

Doug Strange Oral History Interview
Returned Peace Corps Volunteer Collection
Administrative Information

Creator: Doug Strange
Interviewer: Louise Liller
Date of Interview: June 21, 2019
Location of Interview: Austin, Texas
Length: 14 pages

Biographical Note

Doug Strange served as a Peace Corps volunteer in British Honduras (Belize) from 1972 to 1974 as an architect, and in Guatemala from 1974 to 1975 as a regional city planner.

Access

Open.

Usage Restrictions

According to the deed of gift signed July 17, 2019, copyright of these materials has been assigned to the United States Government. This interview is in the public domain.

Copyright

The copyright law of the United States (Title 17, United States Code) governs the making of photocopies or other reproductions of copyrighted material. Under certain conditions specified in the law, libraries and archives are authorized to furnish a photocopy or other reproduction. One of these specified conditions is that the photocopy or reproduction is not to be "used for any purpose other than private study, scholarship, or research." If a user makes a request for, or later uses, a photocopy or reproduction for purposes in excesses of "fair use," that user may be liable for copyright infringement. This institution reserves the right to refuse to accept a copying order if, in its judgment, fulfillment of the order would involve violation of copyright law. The copyright law extends its protection to unpublished works from the moment of creation in a tangible form. Direct your questions concerning copyright to the reference staff.

Technical Note

This transcript was created by Sonix software from the MP3 audio recording of the interview. The resulting text file was lightly edited and reformatted according to a standard template.

Suggested Citation

Doug Strange, recorded interview by Louise Liller, June 21, 2019, page #, Returned Peace Corps Volunteer Collection, John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum.

DISCLAIMER

This transcript was generated automatically by Sonix software from the audio recording. The accuracy of the transcript cannot be guaranteed. Only the original audio recording constitutes the official record of this interview and should be used along with the transcript. If researchers have any concerns about accuracy or would like to recommend corrections, they are encouraged to contact the library reference staff.

Oral History Interview

with

Doug Strange

June 21, 2019
Austin, Texas

By Louise Liller

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

LILLER: [00:00:07] Ok, today is June 21, 2019. My name is Louise Liller. I was a Peace Corps volunteer in El Salvador from 2006 to 2008 and a Peace Corps response volunteer in Panama in 2009. I am interviewing Doug Strange, who was a Peace Corps volunteer in British Honduras from 1972 to 1974 and also a Peace Corps volunteer in Guatemala from 1974 to 1975. So, Doug, we're just going to sort of start at the beginning. And can you talk a little bit about why you joined the Peace Corps?

STRANGE: [00:00:59] Why I joined, it was. It was an idea of doing something different when I graduated. I graduated with a degree in architecture and everyone I knew was going to work in offices and various things. And this opportunity came up where the Peace Corps was actively looking for recent graduate architects. I believe they had six different countries and I could choose which one. And it was a matter of really doing this, or I had acceptance to do a master's degree in architecture at University of

Oregon, which I turned down and said, I think the Peace Corps would be more fun. I was married at that time, so my wife and I both joined as volunteers.

LILLER: [00:01:57] What can you tell us a little bit about sort of your growing up just a little bit about your history in general before Peace Corps?

STRANGE: [00:02:06] I grew up in a lot of different places. My father was a mechanical engineer, design engineer, and he kind of traveled with contracts, government contracts and private contracts. His hobby was sailing. So that became my hobby and it still is my hobby. So we lived in areas where I sailed in Long Island Sound and Gulf of Mexico and Redondo Beach Breakwater and the lakes of Texas and several places around the world. Happily married family, mom and dad, three children, one of three children. I was the only one that went to college and graduated. I take that back. My brother and sister went to college, but they did not graduate. My brother went back later on and finally graduated. My sister never did. So I went to University of Texas in Austin and got a degree in architecture in '72.

LILLER: [00:03:19] And so how did you first hear about the Peace Corps?

