

Jenna Waites Oral History Interview
Returned Peace Corps Volunteer Collection
Administrative Information

Creator: Jenna Waites
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Biographical Note

Jenna Waites (nee Butts) served as a Peace Corps volunteer in Guatemala from 2001 to 2003 on an environmental education and ecotourism project. She also served in Honduras from 2003 to 2004 in a water and sanitation program.

Access

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Oral History Interview

with

Jenna Waites

January 22, 2020
St. Augustine Beach, Florida

By Christine Musa

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

MUSA: [00:00:02] Today is January 22nd, 2020. This is Christie Musa. I served in Sierra Leone in 1981 to '83 and I am interviewing Jenna Waites, who was a Peace Corps volunteer in Guatemala from 2001 to 2003, and then served in Honduras from 2003 to 2004. Jenna, tell me what made you interested in the Peace Corps?

WAITES: [00:00:30] Um. I would say my first exposure to the Peace Corps was when I was a kid in the eighties and saw the Tom Hanks movie Volunteers. That was pretty much all I knew about the Peace Corps. But I grew up with a strong love of travel and interest in learning new things and new people and art and culture and everything. I then went to college to get an engineering degree and started working as an engineer, found it incredibly boring, and felt a little stuck with what I was doing and wanted something new. But I wasn't sure what. And I was in I guess my mid twenties, mid to late twenties at the time, and I don't even honestly remember how it popped into my head.

WAITES: [00:01:33] I didn't always grow up thinking I'm going to join the Peace Corps, but the idea of being able to travel, learn about new people and different places in a different culture and have more meaning to my work than keeping a company out of trouble with the law, which was basically my job, keeping them from polluting beyond legal limits. So I just decided. I was like, why not now? You know, I have the freedom to do so and with no debts and no significant others. So I decided to quit my job and join the Peace Corps.

MUSA: [00:02:18] Did you take a leave from your job or you quit it outright?

WAITES: [00:02:20] I quit, yeah.

MUSA: [00:02:22] Where did you grow up? I didn't ask you that to start.

WAITES: [00:02:25] I grew up in a small town in south Alabama in between Pensacola, Florida, and Mobile, Alabama. So I went to school in Mobile pretty much.

MUSA: [00:02:35] All right. And you applied for the Peace Corps. And was it a very complicated process at the time?

WAITES: [00:02:44] I didn't think it was very complicated. To me it just seemed long and tedious, though, after having heard what other volunteers went through, mine apparently was fairly quick and painless. I think it maybe only took six or eight months. It was just a whole lot of paperwork, visiting doctors, getting records, shipping that all off. But even my interview was fairly easy. There wasn't anybody. I was living in Melbourne, Florida, in the middle, kind of middle eastern part of the state. And the closest interview place I think was in Atlanta. But I didn't have to go there. They did a phone interview with me, which I found out is not normal, but it even that just felt like I was just chatting with someone. It was, it was very, I felt very friendly, very easy.

WAITES: [00:03:41] The only thing that struck me is, you know, he was like, well, since we're not in person, I just have to ask, do you have purple hair or

face tattoos or piercings? Because I guess, you know, especially in certain countries and where I ended up serving probably would not have favored. I already looked weird just being a gringa, but I wasn't too out of place.

MUSA: [00:04:10] Now, what program did you apply for?

WAITES: [00:04:14] I applied for engineering and ended up getting placed in environmental program in Guatemala, which was environmental education and ecotourism. And my particular job, I actually ended up getting placed with environmental education for school kids, which was interesting to me because I'd never even been around kids before at the time. Never tutored, never taught anybody.

WAITES: [00:04:44] What age group?

WAITES: [00:04:46] Elementary school. Yes.

MUSA: [00:04:50] And what about region of the world?

WAITES: [00:04:55] I wanted Latin America because I already knew some Spanish, or Africa because I just felt the need there is so great.

MUSA: [00:05:06] And your first offer was Guatemala?

WAITES: [00:05:10] Yes.

MUSA: [00:05:12] And did you get much lead time or did they say pack up and show up in another week or so?

WAITES: [00:05:20] I was accepted in October and, or given, I was accepted and then given my placement, I think in October and I left in January. So I had plenty of time to give my notice to my job, sell all my stuff, tell my family.

