

**Victor Cox Oral History Interview**  
Returned Peace Corps Volunteer Collection  
Administrative Information

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**Biographical Note**

Victor (Vic) Cox served as a Peace Corps volunteer in Brazil from 1964 to 1966 in a health and community development program.

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Oral History Interview

with

Victor Cox

July 15, 2007

Santa Barbara, California

By Barbara Hodgdon

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

HODGDON: [00:00:00] This is July 15th. And I am Barbara Hodgdon, and I'm interviewing Vic Cox, who was a Peace Corps volunteer in Brazil, serving in health and community development from 1964 to 1966. So hi Vic.

COX: Hi Barbara.

HODGDON: Why don't we start by asking you what you're doing today?

COX: [00:00:23] Well, I'm living in Goleta, California now, which is officially a city, a new city. And working at the University of California Santa Barbara campus as a kind of in-house journalist. I edit and write the staff and faculty newspaper, which is called 93106 after the zip code. Very imaginative. And this means that I'm essentially the chief cook and bottle washer for that little newspaper, which comes out once every two weeks

during the school year. I sell ads so, you know, follow up with billing and as well as write and edit stories. And then I take other people's stories and edit them and do layout and make sure production works. So I do the whole schmear.

HODGDON: [00:01:13] Now, for the record, would you mind just giving us your address here in Goleta?

COX: [00:01:17] Right. It's [address].

HODGDON: [00:01:24] Ok, good. Well, let's jump back a few years. Quite a few, as a matter of fact. When did you first hear about the Peace Corps? Can you do you remember? Is there a context?

COX: [00:01:36] Yeah, there is. I was actually an undergraduate student at UCSB when Peace Corps was first announced. And I graduated in June of 64. But I, I was pretty certain after I'd say my sophomore year that I really wanted to consider Peace Corps. And I don't remember talking specifically to a recruiter, but I do remember gathering information from Peace Corps Washington in the early 60s. They probably didn't have much of a recruiter network. And then I applied and went through the procedures, which took several months, as I recall, not unlike today. And on April the 1st, 1964, I was invited to join a health community development training group for Brazil.

HODGDON: [00:02:34] So you actually were invited before you had finished your college?

COX: [00:02:40] Yes. But I was on track to graduate in June. Right. I think they knew that at that time. And, of course, that was the day that the regime was overthrown by the military in Brazil. So my mom did wonder if I really wanted to go to Brazil after that. But I don't think it's going to be a problem for the Peace Corps. Let us know.

HODGDON: [00:03:03] Right. So what was the reaction of other friends and family?

COX: [00:03:07] I guess my sisters, I had three sisters and they were all a little envious. Basically, the family was supportive, but it did raise questions because the juxtaposition of the Brazil and the news and yet, you know, I always felt like South America was a place that I wanted to explore more. And Brazil was just one great big question mark. And in my mind and I loved the idea of learning a new language and getting into a new culture. And I hadn't done very well in language classes that I had taken there at UCSB. In fact, to be truthful, I had to kind of make a deal with my French teacher that if I promise not to go on to French to she'd give me a PhD. So I didn't do too well in the classroom situation. And that tended to kind of undermine my confidence to some extent. But I had always what I'd read about Peace Corps language training had an encouraging sign that life is more an emergent technique. And I had felt like I really needed to be in that kind of a situation to grasp the language.

HODGDON: [00:04:37] Now, let's talk about the training. Yeah, training in the sixties was considerably different than training currently. What was your training like?

COX: [00:04:46] I was at the University of Wisconsin Milwaukee campus there for 11 weeks, and they made an effort to sort this out by language abilities and they put me in the lowest level language group, and I stayed there through the 11 weeks. But each week it was a little bit tougher, a little bit more information. And I can remember the Brazilian language staff as being extraordinary. They were different. They came from different regions in Brazil. So they had different accents and they had some different slang. Sometimes it share with us and they rotate among the group. So even though my group was considered the lowest and the language abilities of Portuguese, it still was exposed to much the same kind of language training that the other groups were different vocabularies. And I think expectations for grammar and the and the chief of the Brazilian language teaching corps, Bianna, was very, very supportive. And she interviewed me a couple of times during that period. And I remember the last interview, she said, don't worry, you got the

basics. You'll learn it once you get in the country. Some people are like that. They just need to be in the culture.

HODGDON: [00:06:12] Let's go back to that. I'll ask you later about how your language skills developed once you were there. But right now, are there any other significant memories of the training itself?

COX: [00:06:24] Yeah, deselection. It was a traumatic event, which was at that time the way that Peace Corps training was organized so that they would have you, you know, in this kind of enclosed community, usually on a U.S. campus. There were a few I guess there were Puerto Rico, and they were supposedly given more physical training. But by the time I got in, in 64, I think they had about three years of experience and they were figuring out physical training wasn't as important as psychological and cultural studies and things like that. So, yeah, they gave us the battery of tests to determine our personality types. And there were some interviews, I remember, with the staff psychologist and then at least twice, I think before the end of the training, there were periods in which everybody knew this was when they were going to say goodbye to somebody. Yeah. And it's usually the dead of night. And they just disappeared. It was a little creepy because of the way it was run. And because not many of us had very high opinions of psychologists, especially the ones that were running the deselection process, which we felt was a kind of Orwellian term. I still do. As a matter of fact, I'm glad to hear that that's pretty much gone the way of the dodo bird.

COX: [00:08:01] It really put extra pressure on people. And there were people who were told they wouldn't cut it. And I don't know if they told me how to leave or they strongly suggested or whatever they did, because I was never part of that conversation, fortunately. But there were people we thought they shouldn't leave. You know, they're better than I am in some of these areas or whatever it is. So that was one, as I said, somewhat irritating and slightly traumatic of that kind of thing and the train. But the other thing was that the cultural studies, I thought even though Congress had mandated that you had to have this kind of anti-communist Cold

War chunk of training for those of us in the early sixties, at least in mid '60s, the cultural studies were really pretty good. I can remember one guy in particular who had lived and been in Brazil for some time, but he was an American, telling us that you got to remember that personal space and privacy concepts were different in Latin countries, and particularly in Brazil, where people were just kind of naturally more open and friendly than you were used to in the United States. And so he asked for volunteers and somehow raised my hand. I end up on stage with him. So we're going to do a little role playing here. And I'm going to be Brazilian and I'm going to be asking you the new Peace Corps volunteers and questions. And he got right in my face. Oh, I'm kind of slowly backing away as much as I could in my chair, you know. And afterwards, you know, we dissected it. And so they'll say, well, that was a natural reaction for a North American. But, you know, it could be considered a bit. Unfriendly or distant? You know, in Brazilian culture, that lesson never left me. And it happened when I was in country inside that there was more than one occasion where I needed to remember that.

HODGDON: [00:10:15] Right. Right. How many volunteers were in your trading group, do you remember?

COX: [00:10:21] We started out with like over a hundred. It was a pretty decent size group. And this wasn't the only one at the University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee. There was an Indian group. There was also training just a few residence halls away from us. But I think in the end, what happened was part of our group. We've been training, all of us have been trained in health and community development. And part of our group was kind of taken aside and interviewed by another. Well, I don't know, actually, if it was a project director or somebody from Washington, but in any case, they were split off. There were about a dozen of them that end up going to the northeastern part of Brazil rather than the far western part, which at that time called Mato Grosso. We were going to be the first group of health volunteers in Mato Grosso. And we're supposed to be joined by another group of agricultural volunteers. And that did indeed happen. But

by the time we got to Mato Grosso also, I think we were at 70 something, something like that.

HODGDON: Right. OK.

COX: [00:11:39] So, you know, that's kind of a roundabout way of answering your question, but that's kind of why. And subsequently, people like Scott Ellinwood were part of that north-eastern group, I think. And so, you know, we didn't see them or didn't see much of them.