STRANGE: [00:03:23] I was married at the time. I guess it was my senior year on campus in the spring and my wife getting ready to graduate in May. Maybe that was a winter more. And my wife came up to me, Claire, and said, ex-wife, came up to me and said, there's Peace Corps volunteers on the main mall. They're recruiting, they're looking for architects. They're going to six different countries. You get to choose. And my immediate response was, what's the Peace Corps? I knew nothing about it. I believe she had a girlfriend that had been in before, so she knew something about it. And it sounded very interesting to her. We went to the mall. I went to the mall the next day and the recruiter said, well, this is a very technical position and we just happened to have the director of technical services coming tomorrow. It'd be better if you talked to him directly rather than me. Let's set up a dinner together and being a student, being offered a free

dinner. I said we said both said yes. And we're going to go talk to them. And at the end of the dinner, we chose Belize. I believe Belize is what it's called now. It used to be called British Honduras, but I believe the other countries were, uh, I keep thinking of Iran being one of school programs, another school program in Ecuador. A roads and bridges program in South America somewhere, somewhere in the South Pacific on one of the islands. Another school building program.

STRANGE: [00:05:17] So they were all involved in the design and construction of buildings. And that's what intrigued me, as I said earlier, to do something different besides the traditional role of an architect. I had never traveled out of the country before. My ex-wife, Claire, was pretty much raised in Mexico City. Her father was with the embassy, U.S. embassy, so she had a lot of experience on living abroad and as a young adult, you know, going to grade school and high school there. And it just sounded like a really good opportunity, something unusual and fun. At that time, you know, I think the mission of the Peace Corps, it wasn't even in my mind, it was more of that. I'm supposed to be an architect. This is a chance for me to try and do something different. So let's do it instead of going to work for a firm and some city and joining the ranks of all the other recent graduates.

LILLER: [00:06:36] So after you decided to go and you and your wife went together, what was that process like? Did you have training in the States? Did you go and have training in-country? Was there any training at all?

STRANGE: [00:06:51] We were another unique example in what's called individual placement. We had no training. We were sent to Philadelphia with all of our duffel bag full of goodies. I had communicated with the Peace Corps director of British Honduras and he had a lot of suggestions on what to bring. Plasticware for dishes, sheets and towels were expensive, different things. So we brought those down as well as a I remember going to J.C. Penney's and getting a wrinkle free suit because they said I would need a suit in my position. Didn't even own one. I think it was maybe 39 dollars or 29 dollars. So then we went to Philadelphia for a week and we joined a group that was going to Morocco, 50 volunteers. And the main purpose of

that was introduction to Peace Corps policies and procedures, lining up to get our shots, which the doctor I had to tell them each time, I'm not going to that country, I'm going to this country. So they had to go figure it out and get back in another line because we didn't need all the shots for North Africa. Belize was relatively clean medically, so we didn't need too much, I don't think. And after a week there, we got a plane and we flew to Belize. We were just, there was no training at all and driven out to our village called Belmopan, which was a new. The hurricane had hit Belize City, I believe, in '61 and done a lot of damage. And they moved the capital government complex to Belmopan, brand new city.

STRANGE: [00:08:53] So they dropped us off in a concrete block house with a bed, a bicycle and a refrigerator and said goodbye. And the next day I actually went to work for the Public Works Department as a chief architect, and my wife Clara started to get the house together. But the following week, I believe she went to the school and she where she was going to be a Spanish teacher. She was bilingual in Spanish. So her assignment was to be a teacher, which the school was very unusual because it was just one school from kindergarten through high school and there was no kind of requirements to be in any grade. So she had people in high school that were twenty four years old and couldn't read. And it's just it was one shot school, that's all they had at that time, so she taught Spanish and I went to work at my new job with a staff of nine people. And I like to tell people the story that on May 20th, I graduated with a degree in architecture. On July 4th, I was having lunch with the president of the country talking about his building program for, which consisted of a lot of different building types, and about two months later, with the director of Public Works, I presented the budget and the program to the Belizean government for approval, Congress and the Senate, and stood up. And that's where I had to wear the suit.

LILLER: [00:10:49] So it came in handy.