MUSA: [00:05:40] Tell me what your transition was then from civilian life into the Peace Corps. They had a staging and then a training?

WAITES: [00:05:50] Yes, we did just probably, it might have been overnight, but a few hours staging in Miami. We all met in Miami. They gave us a couple hour debrief. I think we spent the night there. And then the next day we got on a plane to Guatemala. Most of us, one person actually decided not to get on the plane, which was interesting. You know, made it to staging, but I guess decided it was not for them. And then we were driven immediately to our training facility once we got in country, kind of given about a one hour tour of the training facility, told we would be taking classes in health, culture, language, and our technical specialty.

WAITES: [00:06:42] And then we were brought to a local house and dropped off and said, okay, here's the family you're going to be living with for the next, well, that family, two months, and we'll pick you up in the morning to bring you to the training center.

MUSA: [00:06:57] And you went alone to your family?

WAITES: [00:06:59] Yes.

MUSA: [00:06:59] Or were you placed in pairs?

WAITES: [00:07:01] No, I went alone to my family.

MUSA: [00:07:04] What town was the training in?

WAITES: [00:07:06] The training was in a town called Santa Lucia Milpas Alta [Altas]. It was, it was maybe half an hour outside of the capital.

MUSA: [00:07:17] Okay. So you got placed in with your family and spent how long there?

WAITES: [00:07:29] We spent two months at the training facility and then we spent a month kind of on site training. So it was just our technical, just the environmental people. We went to a site, very small town, and do not ask me the name. I do not remember. There was maybe 400 people and did technical training for a month.

MUSA: [00:07:56] Uh huh. And after that got finished then?

WAITES: [00:08:00] After that we came back to the training center for maybe a few days or a week and did our language assessment to make sure that our language proficient enough to go to our site, which honestly, I, I have to admit I purposefully tried to fail because even though I had had. I'd been taking Spanish since middle school, in our education system I never actually had to carry on a conversation. I learned to read and write. I could memorize a speech and give it. But holy cow, when confronted with somebody who wants to talk to you, I'm like, can you write that down? I could not. Language is not my gift. So I thought if I could stay another month, one on one, you know, and have some more help with my Spanish, that would be amazing. Unfortunately, they passed me anyways and said nope, you got to go to your site.

MUSA: [00:08:56] Now living with a family must have helped with the language.

WAITES: [00:08:59] It did. It did. It was scary at first being dropped off the first day and I'm like, oh, wow, said a few things and they just start rattling off in Spanish. I'm like, deer in headlights, like please slow down. But they were amazing. They'd hosted volunteers before, were so patient with me, super wonderful people. So yes, it definitely helped. And then there was some days we had 6 hours of Spanish classes so.

MUSA: [00:09:29] Wow. Yeah. So you got through that and I'm sure your Spanish improved as you went on. But you were stationed then where?

WAITES: [00:09:40] I was stationed in San Juan La Laguna in Sololá, in the eastern or, excuse me, the western side of the country. Very glad to get there. Training was tough for me and it was a rough three months. It felt like being back in, I don't know, elementary school, boarding school. I was like, I can do this if I can just get through training so.

MUSA: [00:10:06] Were there are a lot of people in your training group?

WAITES: [00:10:09] Yes. Um. I'm trying to remember how many because we had 12, I think just in environment, and there was about four. So there was

probably 50 or 60 people in our training group. Guatemala, at least at the time, was the largest Peace Corps country, and they had people coming in, I think, new trainees every quarter, so it was very big.

MUSA: [00:10:31] All right. So now you've got to your town. And what was that like? What were your accommodations like? Were you placed with the family or given?

WAITES: [00:10:41] No. So how it worked and I don't know if this was universal at the time, but you were assigned a counterpart who was supposed to be somebody living and working in your town, who you were going to work with. And they would introduce you around, help you get settled, help you find a place to live. Because we were assigned to work with a particular organization who had requested a Peace Corps volunteer. The organization I was assigned to was a big organization headquartered in a city probably about a half an hour, and I say city because it was bigger than my town, about maybe a half an hour, probably about a half hour boat ride away from where I was. And my counterpart did not live in my town. He actually only came to my town about once a month.