HODGDON: [00:11:58] So now, after the training was over, you returned home?

COX: [00:12:01] Yeah, there was a brief break, I think, to say goodbye and wrap up very last-minute things you had.

HODGDON: [00:12:08] And do you remember the trip? Was there anything memorable about the trip itself?

COX: [00:12:14] You're asking about what happened 40 something years ago. And I can't recall. Yeah, I think we went to Miami to fly from Miami to Brazil, and I'd never been in Miami before. I was given a little dose of humidity. What I should expect. I don't do well with humidity. They told me about this. And this is what it feels like now.

HODGDON: [00:12:50] When you when you arrived in country.

COX: [00:12:52] In Rio.

HODGDON: [00:12:54] Ok, you arrived in Rio. Any, you know, first impressions that loom large?

COX: [00:13:01] Well, we flew into the Rio airport, which is on an island right in Guanabara Bay. And so, as I recall, we could, we couldn't see Christ the Redeemer statue, but we certainly could see Sugarloaf on the super when we flew in. Those were great sights and just a beautiful location for

our city. You know, it just tears my heart out to read about the pollution that's been going on. But yeah, it was all very exciting. We had about a week in Rio before we were, and we're mixed in with a bunch of other volunteers from different places.

HODGDON: [00:13:51] How did you did your training continue in country?

COX: [00:13:54] It did, but not in Rio, per se. We had a probably a few orientation sessions and maybe meet some of the people from the embassy and USAID. I wouldn't even swear to that because I can't remember that kind of detail at this point, but feels like the right thing that would happen, because that was still that was only four years into the changeover of the capital and Brasilia. You know, officially the capital of Rio in 1960 became Brasilia. But that city was still in construction. As far as a Brazilian friend who I met during this first week, thanks to another volunteer told me, said Brazilians are like crabs. They don't want to leave the coast. And it was and I suspect still is to some extent true, although Brazil has certainly become the capital and Rio is still the kind of gaudy lady on the on the beach. But it's a wonderful city in so many different ways and full of contradictions.

COX: [00:15:08] And it was really the first place that I had been to where I'd seen this juxtaposition of great wealth and great poverty. The slums in Rio, you know, just call up the hillsides and have some of the best views of the city and the surrounding areas. But the favelas, which might be a word that we want to put in there. One of our new Peace Corps volunteer friends was in a group that was going to work in the favelas. And she was very excited about this and a little bit scared. And that was fine, because it's probably the right attitude to go into any real new situation. But, you know, the favelas in those days were still known as they were associated with crime, and they're even more so today. But I think there is less reason to say that they were crime ridden or dominated by criminals in the mid '60s than there is today, in part because there still was. And I'm not sure that's true today. A very, very active neighborhood culture. The one really unifying force that helped

people survive in conditions without running water or electricity in most cases at that time.

COX: [00:16:47] But it also was kind of glamorized some extent with movies like Black Orpheus, which we saw as one of those movies we saw in the States before going to Brazil. And the whole samba school culture, which was fantastically interesting to me. I'd studied political science as an undergraduate. And to understand the samba school as a political unit, one of neighborhood cohesion, one a kind of gathering resources. And to some extent, distributing, though, you know, through the samba school was a fascinating concept to me.

HODGDON: [00:17:36] Yeah. Well, you spent a few days in Rio and then you went into additional training?

COX: [00:17:41] Yes. They had the Mato Grosso volunteers. And I think we may have not met them until we got to Mato Grosso, but they had the health volunteers that I was part of, and they had the agricultural volunteers that were all going to Mato Grosso, meet in Cuiaba. And some of our people from health and some of the people from Ag, so they must have been in Rio, were designated to drive Land Rovers across the country to Campo Grande then from Campo Grande north to Cuiaba, because those roads were the best that they could travel on. And they weren't always that great from what we heard.

COX: [00:18:35] But we all met in Cuiaba and in Cuiaba, we had almost another month of specialized health training. In the States, we'd learned general health concepts. We'd learned something about disease prevention, vaccination techniques, things like that. And in Cuiaba, we got the vocabulary that would go with our different jobs. The men were assigned to be sanitation helpers, was the translation. The women would be nurses' helpers.

HODGDON: [00:19:12] Yeah.

COX: [00:19:15] And so each group kind of got separate training on what kind of vocabulary they would be expected to use and to know. Plus, we built a privy. And that was one of the first times that we actually had done that as a Peace Corps trainee group, there in Cuiaba. And we met some of the people that would be part of the state health system that we might correspond with or have community.

HODGDON: [00:19:43] You didn't live with families in those states, did you? As part of the training?

COX: [00:19:48] Yeah. Thank you for reminding me. We had a host family.

HODGDON: [00:19:51] You did have a host family?

COX: [00:19:52] Yeah. And I was paired up with another young man, I think, with this one family. And the father spoke some English and he wanted to practice his English. And we wanted to practice our Portuguese. So we basically, you could find somebody in the family who'd practice one or the other with.

HODGDON: [00:20:20] And did your language skills begin to explode?

COX: [00:20:23] Explosion isn't quite the word I would use, but they did improve slightly, I think. And the father, fortunately for me I thought, was not bashful about correcting my grammar or misuse of vocabulary, which I always appreciated, really. But I think of my real language skills development as being in in the site.

HODGDON: [00:20:52] Ok.

COX: [00:20:53] When I was sent there. In Cuiaba, because we are the new group and the pioneer group really for health, we were considered kind of hybrid workers for the state health system.

HODGDON: [00:21:12] Oh, OK.

COX: [00:21:13] So they were going to and did assign the males and the females to state health posts. What we didn't know at the time and really should have been told was that this was part of a general housecleaning, that this new director of the state health system had already started before we got there. But some of us I heard from other people, not in my particular case, but some of us were seen as job takers because they had moved out the sanitation helper who had been there. And suddenly here was this North American, you know, with various levels of Portuguese comprehension. But in my particular case, I was assigned to a small town called Camapuã, which was more in the southern part of the state. It was about four hours by bus from Campo Grande, which was the largest city outside of Cuiaba. And today, in fact, the state's been split in half. So large. And Cuiaba as the capital, the northern what used to be the northern part of Mato Grosso. And there's a new state called Mato Grosso Dos Sul and Campo Grande is its capital.

HODGDON: [00:22:37] Now, were you the first Peace Corps volunteer into that community?

COX: [00:22:41] Right. And for many of them, I was the first white person, they said, or first North American, and I was the only English speaker in the community.

HODGDON: [00:22:50] Oh, OK.

COX: [00:22:52] So for a month, I walked around with a Portuguese English dictionary in my hand. But, you know, I've said this to many people over the years, and especially to new trainees or to new would be volunteers. It really helped me become part of the community quicker. And it helped undermine the whole concept that some of them had of me being a spy or a CIA agent or something like that. I mean, Latin America in the '60s was being roiled by a lot of changes. There were, you know, very active communist parties in most countries. And there was a lot of agitation against America, but there was a lot of hope, a lot of feeling of goodwill

toward John Kennedy and the children of Kennedy, as some of the Spanish speaking countries came to call the volunteers.

HODGDON: [00:23:48] Ah.

COX: [00:23:50] Not in Brazil, that that term didn't catch on as much as some of the Caribbean nations and some of the others. But even in my little town.

HODGDON: [00:24:01] Let me think now. When did you actually go to Brazil? What month?

COX: [00:24:06] Well, you see, I started training in June of '64. It would have been September.

HODGDON: [00:24:17] So you had just barely been there when Kennedy's death?

COX: [00:24:21] It was less than a year after his death.

HODGDON: [00:24:28] He died in November of '64.

COX: Sixty three.

HODGDON: OK, yes, that's right.