STRANGE: [00:10:50] So it came in handy, although I didn't use it very much. The leather shoes and the leather belt got a lot of green fungus on it and had

eventually thrown away. But that was my beginning of the service. So it was as I've learned, it was quite different from the normal program, I think, of which you joined a group and you went through training or country training or language training or various different things to enter the country. We followed the same program. After two years of Belize, we really liked the experience. My daughter was born in Belize, actually not born in Belize. She was actually conceived in Philadelphia when we were with the Morocco group. There are a lot of spare time and nine months later, due to a perceived medical complication, we were medevaced out of the country to Washington and they decided it wasn't a medical problem. But she had a family history of diabetes and they didn't like that. So they moved her to Mexico City to live with her parents. And I went back to Belize. And about a week or two before the birth date, I flew out and joined her. We had a home delivery in a hospital in Mexico City, I was right there in court, caught the baby as it was delivered. And when the baby was two weeks old, we flew back to Belize and continued our service. And at the end of the two years, as I said we liked it and we wanted to continue.

STRANGE: [00:12:44] And our director was saying, well, we used to extend people for another year, and we're not really interested in promoting families and a lot of different things, but it just so happens the director of technical services was on a world tour of various countries and he showed up in Belize and he was from Venezuela. And he took one look at our daughter, blond hair about maybe not quite a year old, and listened to our story and said, you're approved. We have a position in Guatemala. You can go transfer from one to another. So in Guatemala, again, the training was unique in that I went into intensive Spanish training for 10 weeks, one on one, which gave me good conversational Spanish. And she was assigned to research this piece of land up in the mountains for a future botanical garden complex for the, um, I think it was maybe the University of San Carlos in Guatemala. So she was being, she was trained in plant identification and how to do temperatures and readings and cuttings. And her job was to do preliminary research on that property. So for the month or two months almost, and I was in language school, that's what she did every day. She was learning how to be a botanist or do the environmental

ecological research on a piece of property. So I think both assignments, we didn't necessarily follow the normal role or the stories I'd heard of others of the way that other volunteers joined the service and got into their country.

LILLER: [00:14:42] And so going back to Belize or even in when you you're in Guatemala, sort of what was the day to day like? I mean, especially as a family? Was your daughter with you or was she being taken care of or did you generally work like a nine to five and then you were home on the weekends? How was sort of that?

STRANGE: [00:15:08] I was working 40 plus hours a week. I had a job. I had a staff, I signed their, did their evaluation annual. I signed their sick leave and the request for time off. I met with government officials, so I was pretty much an eight to five. Claire was a teacher and when Kristen was born, we actually hired a nanny to come into the house and she took care of Kristen during the daytime. And my work schedule didn't change too much. I think Claire's reduced, but she kept working as a teacher. She really enjoyed it. She thought it was a lot of fun. And so we didn't want to stop. So that was in there. In Guatemala, my job was city planning and it didn't really come together as strong as they'd hoped it would. So we had a lot more family time together. We spent most of our time doing the research for the property for the university, and I was very interested in woodworking. And I actually found a furniture maker in Coban, which is the name of the town. And we made a deal and they would teach me how to build a house full of furniture and I would teach them English. And so for six months, almost every day or every other day, I would go down to this little shop and eventually made a whole house full of furniture, drastically improved my Spanish and they improved their English.

STRANGE: [00:17:02] And we just had a great time. I still have a chair at my house here in Austin that I made back then. I had it shipped back. So that was the beginning of my love of woodworking, which I still practice today as a hobby, building furniture. So it's quite different experiences, two different countries, two different styles. I think my expectations were high for

Guatemala. And the program to me sounded like what most volunteers get, an unorganized program that has a lot of potential. And you have to pull it together. In my case, it wasn't coming together, and so we drifted off to her supporting her program. We lived in a town called Coban, which is in Alta Verapaz in Guatemala, it was a tropical rainforest at 5,000 feet. Very nice. We were the only English speaking people in the town and I think we have a major fault at the beginning is that they taught me Spanish. And the main language in this town was Quiche, which was a Mayan dialect, although most of them spoke two languages. But it might have been more beneficial for me to learn the Mayan dialect, although my role in city planning was really to talk to the leaders of this three city region and organize some city planning. And those communications, the ones I have on Spanish, not Quiche.