WAITES: [00:11:34] So he met me at the training center because they actually come and get you from the training center. You know, they get you on the right bus to your town. He actually brought me to the city across the lake where they were stationed, put me in a boat, and said, your town is over there. So I just was in a boat going off to my town and luckily.

MUSA: [00:12:00] He didn't escort you there?

WAITES: [00:12:01] No. No. So luckily there was already a Peace Corps volunteer in my town who was going to be leaving in three months. So she was there. And I actually had a site mate from my training group who was going for additional work. So the two of us kind of went together to our town because her.

MUSA: [00:12:20] That's helpful.

WAITES: [00:12:20] Yes. Her counterpart was similar, didn't live in the town. And just so they just put us on a boat and said, have fun. So the other Peace Corps volunteer met us and kind of introduced us around. We got to stay with her for about a week while we looked for housing.

MUSA: [00:12:35] You had to look yourself?

WAITES: [00:12:36] Yes. Had to look myself. Because my counterpart didn't really know anyone in town. They didn't set anything up prior to our arrival so.

MUSA: [00:12:45] I think that's pretty unusual that that housing wasn't established ahead of time for you. Anyway, how did that go?

WAITES: [00:12:56] Thank goodness that other volunteer was there because she was great and knew everybody in town. And luckily, surprisingly, in our town there were several vacant homes and both my site mate and I were able to each individually get our own homes that were within our budget. The one I was able to get had been vacant since the war. Guatemala at the time I went there, was just recovering from a horrible civil war where there was mass genocide. Entire towns wiped off the map. It was really bad. My town was fairly sheltered from it, with the exception of one woman was murdered in my town and that was her home. Then was vacant. And they were like, yes, rent it to the gringa. So it ended up.

MUSA: [00:13:55] You think there were superstitions in the village that prevented anybody else from living there?

WAITES: [00:13:59] 100%. Yes.

MUSA: [00:14:03] But nothing happened to you while you were in the house?

WAITES: [00:14:05] Well, other than being peed on by possums in the middle of the night, which people said like, they were like, well, that's because the house is cursed. So I ended up, it got so bad I ended up actually moving because I tried to trap them.

MUSA: [00:14:25] Living up in the roof?

WAITES: [00:14:27] Yes. Yeah. And well, in the.

MUSA: [00:14:28] Ceiling.

WAITES: [00:14:29] In the, yeah, and my bedroom was the only one that had a ceiling. None of the others had ceilings and they had made nests up there. And I had.

MUSA: [00:14:37] Their own apartment.

WAITES: [00:14:38] Yeah. I had guys go up there and clean it out and we tried to put chicken wire all around so they couldn't get in, but somehow they kept getting in and somebody gave me a trap. So I would put a trap up there with chicken in it and I'd catch one and then the other, it's like they would catch on, and they wouldn't touch it for two weeks. And then I'd catch another one. But this was like two months and I caught maybe three and it was still happening. So I said, I can't. I can't do this.

MUSA: [00:15:06] So how long did it take you to move to another?

WAITES: [00:15:09] I was lucky. There was another house that I'd had my eye on that, it was really beautiful, vacant, had a huge yard and you could kind of see the lake over the wall. There was like this big concrete wall around it, but they had wanted too much money. But by that point, I had befriended the family that owned it and explained my situation. So they came down in price and let me have the house. Because I was like, it's just sitting here. Nothing, you're not going to do anything else with it.

MUSA: [00:15:39] All right. Now you mention the lake. Tell me the name of the lake.

WAITES: [00:15:42] Oh, Lago Atitlan.

MUSA: [00:15:44] Okay.

WAITES: [00:15:45] Very famous. If you ever are a tourist in Guatemala, you probably go there. But none came to my town. They came to the town next door. But my town was just a sleepy little town no tourists ever came to, which was kind of nice actually.

MUSA: [00:16:01] Yeah. You also mentioned a company that the Peace Corps was working in collaboration with.

WAITES: [00:16:08] Yes. The NGO, the non-governmental organization I was assigned to. Um. I am blanking on their name because I actually didn't ever really work with them. I ended up more working with the Ministry of Education because I was assigned to do environmental education in the elementary schools. And for me, you know, one of the principles in the Peace Corps that resonated strongly with me was sustainability. Like, I want this to keep going after I leave, and I'm not the best teacher of kids. And I would try to go in and develop programs and have the teachers help me with the kids. But every time I would come to the school, the teacher is like, great, I have a break. I'll see you in half an hour. I would be left alone with the kids.