COX: [00:24:32] It was after. Yeah. And I can't recall because my decision to enter the Peace Corps had already been made before his assassination. And the only thing I can think of is that his assassination may have just firmed up my resolve that I was going to do this. But we didn't talk about that so much. I mean, a lot of us talk about why are you here? And some of them some of us mentioned Kennedy or trying to carry his legacy forward or whatever you want to say about. But most of us, I would say, just were there for self-exploration and trying to do a little something positive for the rest of the world.

HODGDON: Mm hmm.

COX: [00:25:26] Maybe in that respect, you know, the ask not what you can do or what your country can do for you. Ask what you can do for your country. I think we're still resonating. You know, my generation of volunteers. But it wasn't one of those things that we carried on our sleeves.

HODGDON: [00:25:48] Right. Well, tell me about arriving at your job, at your assignment.

COX: [00:25:53] I have actually written about this partly because I, like a lot of things when you're younger, you think you can do more than you really can do. And I was proud of myself. I found the right bus to get from Campo Grande, you know, and I got a little help from the staff, as I recall. But they just kind of pointed me in the right direction. And I had to make my own arrangements. And so I took this for our bus trip, and it was dark when we got into our car. But I made a couple of contacts. Friendly. I think of him as a kind of a ranch foreman. It was on the bus and he was also getting up and come up. And so he said he had helped me identify the place when we got to it. And most of the people on the bus were, you know, farm workers or ranch and something like that. And it was not a really well-heeled crowd, let's put it that way. But you didn't have the stereotypical chickens or whatever.

COX: [00:27:12] Still, my bags were on top of the bus and were part of the cargo is being carried. So he climbed up the back of the bus and I think his name was Roman or something like that. And he lowered my luggage to me and I thanked him and I said, let me help you with what you've got. And in broken Portuguese, of course, and he paused a little bit. Are you sure? And I said, I want to help. He said, okay. So he had this box and it didn't look like it was any more than, you know, 14, 15 inches long. It was a wooden box and maybe a little less high. And so he carefully lifted it and put it on the edge of the bus where he could reach. And I climbed up the ladder partway so that I could get it. And I said,

okay. And he said, *cuidado pissado*. And I didn't have enough grasp of Portuguese to do recall or to realize that this was a warning, that it was heavy. So I had one hand up there, about 50 pounds of lime in that box, pushed me off the bus, and I made a perfect three point landing on a dirt road behind the bus. But to my chagrin, the box had broken open. There's a little mound of white powder. Oh, I was so mortified.

COX: [00:28:52] But that that was my entry into my little town, which had, by the way, limited electric power. They had generators and the central four block area had electrical wiring. And some of the homes beyond their had attach themselves to that grid. But most of the houses I saw coming in had little kerosene ladders.

HODGDON: [00:29:19] Now was anybody there to greet you?

COX: [00:29:22] No, because they weren't sure exactly when I was going to arrive. And also, they were going through what turned out to be a fairly regular period of turmoil in the health post. There was, as I mentioned earlier, no one in the sanitation helper position that I was coming in to fill. Fortunately for me. But there's also no doctor who is usually who is supposed to be in charge. They had two nurses, as they call them. The translation would be visiting nurses, I think, but there, from what I could determine there, their training was above what we consider an LPN, but not quite what we consider an RN.

HODGDON: [00:30:18] Mm hmm.

COX: [00:30:19] And one of the two nurses had kind of taken over the role of acting health post director. And we were working through the grace of the local Catholic Church in what used to be the nunnery of the church. Uh, we didn't stay there very many months, but we did have, at least when I arrived, a place where they could put their meager stores and have some examining rooms and things like that. So, yeah, it was it was a I was I was told I was going to stay in the pension, a little inn. And where the bus stopped was just outside that that inn. And that was

perfect for me. And the foreman wasn't angry with me, but he just scooped up the lime and put it back in with the dirt.

HODGDON: [00:31:19] So you were told you were going to stay in the pension, but was that just for the first night or was that to be your?

COX: [00:31:25] I wasn't sure. And then I found out that all the other health care workers who didn't live either with a family or have a.

HODGDON: [00:31:38] Ok, then we just flipped the tape, and I think you were saying that you had just discovered that the other health workers were also staying in the pension. Is that how you pronounce it?

COX: [00:31:47] Pension? Yeah. And it was just a one-story structure with little rooms. And it gave me a room to have a door that open to the street and plus the fact we had no ceilings, that you got air circulating, especially in hot nights into your room. And I had a I remember I had a mosquito netting that I used the Peace Corps supplied over my bed. And I also had I believe I brought this with me from Campo Grande, a little library of paperback books, which in those days was part of the equipping of a volunteer and a site. And I met the owner of the pension, a man of indeterminate age, but he looked as old as the hills, named Saturnino, and his wife, Virgilina, who actually ran the pension. She was kind of brusque large and very efficient and had a heart of gold.

HODGDON: [00:33:18] So you lived there the whole time.

COX: [00:33:19] And I ended up living there for the better part of two years.

HODGDON: [00:33:22] Where'd you take your meals?

COX: [00:33:24] With them. They had, in the pension, a little eating sala room, and they had the people who stayed there eight there for the most part. At least they had their dinners there, because when I had breakfast, every once in a while, there'd be somebody eating breakfast, but not

always. And they had a little kerosene fueled refrigerator, which was fortunate for me because they didn't use it too often. But when I saw with the water situation was they used filtered water from the wells. But the well was below the privy at that time. And so that was one of the things that I knew from training was that a no-no and that I was supposed to try to help change. And actually, it turned out that my one of the nurses who was also working there had been working on them, too, for a couple of those type of features that needed to be changed and improve the health situation. Moving the privy was one of them. So between the two of us, we actually got that privy moved downstream.

HODGDON: [00:34:44] Did you go to work right away?

COX: [00:34:46] Pretty much as I recall. I met the nurse who was in charge. And the other one, I think they're both. They were both staying at that pension. And they said, well, tomorrow we'll show you what the health post looks like. They weren't quite sure, you know, how I was supposed to work and how are they supposed to use me. Because my salary was, like most Peace Corps volunteers, the cost of living allowance that they gave us. I wasn't paid by the state of Mato Grosso, though. So I had this kind of outside independence, too, especially when after the first few months I found that my cost of living allowance was more than I needed to actually have a comfortable life there. And it turned out to be very helpful because we got some community development projects financed with that little extra margin, plus what I got paid for teaching English at a private school.

COX: [00:36:05] But that's another part of the story, the community development part. At the health post level, I was informed very quickly that they had no doctor. There was a visiting doctor from Sao Paulo, which was another large city on the coast of Brazil. He was considering moving here. But basically we saw no fewer than three legitimate doctors and one fraud come through our little town in the time I was there checking it out to see if there would be a possibility of enough income.

HODGDON: [00:36:51] How big a community was this?

COX: [00:36:54] My first community survey showed about two thousand people. And this was the county seat, the municipal, municipio, and it was the source of the it was very limited bureaucracy at that time. And it handled mostly an economy based on raising rice and growing cattle.

HODGDON: [00:37:27] Yeah.

COX: [00:37:28] And there were a lot of large fazendas, or ranches, in the area. The mayor himself owned two of them, you know, and a number of the people who sat on the council for the county slash city were also ranchers.

HODGDON: [00:37:49] Do the nurses provide clinical nursing care? Was there a clinic or was this more public health? What kinds of things they were working on?

COX: [00:37:57] It was a combination of both, Barbara, because the nurses did tend to spend a fair amount of their time giving injections of very often just vitamins. Other times, they may have been treating small infections. You know, that sort of thing with antibiotics. But we didn't have much in the way of that. And most of it came out of a drug salesman's samples.

HODGDON: [00:38:27] And there was no clinic other than what they provided. That was it for the community?

COX: [00:38:32] That was it for the community.

HODGDON: [00:38:33] And the nearest hospital, would have been?