LILLER: [00:18:52] And so what about, so it sounds like you like developed some hobbies and had maybe a little bit more free time in Guatemala, but were there any other things that you all did when you weren't working? Maybe any travels or just things that you all did as a family or that you did with the community, like when outside of work things. You talked about a little bit.

STRANGE: [00:19:18] The one big adventure which, you know, shouldn't go on tape, but it needs to go on tape because the Peace Corps had a pickup truck and they would give it to volunteers for a particular assignment. And we got together with another single volunteer in another village. And I requested a week. Claire requested a week. And Tom requested a week. We had a pickup truck for three weeks and we took off on a vacation in Guatemala and went down to some extremely rural villages, and the. Claire got very much into weavings and we were kept hearing about what if you go to Neybaj they have weavings that have a lot of animal figures. If you go to Chichicastenango they had a lot of flowers, and if you go to Huehuetenango it was geometric designs. So we went to all these different villages and literally in some of them we traded the cotton T-shirt that I had for the *huipils* that the woman was wearing. And Claire still has all those, a collection of about a dozen of them. I have some fabrics. But she collected the *huipils*, which were very well done and it's very valuable

to her. She loves wearing them today. But aside from that, we went on some trips to other villages just to visit other volunteers and see what they were doing. We had a, we lived in a recently built concrete block house on the side of a mountain, and it had this big room in it, one of the rooms of the maybe like bedroom.

STRANGE: [00:21:23] Living room, kitchen, bathroom. The bathroom was just a big room with a showerhead in the middle and a toilet in the corner. I started looking around and going to the junkyard just looking for just browsing. And I saw this water heater and I talked to him. I said, is that a wood burning water heater? And they said, yes. And I said, can you install it in my house? And they said, yes. And so they would put a wood burning water heater in and we bought a galvanized tank for a bathtub so we could give Kristen a bath and Claire a bath. But also we were the only hot shower in about almost 100 miles for the other volunteers. So the other volunteers started coming to our house for a hot shower. And, you know, they would, we would say, well, the cost of your shower is dinner. So let's go down to the market and find some nice food and we'll have dinner together and spend the night and have a hot shower until the water runs out. And we had a. And once a month, one or two would show up for a hot shower. So that was kind of fun, something different. Trying to put some of my, I guess, initial architectural skills in realizing that, you know, that looked like a hot water heater and I wonder if I can make it work. So that was a very nice program there.

LILLER: [00:22:56] And so in Guatemala, there were other volunteers where when you were in?

STRANGE: [00:23:01] I think there were about 30 to 50 in Belize and 30 to 50 in Guatemala. But for some reason, we were kind of individual placement in both countries and didn't come in with the rest of the group. And to this day, the only person I know is my ex-wife. And she's in Austin and a girlfriend she developed, Kathy, who I believe is in the surrounding area still, but I haven't kept in touch with the rest. And part of it is because of the, I didn't come in with a group. So you didn't have that bonding. And I

noticed on the sign up board, it was in the lobby [at the conference], that there's no one else here from Belize or British Honduras. So I don't really know how big the program was or on and on. I don't even know if it's still going on there. But it was active. I know it was big in education. It was big on health care because I had one of the projects was to design a new hospital for the government. So I went to the old hospital and there was foreign nurses there that were actually practicing nursing as their volunteer assignments. So I got to meet a few people and but we traveled around. One of the nice things about the is Belize was that they gave me a Land Rover to drive so I could get around the country because I told them, well, if I'm going to design your building, I need to see the site where it's going.

STRANGE: [00:24:56] Now, some of the buildings were so basic that I really didn't need to see the site. But between driving that Land Rover, going in a dugout canoe up rivers, going in a small plane and landing in fields that were hacked out of the jungle, I went to all the sites that I had to build something on and got to see pretty much all the corners of the country, which was also, I think, pretty unique. A lot of volunteers were pretty much in their small area. But I would, I mean, one trip was driving to a town called Punta Gorda, which was way in the south of the country, which was four to five hours on a dirt road in the Land Rover, spending the night, next morning getting in a dugout canoe with an outboard going up the coast for an hour and then up a river for an hour to get, I believe, to a town called Monkey River Town. And they wanted an elementary school and a government rest house. The government house, which I did several all over the country, was a building that government officials could stay in in that town so they could do their business in the country. And it was just a two or four bedroom house with a kitchen.

