills people in the end. That's just and that's I live that. So it's in me. And that's what I

have to. So that's what I brought home, a completely different experience, probably than 99 percent of the Peace Corps volunteers.

WIGGUM: [00:31:14] And it sounds like you were very humbled by your experience.

RIZZI: [00:31:17] Yes. Yeah. So I don't, probably like you, I would love to live, you know, just like in Vermont, somewhere in the woods, somewhere like that. Yeah. And you don't you know, you don't need anything. Right. So, yeah. We have three adopted kids. That was that was like sort of what we did. And you have to you know, you have to make money. Right. So we're doing the best that we can.

WIGGUM: [00:31:46] Have you been active at all since you've gotten back in post Peace Corps activities?

RIZZI: [00:31:50] No, I'm too busy. I just went to the parade and that was about it.

WIGGUM: [00:31:58] Yeah, great. Yeah. Well, thanks, Ken.

[END OF INTERVIEW]