COX: [00:38:35] Plus the drugstore. You know, in Brazil, like many countries, the *farmacia* is not just a dispensary of prescription and non-prescription

drugs, but also advice. And very often they gave injections too, something that bothered, I know, at least our lead nurse.

HODGDON: [00:39:00] Mm hmm.

COX: [00:39:02] So, yeah, in terms of health care, anything serious had to go south. There was nothing between us and Campo Grande.

HODGDON: [00:39:12] So what did your role become as a health care volunteer?

COX: [00:39:16] I very quickly found that I was using the vaccination techniques and experience I got during training. I also found that there was a real need for health education, and that most of the people, even though there was a fairly adequate level of literacy, there was an elementary school which I think went to fourth grade or sixth grade. I don't remember which now, but I think it was fourth grade. I think they only had four years at that time. I think it's been increased. So there was an elementary school that had been functioning for many years before I got there. And when I walked the town with the nurse, you know, she introduced me to people who were part of the power structure and patients and who weren't and showed me up on top of one of the hills. Because it was a little bit of a valley with hills around it and quite a pleasant little place I thought. Had a stream that ran through it kind of seasonally. But you could see, because they had a bridge in one place where, you know, whether it had heavy rains and it probably washed away a lot of things. And so they'd had to build this bridge years before I got there.

COX: [00:40:52] Anyway, during this walking, excuse me, tour and introduction to Camapuã, I was taken to this unfinished structure on a hill. And the nurse said, this is our maternity hospital, or at least it was going to be there until politics stopped it. And she gave me a little bit of the background, but she didn't have a lot of details. But what I could see right away that had a good well, first of all. And the privy was down from the well. And there was a family, actually an extended kind of family

made up of more than one unit of essentially abandoned women and their children.

COX: [00:41:44] And I found this to be true in several cases there in rural Brazil, where women who may or may not have married had children and were abandoned, ostracized. Sometimes the only income they could find was by going to prostitution. Other times, like the women who are in this particular building at that time, they were taking in laundry mostly from the nearby red light district, because even a small town like this had about five or six houses, small houses, you know, but they had houses and they're all kind of neatly grouped together, kept away from the respectable people. But, you know, I mean, when you got to survive, you find ways.

HODGDON: [00:42:42] And so these women were living in this unfinished hospital.

COX: [00:42:46] This unfinished hospital, which had a roof and walls, but just, you know, cement and stone walls and a foundation. And they had built a little kind of lean to next to it where they did their cooking. So they did their cooking essentially out of doors. There was nothing to stop the wind coming through unless they put up some sort of blanket or something. And they had two sort of little mattresses that they had made out of straw, plant material, things like that. And there must have been a dozen kids. And maybe three adults.

HODGDON: [00:43:33] So did this structure figure in the future of your life there?

COX: [00:43:36] It did, because I agreed with the nurse. If we could get this finished, this project finished. And it made into a truly well-equipped maternity hospital. We would be able to get the doctors that we needed to stay here. And she told me this at the time, but it seemed hard to believe. They had a 50 percent mortality rate in their birthrate.

HODGDON: Wow.

COX: But I was able to subsequently confirm that figure, and we knew we could make a dent in that. So that became a future project. But I was just starting and I knew I was way beyond my abilities. And if this nurse, who was pretty darn determined and who knew all the right people, you know, couldn't get things moving again, then there must be other reasons. So, yeah, I essentially found. First of all, I found out, which nobody ever told me at Cuiaba, is that the state health post workers only work half day.

HODGDON: [00:44:53] Ok.

COX: [00:44:57] It made extreme sense to have your meal and your siesta in the hot hours of the day. But then you could come back to work, you know, if the post was open. But they didn't, you know, that was not the tradition. So they could do essentially whatever they wanted with their time. And I found that my, I had some cartooning and art skills from another life, high school and college. I found I could put those to work to make health posters. So I use some of that allowance money of that surplus or allowance money to buy materials. And I think I had to get some it from careful driving because it was not something I did immediately. I remember that I had to get supplies together, and the stores there had some of it, but I didn't have the poster size I want. And by the time I was starting to do these health posters, you know, it'd become a post project.

HODGDON: [00:46:04] Mm hmm.

COX: [00:46:06] And one of the guys that was there, he started out as an assistant who just kind of swept the place and kept it clean, was really. He was a young man. He was in his early. Let's see, I was 23. Yeah, something like that, I think. I would've been 22, 23 when I arrived. And then I turned 23 there. And then he was only about two or three years older than I. But he had a major responsibility in trying to support his family who lived there in Camapuã. So I guess he'd been away or whatever. But he'd gotten his most of his elementary education. I don't

remember fully where he was in his educational progress. I think he had finished elementary school, and this was only the only kind of job he could get at the time. And he wanted to stay close to his family, so that meant an in-town job. And these were mostly one or two person operations, you know, selling occasional materials from the textile or clothing shop or the general store. The general store is probably the largest store, but not the largest employer at the time. The granary was the largest employer in town. There just weren't that many jobs. And most of them were part time. So anyway, Dete was his name. Dete worked in the health post half a day like everybody else. And then he'd go home and he might work around the house or whatever, but he couldn't, as far as I could tell, find another job.

COX: [00:48:13] So he kind of took me under his wing and he helped me with my Portuguese. And when he saw that, I could do some drawing. You know, he was delighted with this. So he helped me kind of formulate what words should go on the health posters and the kind of things that they engaged in, like they had a yellow fever vaccination campaign. And I think we still I don't remember a vaccine against smallpox, but we might have there were a couple of other things that the nurse would go to the mayor and say, look, we need a certain amount of funding to get this vaccine, and I need to be able to get to other parts of the county and you've got to help me.

COX: [00:49:00] You know, this is kind of the way it worked. And he would do it very often on the back of his own rice truck sometimes. The mayor would help. And after I did the first survey of the town and its health needs, I had at least one and maybe two. I think I had two public meetings to discuss the results. And they had a sport club because there was a team, a sports team, that played on a sloping soccer field. And I got involved with them, too, because I was the tallest one there. So they made me goalie. I was a miserable goalie, but I tried. But it was really quite a, just an energizing thing. I mean, I looked forward to going to the health post and I figured even if it wasn't somebody new coming in, you

know, they have something new to do. And uh, and most of the time that was true.

HODGDON: [00:50:12] Was your work in the health area pretty consistent over the two years?

COX: [00:50:17] Yeah, I would say so.

HODGDON: [00:50:18] And then the other thing you developed was the community development strand. Let's talk about that.

COX: [00:50:24] Yeah. Uh, trying to think if there was anything novel about health before we leave. The only thing that did develop in the health field relates directly to the community development.

HODGDON: [00:50:40] Uh huh.

COX: [00:50:41] And that was the fact that that maternity hospital, you know, was dead in the water and had been for a couple of years before it got there at least. I did a history on it, as you will see. And what happened is that when I understood and I got into, you know, talking to some of the community powerbrokers. As I understood it, there had been a kind of a traditional split between the two dominant political parties and the members in Camapuã and that area who belonged to those parties. And that split became reflected on the community maternity hospital project. And so basically, as one of the county accountants, as he told me, says, well, there's money, you know, to finish that hospital, because those are all federal funds.

HODGDON: [00:51:51] Mm hmm.

COX: [00:51:52] And as far as I know, we just need to have an election and get this board reactivated, this community board. And I said, really that's all there is to it? I'm thinking, oh, this shouldn't be too hard. But then I started talking to people who had worked on it before or who I thought

might become interested in it. And they were saying, well, you know, I don't know. It's political and you don't want to get mixed up with politics, especially after the revolution, etc. So I said, okay. And I just kind of shelved that again.