MUSA: [00:17:02] They weren't benefiting from that.

WAITES: [00:17:04] And so I was trying to work with the Ministry of Education to help them figure out ways that we could incorporate environmental themes into what they're currently teaching. Like, it didn't have to be a whole new curriculum. We can put it in math and science and history and, um. They did not want to do that at all and ended up not wanting me to teach or help out in the schools at all. It was sad and I felt very defeated and lost.

MUSA: [00:17:40] That would be discouraging, yeah.

WAITES: [00:17:41] And like I was a horrible volunteer and nobody wanted to work with me. So that was, that was rough. I felt like I had failed big time.

MUSA: [00:17:52] Why do you think they didn't want to? Just they were set in their ways of presenting material?

WAITES: [00:17:57] Yeah. And I think it's a situation where most of us don't like change. It's, even if the path isn't great or we're not happy with it or it's sometimes even painful, it's easier just to keep going, as you know. And you don't have to think too much about it. You don't have to do anything. You don't ruffle any feathers. And it just, status quo is a lot easier than trying to implement changes. So and I didn't have the support of the teachers because they were like, oh, a gringa is coming to teach. I get a free break and I get paid to do nothing. And the Ministry of Education, I guess, didn't, just had other things to worry about and just didn't care that much so.

MUSA: [00:18:47] And that continued for the duration of your service?

WAITES: [00:18:51] No, I tried to work with them for probably, I would say the first six months and then they finally were just like, we're done. Just we don't want to see you again. We just, we're done. Don't, don't come back here. We don't want you in the schools. So yeah. I felt, I felt like I had failed big time. That was really horrible. So then I didn't have a job. I didn't have anything to do, so I just was like, okay, I'm going to, you know, just like they taught us in training, just to go around and figure out what people need and see if there's a way to help people. So I just made it my mission to just get into my town and get to know people and just chat with them and see what people needed. And I ran into, it's interesting. I got very down actually on international aid because there is a lot of it in my town and all the towns around the lake because it is so famous.

WAITES: [00:19:53] It's actually Mayan communities where people speak a Mayan language. They wear the traditional Mayan dress. So it's very high profile. So a lot of international organizations are there and a lot of people dump aid. And what I was finding is I'd go around and be like, okay, well, what do you think are the biggest problems or what is your biggest need? And people are like, well, I don't know, I'm poor and ignorant and I don't know what I need. So you're a gringa. Give me stuff. Just like, I don't know what you need. But so many organizations were doing that, like, oh, you poor Mayan people, here's things. This is what you need. But there was no buy-in from the community. They were just like, oh, and they might use it until

it broke. And then they're like, okay, well, somebody else will come by soon and give us something else. And it was horrible.

WAITES: [00:20:44] I was like, this is terrible. But I didn't know what to do about it. I just was like, no, like, let's figure something out. I was like, I don't have money. I can't give you things, but you know, I have resources and we'll figure this out. And a lot of people are just like, no, we'll just wait until somebody comes along to give us something. But it really turned around when I, uh, I befriended a park guard because behind my town, there's, it's. I lived on a lake that's surrounded by three dead volcanoes and just it's beautiful, forested, and they're actually national parks. So we would go hiking and it's so neat. There would be like Mayan artifacts just buried in the coffee bushes and in the trees and everywhere. It was so cool. But anyways, I befriended him and his wife, who was a weaver, and she used natural dyes in all of her weavings.

WAITES: [00:21:45] And he just came to me one day and was like, you know, I have this great idea for a town, for the town, but I don't know where to start and I need some help. So I was like, oh, tell me, yay. And he basically was saying, you know, look around the lake. There's all this tourism, all these foreigners that come in and bring money, but a lot of it ends up negatively affecting the town. Like the town next door to us got a lot of tourists, a lot of expat people come and live there. They buy up all the land. They push the local people out. They're doing drugs. The local kids get hooked on drugs. There's crime. It was a horrible town, like it was really dangerous. And our town was like super nice and safe. So they're like, we would love to benefit from the tourists and show them the amazing things of our culture, but control it and not let the bad influences come in.