STRANGE: [00:26:24] And when they came there, they would have local support of a housekeeper to cook and clean when they were traveling there. So we did that. I mean, I have had more stories about Belize than any, that was just. There was a town called Placencia that was on the coast. Maybe about two hours south, two or three hours south of us, and they wanted a

government rest house. Well, the only way to get the Placencia was by boat. And we decided to drive there in this Land Rover and we actually drove up the beach at low tide in the hard packed sand and at times got out with machetes and chopped the palm tree out of the way so we could drive over and we got to it. They had a big celebration. We were the first vehicle to ever be in the in the village. And I did my work and went back. And now Placencia is one of the main tourist attractions, believes it has a crystal clear water. It has beautiful white sand beaches. There are resort hotels and youth hostels. But it is going to be a major tourist attraction for the country. And I like to say that my little part in getting it started back then, just getting the government officials there helped it do that for the government, which was fun.

LILLER: [00:28:06] And so overall, do you feel like there was like, thinking about the service as a whole? Do you have any, like, main accomplishments, things you're proud of or regrets or lessons learned sort of thinking about just overall? Are there kind of these big picture kind of things that you might want to discuss?

STRANGE: [00:28:28] I think the Belize is the story and the accomplishment was, I did for them what they wanted. I brought back a portfolio of drawings of about 20 buildings that I designed with the team, and we started construction on a few of them while I was there. A new hospital, a new prison, health care clinics, fire stations, border inspection stations, a real new one was called an *abattoir*, which is a slaughterhouse. That was a fun one. I didn't definitely didn't have any courses in that in college, but the old one was just horrible. And so I had to go to the old one and learn about the codes and regulations and design a new one. Well, later on, I remarried and it was probably, I'm going to say maybe like 15, 15 years, she wanted to go to Belize, so I took her back and we got into the public works department and none of the people there that I knew. But in talking with the current director, by then, it was Belize was no longer British Honduras. He went into the archives and 90 percent of the buildings that I designed were built. So the country needed an architect. I showed up and I did what I was supposed to and the buildings were built, and so I was, I really feel

accomplished that happened that way. And I think in, it may come to one of your next questions, but that led me in my career to not be afraid of international. I actually lived abroad as an expat in Dresden, Germany, Istanbul, Turkey and London, England for three years each one, practicing my profession, but actually living in the country, learning the customs, learning the language. And I had no hesitation at all when I was offered the assignment to go. And I think that Peace Corps experience for sure made me realize that I could do it. It wasn't going to be a hardship. And that was fun, so that led to that. Acceptance of foreign assignments when they came around.

LILLER: [00:31:26] Just a couple more questions. One is thinking about the three goals of the Peace Corps, which is providing technical assistance, just kind of spoke to that a little bit, promoting better understanding of Americans and promoting better understanding of other people by Americans. How do you feel about your service in those three? So, like, goal one is where you're providing technical assistance and you're promoting better understanding of Americans and then promoting better understanding of people in other countries back home.

STRANGE: [00:31:59] I think that the. I mean, that probably the first goal of providing the technical service was the major one. I think the other two goals probably happened after, when I was actually a working expat in a country and I can remember in Germany, in Dresden, Germany, and I was working for a large chip manufacturing company that was building a microprocessor manufacturing plant in Dresden, Germany. And I was their project architect, construction manager, project manager for the project for the owner. Guiding the project team and I remember sitting down with the project team when they were working on some issues and saying, we need to stop for a minute and just talk about the fact. If it's a technical issue, work on the issue and fight for the issue and make it happen. But you're beginning to touch on cultural issues. Our job is not to change the culture. We have to do this project in a culture we're not familiar with. We're all expats, most of the team had never been overseas, never done anything like this. I was the only one that had a little bit of experience. And

that came up again and again, of realizing that your job is to, you know, do your assignment but overall but don't, realize the culture and don't try and change it because make that culture better by doing a building that's safer to, you know, safer to stand up, has some room in it.