COX: [00:52:39] In the meantime, I had been teaching English at the request of a number of people there in the community, and I've been granted the use of classroom there in the elementary school. So the only expense was the textbook I'd chosen. And basically it was at cost, and I sold it to them at cost because I had had to advance the money to buy the textbook. That worked out okay, except it was really clear to me that most of the people who came were coming not because they really wanted to learn English, but because they were curious about me or they just needed a little novelty in their life, something to do in the evenings Monday night or something like that. So my class shrank rather quickly from, I think I had 15 or 20 people the first one or two classes. Then they saw I was serious about teaching. And it shrank to maybe six or seven. But Dete was one who stayed. And there were several young women who stayed. And one of them was a teller in the local bank because we had one bank. We had one of just about everything you could say. One bank, one health post, one church.

COX: [00:54:05] It turned out there were two churches, but I didn't realize it at the time. There's one Catholic Church, which was the biggest, most impressive building in town. And as I said, whose monastery or whose nunnery, which didn't house any nuns, was where the health post was, when I first came. But then, there's so much. We got moved out of that choice location, really, to a much smaller place that wasn't far from there. But it was really just some kind of a former store in this structure that wasn't really designed for it. In any case, that's where the health post remained most of the time I was there.

COX: [00:55:03] And the reason we got moved was because of the fake doctor who came to town, Doctor Ricardo. I won't forget him any time soon. Doctor Ricardo was a mover and shaker. He was able to finagle the

space that we had. And except for the nurse, fighting him tooth and nail, would have taken over all of our health post resources too, for his own office. And he did surgery there. He did essentially minor surgery. He took out people's tonsils whether they needed it or not. I think he did one appendectomy. Anyway.

HODGDON: [00:55:48] How long was it before you discovered he was a fake doctor?

COX: [00:55:52] This coincided as it happened with my survey of community health needs. And he must have been in that that community at least three and probably five months, maybe five or so, three or four months, taking money, making lots of money from the people who came to him because the word spread to have a doctor. You know, the other doctor from Sao Paulo had long left. We hadn't been able to get another one to help us. And Doctor Ricardo confronted me one evening while I was laboriously typing my report about the health needs of the community in Portuguese.

COX: [00:56:47] Ok. And said, what are you writing? Are you writing about me? And I said, no, why should I write about you? No, this is about the whole community of Camapuã and what the state needs to help supply its privy needs and things like that. And he came and he looked at what I had written, because I had done several pages by that time, and he was satisfied that I wasn't writing about him. And I thought that was awfully strange.

COX: [00:57:22] So I told the nurse about this after I sent the report off, you know, and I said, well, in fact, I think I gave her a copy of the report. And I said, and by the way, Doctor Ricardo is a really strange dude, you know. And she hadn't told me she had to fight against him with the mayor for keeping what we had kept. But all I knew was we had to move, you know? And she said, yeah, I don't think he smells right. And we're kind of looking into him. That's what she said. So she had initiated some inquiries. And sure enough, it turned out he was a drop-out medical student from Argentina. He had never gotten his credentials there, much

less in Brazil. And he was wanted by police for doing the same scam in other small towns in Brazil.

COX: [00:58:20] Well, he packed up and left. It couldn't have been more than a couple of weeks after that incident with, uh, with me. And I figured he felt, you know, uh oh, they're getting wise to me. It's time to move on, take my ill-gotten gains and move on. But because we had to move, you know, we never got moved back. And it was like one of those things that you didn't talk about too much. And shortly after that, um, or around that that time, I got an invitation from the Baptist Church, who was running a private school, a secondary school. They didn't, wisely, didn't compete with anybody. They didn't compete with the Catholic Church for believers, and they didn't compete with the schools system. They just formed their own separate school and people who wanted to. And they were accredited. People who wanted to get their secondary education went through four years with them. And they said, you know, we need an English teacher here.

COX: [00:59:38] And I said, oh, I could teach some freehand drawing, too. So I end up teaching those two classes for them. And I started putting that salary away in the account because by then I was talking to Dete, the bank teller, and some others about wouldn't it be neat to have a little newspaper here at all. And I had also been in communication with a fellow at U.S. AID in Rio who believed very strongly in the value of community newspapers using the most simple kind of technology available. And basically it was a silkscreened operation, and stencil. So, you know, you put your paper down in this kind of box-like device. You attach your stencil so it's over the paper, put down a silk screen which was hinged and rolled ink. And presto, you had a page. You know, just slightly above a Gutenberg press. But it worked. And it was straightforward, simple technology. Anybody could master it. Dete became very good at printing that. And then pretty soon he was writing articles. And our little paper grew from four pages to eight, as I recall, or six sometimes. Sometimes eight.

COX: [01:01:11] And the nurse had very kindly loaned me her typewriter, the same one I used for the report to cut the stencil. But she got a little worried because of one of these portable typewriters. And I said, don't worry, we're saving up money to buy our own typewriter. Sure enough, we got a nice big Olivetti. And. And so the newspaper was in business. We had our printing press and we had our typewriter.

HODGDON: [01:01:40] How often did you put it out?

COX: [01:01:42] Um, I think at first we tried to do it once a month or maybe more frequently, but pretty soon we were doing it every two to three weeks because we got more staff who helped write the articles.

HODGDON: [01:01:59] Now, did they get paid or was this all volunteer?

COX: [01:02:03] All volunteer. We started charging, though, for subscribers and we started charging for advertising. And I would, you know, cut the stencils very carefully to get the ads in. And some of the local merchants would subscribe to support the little paper. And we called it Okallaponence, the Camapuã post, you know, as the title of the paper. And people loved it. They took it to their hearts and they would send it, because a lot of them were migrants from the northeast or the south, west, southeast, northeast or southeast. And they'd send it to their families and friends, say look what we've got here.

HODGDON: [01:02:46] Did it become a vehicle for health education?

COX: [01:02:49] Yes. As a first, the first issue had a bit of front-page article about the yellow fever vaccination campaign. And we had the local dentist in town who had the most education. The most educated person in town was the dentist. He would do proofreading for us, capture the mistakes I was making or some of the others would make.

HODGDON: [01:03:16] Ok, let's see if we can pick up where we left off on the last tape.

COX: [01:03:20] Well the newspaper was an experiment and we none of us knew if it would work. It was all my money, because I had saved money from the teaching courses and the extra stuff I kept above my living allowance, which also paid for my vacations, I mean, that living allowance was more than adequate for I gathered most of the volunteers in the matter. I couldn't tell you about Rio or the large cities. Might be different. But we were quite capable of living off of that and saving money for a vacation.

COX: [01:03:55] The newspaper, though, needed a constant, steady source of income. So my teaching salary supplied that at least initially. And then as I was starting to tell you, we did get enough momentum going so that people not only liked it, but were proud of it. They wanted to support it. If they were a merchant, they bought advertising, they bought subscriptions. So that by the time I left, which was in May of '66, we had something like 120 subscribers. Which isn't bad, you know, for a small town like that.

COX: [01:04:42] And we caused a little controversy in our way, too. As it turned out, the paper was very straightforward in its journalistic style. The articles were factual. And, you know, sometimes we quoted authorities and sometimes we just said where the material came from. Had a very heavy health emphasis from the beginning, as you astutely suggested, and we maintained that. And so in I would say about the second year of my stay and also just about the anniversary, the first year or maybe into the early part of the second year of a little newspaper being getting going, we did a history on the maternity hospital. And I allowed myself to put in a little editorial commentary toward the end about what a sad thing it was that we had this high rate of infant mortality when we had these wonderful public minded people who had started this and not been able to finish. What a shame. We haven't had a new election or new board. And I heard that within that came out toward April, I would say March or April. Within a couple of months, enough people had talked to each other about this and said, yeah, you know, and again,

there were civic minded people there who felt very frustrated about how politics interrupted something really necessary. And that included the municipal auditor secretary. And I'm sure that he talked to some of the people that I talked to for the story and afterwards. And they said there's money there. We just need to get ourselves organized.