WAITES: [00:22:39] So he's like, I want a town wide, like ecotourism effort. I want to bring people up in the parks to show them that, you know, because we lived in a Mayan community and women like hand wove their own clothes. So, like, we want to showcase the women weavers. There was actually several Mayan painters in my town and a couple of them were kind of famous. And he was like, you know, we want to showcase artists, the lake, you know, everything. We had an organic coffee co-op that's actually world famous. A lot of people would come to study how the co-op works.

So he's like, I want to showcase, I want to get the whole town involved, you know, how do we do this? So I was like, okay, like, let's get a plan. And so that kind of snowballed and became my project.

MUSA: [00:23:26] Oh, that's a wonderful transition from being so disappointed to going in a positive direction.

WAITES: [00:23:32] Yes. And I loved it because it was his idea, not the gringa's idea. And they'll placate me while I'm there, but when I leave, it'll disappear so.

MUSA: [00:23:43] Who was that ranger?

WAITES: [00:23:46] His. Oh my gosh. What was his last name? It was Raul. I want to say Iq, but I.

MUSA: [00:23:58] That's okay, we have Raul.

WAITES: [00:24:00] Yes.

MUSA: [00:24:01] Just to give a name to this person.

WAITES: [00:24:04] Yes, Raul.

MUSA: [00:24:04] And so you worked with him. And how did that go?

WAITES: [00:24:08] It was amazing. He got a group of, I want to say six local guys together who wanted to kind of form a board and get this going. So the first thing we did is I found somebody to come in and train them on how to be tour guides basically. And so he came in for free. Like it was amazing and did this week long training with these guys to teach them how to deal with foreigners and everything that goes along with it and to properly showcase what they wanted. And then we got little certificates and then we kind of tried to formalize it and they got a name of the group and, you know, elected the members of the board to try to figure out like how, what are the next steps, what do we need to do?

WAITES: [00:25:10] That was a frustrating process for me because I'm used to coming from engineering corporate America in the States and you have a meeting and there's an agenda and people show up on time and you just start going down the list. And this, we would have a meeting. Nobody would show up for an hour. If somebody showed up an hour and a half later and we're already in the middle of the meeting, everything would stop and be like, hey, how are you doing? You know, how are your chickens? How are your kids? So that was a lot for me to get used to, and just slow down and just take things as they come. But and, you know, when you're starting a new organization as well and trying to figure out roles and everybody has a say and wants to talk and so, you know, we would have three hour meetings and do nothing. Get nothing accomplished. But, you know, in the end, it worked out well.

WAITES: [00:26:10] One of the other little kind of side projects I worked on with that is to get the women weavers involved. And instead of just showcasing them weaving or the works that they produce, I was like, how cool would it be as a tourist to come in, sit in somebody's adobe home, and actually like, make like a small little napkin? Like weave your own napkin.

MUSA: [00:26:36] Oh, yeah.

WAITES: [00:26:36] So I was like, okay, well, I should try this first to see is it going to take 5 hours? You know, how long is the process? And so I started with one woman and having her show me and then working with her on how to show other people and coming up with translations because she, you know, her Spanish wasn't great because everybody in my community was Mayan and most everybody also spoke Spanish. But since it was their second language, it was not great Spanish. So we came up with like printed materials so you can point and, you know, with whatever language to be able to understand what's going on.

MUSA: [00:27:17] I wondered that because you said there was such significant tourism. What language? What countries people were coming from that were coming into the area or were they really ready to speak Spanish if they came there?

WAITES: [00:27:29] Most, no, they didn't. You know, there was a lot of people from the States who normally only just speak English. There are a lot of Europeans. So we had a lot of people that spoke French and German, some Spanish, but most tourists didn't come in fluent in Spanish so.

MUSA: [00:27:50] Because you worked around that.

WAITES: [00:27:52] Yes.

MUSA: [00:27:53] So that was successful?

WAITES: [00:27:56] Yeah. I actually recruited some people to come in and be kind of test cases and it worked really well and they loved it and were excited they got to walk home with something that they made. But then they also wanted to buy like the real thing.