STRANGE: [00:34:00] They need to do is it's technically better than their existing buildings that would help the community. But don't try and force an issue of saying, well, you know, we can span this distance. We'll just get a steel beam and we'll have a bigger space. Well no. In Belize, we didn't have steel beams. It was concrete and as far as you can span with concrete, and that's the size of the room and design a building that lives with what the local economy can build with. So in Belize, there was a lot of understanding of what the local craftsmen can physically do. When you're in college, you're taught anything's possible. Well, now I had a whole set of constraints that, yes, anything's possible, but. In my world, when you build a big building, the concrete truck shows up and you pour concrete as much as you want and you make it happen. In Belize they have a little portable mixer that you can rent from Home Depot, that mixes maybe a yard or a wheelbarrow full at a time. And we would pour whole slabs and beans with this little mixer because they didn't have mixing trucks show up from the batch plant. So learning the basic culture.

STRANGE: [00:35:27] And I think that, it benefited me more from later. Some of the big projects that I'm involved in now and what I call giving back is, I found a group that is doing a lot of community service work in Fiji. And I've been there four times, two to four weeks at a time, doing whatever the island needed, the village on the island. Sometimes I would repair houses, build greenhouses, repair a school, help do compost bins. Just whatever it takes, and I'm still actively involved in that every year to go down to Fiji and help, the other thing is I do my career and my interest is I've been involved with Habitat for Humanity for a lot of years and probably on house number 12, very active right now, doing three houses a year as a not just a warm body, but as a senior leader, helping other volunteers frame the wall, put the roof on, put the cabinets in, put the siding up. So educating volunteers that want to help Habitat to learn a trade and at the

end of the day say, you know, I put the trusses on the roof and I've never done that before, I actually know why I am. And Doug explained to me why we do it this way and not the other way. So it's led me to my current giving back.

STRANGE: [00:37:19] And as I told some people earlier at the conference, one of my current goals is to try and even get back with the Peace Corps. And reconnect and what is available for with someone with my skill set and my desire, probably a quote, normal volunteer is not an answer, but the disaster response group in the short term assignments. That's really the prime reason why I'm attending this conference is to learn more about it and even possibly express some interest in Peace Corps leadership to say, well, maybe we will consider a more technical program in El Salvador and help them actually build us a large elementary school. Or I think a more relevant one is, I retired from a 15 year career with the local hospital network. And so I built, designed and built five hospitals and health clinics and office buildings, the medical office buildings. And that might be a better window to go in to say let me help support. The Peace Corps building small clinics or small hospitals in countries, it would be a longer term assignment to design, to build up a structure, but I could be very excited and talked into that if it all came together. And I'm going to be pushing for that during this conference to see what I can learn.

LILLER: [00:39:14] It's great, that feels like a good spot to end. Do you feel like there's anything else you want to add?

STRANGE: [00:39:20] No, thank you for the opportunity to share my story. My daughter, actually that was born in the Peace Corps, applied after college to go in the Peace Corps, and they offered her an assignment in rural Africa somewhere to work with women's health issues. She was a, kind of like, I can't even tell you what her degree was, but it wasn't in women's health. And she declined it because she said, no, I want to do it, my dad did, I want this. I like the assignment he did. I don't want to live in a rural hut far away from anyone else. And I don't like that idea. And they weren't able to work something out. So she didn't go in. But I enjoyed the Peace

Corps tremendously. I really enjoy this conference so far, just meeting all the returned volunteers and seeing their enthusiasm and hearing their stories of what they did or what they're doing now is very heartwarming. And I like all the comments about continuing the message and continuing the program. And I know it's a struggle for leadership. Dollars are getting tight for everything so I'm glad to see it's still moving forward. So thank you.

LILLER: [00:40:58] It's great. Thank you so much. And then we'll end here.

[END OF INTERVIEW]