COX: [01:06:56] And they did it. And I can't, I remember this very well because. Yeah, it was May, because I had gone to get. By then I was getting these legal sized sheets of paper that were folded over, which is a kind of an old-fashioned European way of bookkeeping, but which was still part of in the sixties, the Brazilian stationery store supply. I buy those in Campo Grande and I get Okallaponence printed, which gave a little bit more heft to the newspaper look. And I remember coming back from a trip of getting new supplies for the paper and learning that there had been an election and there was a new board. So I was able to report that in one of the last papers that I helped with. But by then, I'd already transferred the paper over to Dete and the staff. So they owned the silkscreen and they owned the typewriter.

COX: [01:08:06] And we tried several months before we tried to put together a group of community supporters who had helped raise money to get, you know, a whole print shop, if we could, established in our town because it didn't have printshop, didn't have a bookstore. The first library, public library in town, I was able to start because it was again helped by U.S. AID people who told me about this Brazillian library, federal library support system, that if you got on it, you could get books for free, you know. And I had to do was really to find a sympathetic ear in the mayor's office and say, look, we could have a library here, but you have to have a place for the books. And at some point, you need to have somebody to organize this.

COX: [01:09:01] So that initiative was something I started but didn't carry through. Another volunteer followed me into this to come up. And I don't know if he worked on this project or not, but I do know that the people in the mayor's office worked on it because I was able to go back to come

up for six, almost seven years later. And the library had its own room. It had a librarian, bulging at the seams.

HODGDON: Gratifying.

COX: [01:09:37] It was gratifying to see it still there. And honestly doing quite well.

HODGDON: [01:09:42] So you were a catalyst for a number of things, it sounds like. Are there any others?

COX: [01:09:48] The newspaper died out after two years after I left. Dete carried it for a year, doing it the way we have it. And then and as far as I can tell, it continued to build up its reserves and then nobody wanted to take on the load. So the dentist took it over. And he always had grandiose plans. He took our money and he invested it in about three issues of the newspaper being printed by a real print shop.

HODGDON: [01:10:30] That was it. Oh, dear.

COX: [01:10:34] I have no idea what ever happened to the typewriter, but the little silkscreen stayed with Dete because that community support group I tried to get going, try to take over the paper, said, no, no, we're independent. We're not supposed to be beholden to you. You're supposed to help us. So they fell apart. Uh, but I think he kept it the uh, the silkscreen, because he was finishing up his fourth year and a little newspaper appeared at the school. Silkscreen. And they told me they sent me some copies, actually, and said the paper lives! So that was that was nice. But I really hadn't expected something as ambitious as that. You know, to have more than a limited impact. I was so happy that it helped get the maternity hospital going again.

HODGDON: [01:11:28] Fabulous. Now, during the time you were in your little village, what contact did you have with either Peace Corps as an institution or other Peace Corps volunteers?

COX: [01:11:39] Not much. We got visited twice in two years, I think. And once was by a Peace Corps volunteer leader, came up and joined us in a volleyball game for that. And then once one of the staff would go, they came up and gave me some seeds for a failed garden project. Not all of my initiatives came to fruition. And um, and then I was asked to help process our group out of Mato Grosso at the end of their two year term. But I had to go to Cuiaba to do that. And I actually welcomed that because I was chicken.

HODGDON: [01:12:32] What do you mean?

COX: [01:12:33] Well, I had formed a lot of close relationships there in town, and I knew how hard it was going to be for me to say goodbye. Uh, especially if I told them two weeks ahead of time, Oh, looks like I'm going to have to go to Cuiaba and help out. And it would just be nonstop, you know, *saudade*, which is a wonderful Brazilian Portuguese term, I'm not even sure the Portuguese use it, but it means, it's a combination of being homesick, of missing something that hasn't even left. I mean, it would be one of these kind of catchall terms that you use because it fits so many different things, but doesn't have a really, really clear-cut meaning by itself. It's the context that makes it clear. And, you know, people would say they still did that. I mean, I told them two days or three days before I left that I was going to have to go. And the word just spread like wildfire. Yeah, little town. And people would come out and say, I know you haven't gone, but I still have *saudade* of you. Oh, thank you. Thank you. I miss you, too. But it was it's more than just missing.

HODGDON: [01:14:09] So it was pretty intense.

COX: [01:14:10] It was it was intense few days. And they insisted on a farewell party at a private school. And the whole community came, you know, testimonial after testimonial about this young American.

HODGDON: [01:14:27] So it's it sounds like you had a wonderful experience.

COX: [01:14:30] I really did. Yeah, I felt like I accomplished something positive. I made a lot of good friends who shamefully I didn't keep in touch with.

HODGDON: [01:14:45] You mentioned you'd been you were back about six or seven years after you finished. Have you been back since?

COX: [01:14:51] I trained a group right after I left Cuiaba after helping the. And I may have heard about it. I don't even remember how I first heard about this, but it could have been in Rio, it could have been in Cuiaba. But after I left my town, and we had at that time, no knowledge that there would be another Peace Corps volunteer coming and taking over that position I left vacant. But the idea, as always, as I understand Peace Corps, anyway, is to work yourself out of a job. And Dete was interested in the job and I said, go for it. You've got all you need and more. And that turned out to be very true because he did apply, he did get the training course that he had to get through, like I did in Cuiaba. And he came back to Camapuã with a wife who was a nurse. So he really brought some resources back to that I never could have.

HODGDON: [01:15:55] Yeah.

COX: [01:15:57] And Dete was the sanitation worker for a while. And then I think he kind of assumed other responsibilities in the health post. And then his wife was part of that health post, too. And at some point in the six or seven years before he came back, he ran as the principal elementary school.

HODGDON: Wow.

COX: [01:16:28] And he became the local agricultural ranching co-op secretary treasurer. So he became a man of importance. I can tell you that community. And I think you just need somebody to believe in him, you know? Because he had the ambition. He had the smarts. And he had a winning personality once he got over his shyness.

HODGDON: [01:16:49] That too must be gratifying. If he became the catalyst.

COX: [01:16:53] You know, I think he was my best project. But he also was my he, I was his project. Because without him, I couldn't have done some of those town meetings. No question about that. And there were other things that he helped out on, the paper. He understood that I didn't want to control the paper in perpetuity. I just wanted to get started and I wanted him and other Brazilians to take over. And they did, for enough months so that I could see that I could leave and it'd be in good hands.

HODGDON: [01:17:34] You mentioned earlier that your living allowance was more than sufficient, that you were able to save for vacations. So where did you go? You took some vacations?

COX: [01:17:45] Yeah, I went alone to the northeastern part, which meant I flew over the Amazon rainforest, which was impressive. When you're in a DC3 and go over all that green. And those rivers. But then took a bus from Belem, which is kind of the north, it's one of the northern large cities. Took a bus all along the bulge there that fits into Africa, down to Bahia, and visited some volunteers, including one who was from Santa Barbara who preceded me, Jacquelia Crook, I remember her well, and had sent a letter to me in Rio. Because I told her, you know, I was going to ride with my group. And she said, this letter is to make all the others jealous of the fact that you got a letter when you arrived here. So I had to thank her personally.

COX: [01:19:03] Saw Scott again and some other friends from training. And it was really interesting because it really brought home to me how the political paralysis could just stop a community's development in the northeast. They used little flags to identify which political party they belong to and they put them on their roofs.

HODGDON: Oh, my goodness.

COX: [01:19:33] There was no way you couldn't know who belonged to which party.

HODGDON: [01:19:34] Interesting.

COX: [01:19:35] Yeah, I never saw that in other parts of Brazil, but that was only in the northeast during this election period. Maybe only during election period. They do it elsewhere, too. We didn't do it. But everybody knew because it's so small. You know what political party you belong to. So, yeah, that was that was one of my first major trips with a stopover in Brasilia.