MUSA: [00:28:10] Oh, that's good.

WAITES: [00:28:11] Which was good. But this was just in, probably, I don't even think my last year of service, maybe my last eight months. So I only kind of got so far. And then when I was leaving, I was trying to petition to the Peace Corps to have a replacement volunteer for me, but to work with this organization. But it was hard because they weren't official. They hadn't requested a Peace Corps volunteer. So I was like, please send somebody that might be interested, at least in a side project of doing this. And I met my replacement.

MUSA: [00:28:49] Oh, then it was successful.

WAITES: [00:28:52] And she seemed great. I didn't keep up with her, so I don't know how much she was involved. But I, you know, I still keep up with people in my town and now they actually have a website. There's a community center that showcases local works. There's hotels, there's restaurants. They have paved roads, internet. Like it's crazy how much it's exploded.

MUSA: [00:29:20] It hasn't been that long either.

WAITES: [00:29:22] Well, 20 years now, almost so. But yeah. So I was excited that, you know, it was something that they just continued to run, because it was their idea and that's what makes it sustainable. I was just kind of the catalyst helping behind the scenes, but it was all their vision. So I was like, yeah.

MUSA: [00:29:43] Well, very fruitful.

WAITES: [00:29:45] Yeah.

MUSA: [00:29:45] Second year.

WAITES: [00:29:47] Yeah.

MUSA: [00:29:47] It takes a while to get going very often anyway. So that's not unusual.

WAITES: [00:29:52] Yes.

MUSA: [00:29:52] Yeah. And your description of how you went into the community is very similar to what I have heard the very initial volunteers that went into the Peace Corps. There were no formalized programs. They were just told, go there and see what you can do. So you followed that format and it worked out well.

WAITES: [00:30:14] Mm hmm.

MUSA: [00:30:15] And you were there two years.

WAITES: [00:30:16] Yes.

MUSA: [00:30:17] And what was a, when you were working with this board, what was a typical day like or did it vary so much?

WAITES: [00:30:27] It varied so much. And honestly, the majority of my time was mostly downtime. So I would get up and read and then get out of the

house and just go chat with people and just sit with people and talk. And do, you know, I would say maybe only 20 percent of my time was actual work honestly, even with this organization. I mean, there would be spurts where every day we're doing something, but then there would be other times where, you know, because all of the people involved in this, they all had full time jobs and ways that they needed to support their families and things too. So this was just kind of on the side for them as well. So the majority of my time was just spent, you know, reading or wandering the town and just chatting with people or sitting by the lake or.

MUSA: [00:31:25] Did you have much contact with other volunteers? You said the one volunteer that helped you get settled was there for three months. There was another volunteer there at the same time?

WAITES: [00:31:35] Yes, there was another volunteer I trained with, but she was in a different program so.

MUSA: [00:31:40] Same village though?

WAITES: [00:31:41] Yes. Yeah. She didn't live too far from me. But, um, but it was interesting. I mean, we were friends and amicable, but we didn't. We didn't hang out a lot because I think both of us were like, well, we don't want to just glom to the other gringa and just kind of, because you can kind of get trapped in that bubble.

MUSA: [00:32:01] Yeah.

WAITES: [00:32:02] And, you know, especially because she ended up in a similar situation where she ended up with no work either. So we could have just had our little Peace Corps thing and just like tuned out. But we both wanted to, I think, integrate a little bit more in the community. But she also ended up dating somebody in another town, so she was not actually in my town a lot.

MUSA: [00:32:23] So did you travel at all?

WAITES: [00:32:27] I did. One of my. [tape break]

MUSA: [00:32:34] We were talking about traveling in the country.

WAITES: [00:32:37] Yes. I, I did some travel in the country, not as much as a lot of other volunteers. But I did like to take opportunity to go and visit other volunteers in various places to see their sites. And, you know, one of my best Peace Corps friends lived in up in the mountains in the town across the lake. So I would go and visit her despite the harrowing efforts to get up there, because most of the transportation in the small towns are pickup trucks. And around my town, they had great pickup trucks that had cages where you would stand up and hold on to the cage, which sounds scary, but it was actually great and a lot of fun. And to get up to her town in this super crazy, windy mountain road, you just sat on the edge of the pickup truck and there was not a lot to hold on to.