COX: [01:20:00] And then I came back and reacquainted myself with the people in Rio that I've been introduced to. When I first came there, I'd written them a couple of times and things like that, and they said, oh you have to come back for Carnival. I said, that offer still open? And sure enough it was, so the first February I was in Brazil, I spent Carnival in Rio thanks to them. I stayed with them and all that. And they gave me some very helpful advice, too, because Carnival wasn't just, you know, fun and games and great music and dancing. It's also heaven for pickpockets.

HODGDON: Oh, yeah.

COX: [01:20:47] Yeah. As you might expect. So they said whatever you do, do not take any money on you, especially in your pockets when you go into the crowds. And I was very happy the first day that I did that in Rio because I felt hands go inside all my pockets. I look around, you could barely move. Nobody is looking at you. They're all looking straight ahead, which is kind of suspicious.

HODGDON: Yeah, right.

COX: [01:21:12] Yeah. But then the second year I was there, I took vacation and went to the southern states there. Down to Rio Grande Do Sul,

which is the land of the gauchos, as they pronounce it there. And this time I went with a gaucho friend who I'd made there in Camapuã. And we had fun together. And he was showing me his old stomping ground where his family came from. And we rode a couple of wonderful old trains. One of them was a real wood burner. And you didn't want to stick your head out the window. You'd get cinders in your eyes. They called them Maria Fumasa. Smokey Marys. I don't know why. That was a wonderful, wonderful trip. Just to have some of that real experience.

HODGDON: [01:22:09] Now, when your assignment was over, was there a formal gathering to get a debriefing?

COX: [01:22:16] Not really. I mean, there was a meeting in which the project director, whose name is Jim Creaseman. He was from, I think, Arizona State University. He said, okay, I've been hearing from some of you all in two years here. But here's your chance. You know, give me your best shot. I mean, what we did right, what we did wrong. Let me know what you felt about your experience. And so, yeah, there was that kind of an informal thing, but individual debriefings, no. We did summarize what we thought we had accomplished or whatever we knew that had been part of our activities. You know, we just did a history. And that became part of what was written up about each of us when they gave you, I remember, it just kind of a typewritten letter saying Vic Cox served in Mato Grosso during this period of time and these are some of his activities, kind of a thing. And he has been discharged honorably or something. You probably got something like that.

HODGDON: [01:23:31] So you came back the United States in 1966.

COX: [01:23:35] Yeah, but first I had, as I said, either in Cuiaba or later in Rio, learned that there was a training group from the University of Texas that was coming down here as part of an experiment. They had been trying to get away from deselection, which I cheered them on, by starting in their junior years of college and going through different kinds of training and then deciding they were or were not cut out for this, in the summers.

But here it was a second summer of this pilot project, and they were coming down to Rio, actually, to a town right above Rio called Petropolis. It used to be the Emperor Don Pedro's private town, because it was cooler in the hot summer days than Rio itself. And they were finishing up their training and they're going to be assigned from there. So they recruited essentially an all, not all, mostly returned volunteer staff. And I think there were three.

HODGDON: [01:24:53] So you did this before you came back?

COX: [01:24:56] Yeah. There are about three of us, I think, from Mato Grosso. And they used my newspaper as a language training aid. That was cool. And then they sent teams of two usually of the trainee volunteers into surrounding towns to accomplish certain things on the weekends, basically, and get them a little bit acculturated and practicing their Portuguese, etc. I could tell from the experience I had and what I heard from my fellow volunteers in Mato Grosso, that getting that language is so crucial to their effectiveness. And it's so hard when you're, as was the case, paired up with another English speaking volunteer. It's constant temptation to speak English rather than Portuguese and that slows your acquisition.

HODGDON: [01:25:58] Right.

COX: [01:25:59] So, you know, we warned them about this and they could see some of these things were happening. I remember one girl, I think she's from Minnesota, who liked culottes. And I said, Leslie, those are going to get you more attention than anything else you could possibly wear. So be aware of this. You know, when you go into your village, don't wear culottes right from the beginning. And she later wrote me one letter when she was said, you were so right.

HODGDON: So that was an enjoyable experience working with this training group?

COX: [01:26:45] Yeah. And I think self selection works. If they've given enough time and information, they really can understand more what they're getting into. But it was a costly process. So I suspect that there weren't that many.

HODGDON: [01:27:01] I'm not aware that that's become the norm in terms of training. Were there any disappointments in terms of your two years as a volunteer in Brazil?

COX: [01:27:11] Well, I mean, I was disappointed I wasn't able to accomplish more at first. And then I realized, you know, this is the American mentality driving you here. And even though I didn't think of myself as some sort of knight in shining armor, I was coming down to spread wisdom. And goodness, I clearly was on a little different timetable. And when they talk about, you know, there's a different clock in Baghdad than in Washington, I know exactly what they're saying, right? You just can't take traditional societies and put up quickly. You know, and to what you think is, you know, a palatable timeframe. And time was so different. I mean, that was one of the other things. Heck, you know, if you only worked half a day and you had a lunch and a siesta and then maybe you joined a few early risers out under the shade trees on the main street and chatted away about everything under the sun. Well, that's not such a bad way to spend your time either. You don't have to be doing something. And we waste a lot of time here anyway in front of the television and all that. So, yeah, I dropped back a notch and said, look. Be content with just planting seeds. Try to cultivate those seedlings that you find. But don't expect to make major changes. And I was, you know, happily surprised that philosophy worked a lot better for me the second year than the first months of effort.

HODGDON: [01:29:08] It doesn't sound like you went through major culture shock when you first arrived.

COX: [01:29:13] I missed my girlfriend. I missed my family. But I had so many great people there that I was working so that I could go back to that

University of Texas training group and say, these people are worth the effort.

HODGDON: [01:29:28] Yeah. Now, when you returned to the United States. Did you have culture shock like I did?

COX: [01:29:37] I had culture shock there. Yeah. Because I could see so much benefit in a slower pace of life and getting to know people and really not just being satisfied with a passing in the hallway. Hi, how are you doing? Fine, thank you. Okay. But you know, it also helped me appreciate individuals and individual. Both the role of individuals and the kind of hidden joys that individuals can bring to your life without you wanting or expecting it. And I still find that to be true.

HODGDON: [01:30:30] Yeah. What did you do when you first came back to the United States?

COX: [01:30:33] Well, I had a choice. I had tried and failed, talk about disappointment, here's one, to pass the Foreign Service officer exam.

HODGDON: [01:30:42] Which I understand was not easy.

COX: [01:30:44] That was one of the nice things of Peace Corps. I mean, if you had to take, as I did, you know, the Foreign Service officer exam and or your master's graduate record exams or whatever, they would support you, fly you to wherever the location nearest you was, and, you know, and I think you paid for the exam if there was a fee. But they took care of the logistics, you know. Their philosophy then, and I hope it's still that way, was they weren't going to stand in your way when you're planning your future.

COX: [01:31:28] So anyway, the Foreign Service was out, but I had learned enough from meeting some diplomats and also in the field and also the U.S. AID people that I kind of felt like I probably have a rough time adapting to the State Department bureaucracy, because the kind of

foreign service I really like was the Peace Corps type, you know, the people to people stuff. And there were nonprofits that were doing that. So I am now toward the end of my second year, I think, okay, I've got to be thinking about what's going to happen after June, July. And I decided that I would apply to Peace Corps for another project and I would apply to the UCLA Graduate School of Journalism. Both of them came through the same week, as a matter of fact. And suddenly I was being presented with the opportunity to go to Micronesia and help build a country, a new country, because this would have been the first group of volunteers there. And independence had just been declared, basically. Or, you know, take some skills that I had and some inclinations and turned them into a profession. And I said, I'd better be practical about this. This is the middle of the Vietnam War. My draft board consistently said to me, once you get out of Peace Corps, you're 1A.

HODGDON: [01:33:05] Uh huh.

COX: [01:33:07] And I said, even if I've been accepted to UCLA? You're still 1A, right at the top of the pick pool for Santa Barbara. So I went to UCLA and that it was a quarter system so that started late September. So I was able to finish up the time required for training the University of Texas volunteers without any trouble. And then I was home for a couple of weeks, I think. Came to re-learn and re-meet my family. And like most volunteers, I found that the family was really happy to have me back in one piece and interested only up to a point in my stories about the people that I had spent two years with. And so you kind of ended up editing yourself and you give briefer and briefer versions of your experiences.

COX: [01:34:20] In the meantime, I couldn't stand the waste of our society and the time differences. The way time was treated and sometimes the way people were treated too, I mean, that too bothered me. And so it was with some relief that I went into a master's program because I knew that I didn't know when I would get drafted. And this is now '67. Vietnam was heating up. Grad school journalism, which program no longer exists and

had a very good experience there, but very intense one, because I finished my requirements and I worked part time, all in one year. And one of the last things I did at UCLA was to get an internship with Time magazine. And that internship turned into a summer job offer. They call it domestic, being a domestic stringer. But basically, it means you come and you put in your 40 hours a week in the bureau. In this case, it was Beverly Hills bureau, and everything that the regular staff doesn't have time to do, they toss on your desk, they give it to you to do. Or the bureau chief might say, okay, we've got some inquiries from New York and this, that and the other thing. And so you do a little round up research. So you end up being a researcher writer at first. But then they encouraged me to come up with my own story ideas. And I started sending that in. And being 1A, one of the first stories, second, maybe the third or fourth story, but that I remember researching and writing for New York was on conscientious objectors. And that was informative.

HODGDON: [01:36:28] Did you become one?

COX: [01:36:29] No. No, because like essentially dating back to the Civil War, most conscientious objectors have to be raised in a peace church like the Quakers, or I guess the Mennonites too. But in any case, you really need to have something like that. It became more liberalized toward the end of the Vietnam War, I understand. But it still isn't easy to be in the military and labeled a conscientious objector and therefore, you know, taken out of combat duties. And I talked to friends, you know, who preceded me into the military.

HODGDON: [01:37:15] Did you end up going into the military?

COX: I was drafted.

HODGDON: You were drafted?

COX: [01:37:18] I was drafted in September of 1967, and I spent two years in the US Army. But because of some of the advice I got, I did as well as I

could on the initial tests, really tried to indicate that, you know, I had education and I had some intellectual resources that they could probably use better outside of combat. That may or may not have been the reason, but after some tumultuous period in which I first was classified as a military journalist, which is what I wanted. Thought that would be the end of it. I got sent to Fort Benning, Georgia, home of the infantry, and that classification was taken away from me and I was made a general clerk. But then I ended up with 13 months still to serve in my two year enlistment because I wasn't going to go for three. I got sent to Germany. And everybody always said the same thing. Draftees are not sent overseas except to Vietnam. And to this day, I have no idea why my orders came down. And supposedly they were cut in the Pentagon by some process in which I was sent as a clerk typist to Fulda, Germany. But by then, I knew how the Army worked. And so I got into Frankfurt, which was essentially a transfer station where different people at different orders go to different places. And I said, look, I've got a master's in journalism, you know, sending me as a clerk typist to Fulda, that really is a waste of your resources.

HODGDON: Yeah.

COX: [01:39:12] And they said, let's see what we can do for you. And they came back a day later and said, we're sending you for interviews at Heidelberg. If they don't need a military journalist there, they always need a clerk typist. You know, you'll have a much better position for that. And I ended up spending 13 months in Heidelberg as a journalist. I got it back and I got a great job producing a little publication, not that much above the silkscreen, but a little bit better, in which I encouraged people to explore Germany, West Germany. And it was just a great thing. I was able to learn some German.

HODGDON: [01:39:54] Super. I think you lucked out. Now, what has been your connection with the Peace Corps in the umpteen years?

COX: [01:40:02] Yeah, well, I was one of the co-founders, I guess you could say, of this group here.

HODGDON: [01:40:12] And we're referring to the very active Santa Barbara Peace Corps Association. And you and I both have served on that board. But you've been at it much longer than I.

COX: [01:40:23] But inconsistently. And it was because there were too few of us doing too much at the beginning. Now, I'm sure you felt that here once by yourself. But it was such a relief to see new blood finally come in and take over from the old timers. I mean, Mike Marzola and Bill Dillon and Rose, yeah Rose too, we date back to that era. But there aren't many of us. Billy Brother, who you seldom see, but maybe once a year. You know, she helped out, too, in the beginning. And there were others that are still in this area.

HODGDON: [01:41:05] But you're still you're still active in the group.

COX: [01:41:07] Yeah. Well, you know, I'm one of those that believes that once you're a Peace Corps volunteer, you're always a Peace Corps volunteer. And I still find it a really worthwhile organization, despite its ups and downs. And I objected very strenuously to Mr. Vasquez as the director. I felt he was totally unqualified to be appointed. But I recognize the political realities. I mean, this is a political appointment, just as some of our country directors are. And so our ambassadors are, you know, and you get the good with the bad, and sometimes you're pleasantly surprised. Sargent Shriver was a political appointee, right? You couldn't have asked for a better salesman, and creator, I mean, the things that he fought for. Just amazing that some of them survived. Including the autonomy of the Peace Corps, which it lost for a while.

HODGDON: [01:42:07] Yeah. Now, as we've gone through this interview, have I skipped over our probing any areas that you would like to be part of your Peace Corps history?

COX: [01:42:22] I'm just glad it's out there as an option. I'm glad that people of all ages now. It used to be just young people and still is largely young people's organization. But with what, ten percent of us or something like that over 55, who are in the field now, I think that's a really commendable thing. Peace Corps has shown a certain rigidity in some areas and flexibility in others that I guess is kind of to be expected with any aging institution. I hope to God that it's still independent of our government's intelligence gathering apparatus. Um, there were always stories and there were some volunteers who claimed, you know, that they'd been approached by CIA in the field or things like that. And even a simple little health sanitation field survey conceivably, you know, could be looked on by some as an intelligence gathering kind of thing. But unless you want to know how many privies are in a town, I don't know what real value it might have. I just think that it's a shame that Peace Corps hasn't ever been supported financially and politically enough to regain it, because it was at one point in the sixties with major programs and India and Brazil, both of which have now, you know, either cut back or have no programs of Peace Corps. It was six. What was it? I think we had fifteen or sixteen thousand volunteers in the field at the high point. We've got seven, eight thousand now, and that's better than the five thousand just a few years ago. But still, I think, you know, without relaxing standards, without diminishing the real challenges, because it truly is not for everybody.

COX: [01:44:41] Um, the Peace Corps offers you an unparalleled chance to explore your world and yourself and to find a little bit more about where you fit into that world. It gives you a much better basis, sometimes at a very young age, of self-confidence, of thinking more about what other people working together can do. I mean, it dampens the individualism, even though I had a very individualistic experience. If you look only in terms of my relationships to other volunteers, I had a very collective experience in terms of my relationship with the Brazilians. And, you know, that's despite language difficulties, cultural gaps, ignorance, youth. I mean, all those things, you know, you can really, I can really see

where I gained from that. And like I'm sure many of these interviews will say at some point or another, I always felt like I got more than I gave.

HODGDON: [01:45:54] On that note, let's bring this to a close. I have loved doing this interview with you because you're a wonderful storyteller. And though we've known each other for years, I know so much more about your Peace Corps experience. Yeah. Well, thank you very much, Vic.

COX: [01:46:11] Thank you, Barbara.

HODGDON: [01:46:11] All right.

[END OF INTERVIEW]