WAITES: [00:33:33] So it was very scary, perched on the edge of a pickup truck trying to hold on when you're going up winding mountain roads. But her town was great and I traveled a lot with her and to see out to go up to Tikal, which are great Mayan ruins up in the north part of the country, which was off limits first year because it was so dangerous. But they opened it up the second year. So I got to go see that. Black sand beaches out on the Pacific Coast, and just other cool towns where volunteers lived.

MUSA: [00:34:09] While you were in country, the Peace Corps has three goals. One, you learn about another culture. Two, you educate the local population about American culture. Third goal is to come back to the United States and educate Americans about other cultures, which is what this interview serves as. But the second goal of communicating to the local people about American culture. How do you think that went?

WAITES: [00:34:41] I think it went great. You know, a lot of people, just in meeting people and in conversation, are very curious, you know, about Americans and our culture, because especially in my town, their view and exposure to Americans was limited because there was a lot of tourism around the lake, but not so much in our town. So and they'd had a few volunteers before, but, you know, depending on the volunteer, they, you know, may or may not meet certain people or talk about certain things. And I remember a

couple of things that really stuck out to me is I had somebody that I was dating long distance in the States and they would ask me lots of questions about him and the relationship. And then one of my friends asked about when we get married, how long our contract would be for.

WAITES: [00:35:39] And I was just blown away. I was like, contracts? She's like, yeah, you know, in the States, you get married, you have a contract for like three or five years and then it ends and you marry someone else. I was like, wow, that's an interesting take on our divorce rate. So, you know, tried to explain that, no, we unfortunately do have a high incidence of divorce, but everybody goes into a marriage wanting it to be for forever. So that was interesting. The other thing that was really interesting in my town. People would only get, you know, a few people in my town had TVs and we'd get to see movies. And most of them were shows like Baywatch, where everybody's blond and blue eyed and like I was and my sight mate and the other volunteer that had been in my town.

WAITES: [00:36:34] And one of my volunteer friends came to visit me and she was a black American and they would not believe that she was from America. Because their exposure to black people is, um, there is a population along the east coast of Guatemala called Garifuna is that is a black population when the Spanish brought over slaves to Guatemala and then released them in favor of enslaving the Mayan people. So that was their only knowledge of black people. So they were convinced like, no, she's Garifuna. No, I said, we have black people in the States, we have Asian people, we have Latino people, all kinds of people in the States. So that was kind of an eye opener for them as well. And those are the big standouts. But I know, there was a lot. You try.

WAITES: [00:37:27] You know, being a vegetarian as well, they never would have fathomed the concept of somebody being able to afford to eat meat, not wanting to eat meat, and trying to explain like obviously not every American's that way. That's personal choice. So it was interesting because most of everything that I did and, um, you know, it was weird to them.

MUSA: [00:37:59] How available was meat anyway?

WAITES: [00:38:02] Not, not very. Most people, well, a lot of people in town had chickens, so they would have eggs or, you know, some chicken meat. But the majority of people ate beans and rice or eggs. I remember one person in town actually had a pig and it was a town celebration when it was slaughtered. And people, everybody had bid on having different parts of the pig and like the whole town was there. And this was the one cultural thing I could not partake in, especially being a vegetarian. I could not go to the pig slaughter. I felt really bad that I was being very culturally insensitive, but I couldn't. I couldn't do it. I couldn't bring myself to it. But it was a big town celebration.

WAITES: [00:38:51] And unfortunately, I had eaten meat a couple of times being there because you cannot, you know, if somebody gives you, offers you something, you cannot say no. That is the most offensive thing you could possibly ever do. And it made me, because I tried to hide that I was a vegetarian for a long time, thinking, okay, they'll think I'm less strange, which is not the case. But, you know, I finally came out because it made me so sick the couple of times I had to eat meat. Finally come out and be like, yep, a weird gringa. I love beans and eggs and tortillas. Bring it on. No meat. Thank you.

MUSA: [00:39:30] That's the cultural exchange. They understood something about, uh, part of the American view on meat eating.

WAITES: [00:39:39] Yes.

MUSA: [00:39:40] Well, you had completed your service in Guatemala, but you decided to continue your service, but not in Guatemala, correct?

WAITES: [00:39:55] Yes. So towards the end of my service, I felt like I was finally just getting rolling with finding a cool group of people to work with and being able to contribute. And I wasn't ready to go home yet. I felt like I still needed to do more. I wanted to do more. And this was a great opportunity to, you know, continue to see the world and experience new things that you may never get again. But I didn't necessarily want to stay in my town and continue that project because part of me also had this great fear of,

oh my gosh, it's been 27 months since I have done engineering. When I go back to the States after two or three years of doing no engineering, who is going to hire me? That's a long time to be out of your field.

WAITES: [00:40:52] And Guatemala didn't have any programs that utilized engineers, but Honduras had a water and sanitation program, which was my specialty. It's what I did. So I worked with my country director to see if I could possibly just transfer there and hit the ground running and work in the water and san program. And I got to talk with the country director and the program director and they said yes, we'd love to have engineers. So that's why I decided to go to Honduras, because I already knew Spanish, so I didn't have to learn a new language. And it was interesting because most people ask me, they're like, you know, why would you extend in another Central American country? You've already been in one. Why not get a new experience? But for me it completely was a different experience, because I went from a small rural Mayan village where everybody spoke a Mayan language, wore Mayan dress, to a city where there is no indigenous culture.

WAITES: [00:41:59] So it's very Hispanic, very Latino culture where people in my town in Honduras drove Mercedes and BMWs and had way more money than I did as a Peace Corps volunteer. And there was dance clubs and restaurants and, you know, all the, all the things that a little small city would have. So it for me was night and day, completely different experience.

MUSA: [00:42:22] What was the name of the town you were in in Honduras?

WAITES: [00:42:24] Danli, El Paraiso.

MUSA: [00:42:28] Which part of the country?

WAITES: [00:42:30] That is in, I guess sort of the southern part of the country on the border with Nicaragua.

MUSA: [00:42:42] Uh huh. Did you go straight to Honduras from Guatemala?

WAITES: [00:42:44] No, I wanted to. But they have this, or at least at the time, they had this weird policy where when you are going to do a service in another country, you have to take at least a month off. Most people go home. They said, you don't have to go home, but you can't, you can't stay here. Just go somewhere. And for me, you know, a lot of volunteers took their vacations to go home and visit friends and family. For me, I never did that, because I was like my friends and family are, they're the same people and the same places. I'll see them when I get home. Like, I have a month to just roam. And so I just took the opportunity to wander around and have fun and see things. And actually.

MUSA: [00:43:31] Within Guatemala?

WAITES: [00:43:32] No. Well, yes and no. So I took some time in Guatemala, a little bit of time in Honduras. A friend came to visit me and we kind of did some time in Honduras. And then I actually went to Scotland for two weeks randomly. Because my mother and my sister were taking a vacation there and it just happened to coincide. And I'm like, I'm there! Yeah, so.

MUSA: [00:43:57] Okay. Interesting itinerary.

WAITES: [00:44:00] Yes.

MUSA: [00:44:01] All right. Then you come back to Central America, you get into Honduras and you get involved in?

WAITES: [00:44:08] Yes.

MUSA: [00:44:08] Some more training?

WAITES: [00:44:09] So, yeah, they didn't put me through the whole training program. I got to catch the tail end of a current training program. So I was in training maybe two weeks, just really catching up on the technical aspect. Because I thought, oh, water systems, I got this. Uh uh. You do not design water systems in rural Central America like you do in the States. It is, you can do it on an Excel spreadsheet. It's so simple and easy and interesting. So, no pumps involved. It's all just gravity fed. So

kind of learning how to simplify water systems. And then one of the things I stressed to my program manager was that, you know, I obviously had already been a volunteer, experienced. I wasn't going to go through the same kind of transitions and learning curve and things a new volunteer would just, you know, getting settled in emotionally and figuring things out.

WAITES: [00:45:11] I was like, I want to get on the ground running, put me with an organization that has had volunteers and just ready, ready to run. Sadly, that did not happen. I got assigned to work with the water department of my city. So I hike up the hill where the office was on the first day and they basically are like, okay, that's your chair. You go sit over there. And they just did their thing and went off and kind of left me. And I was trying to listen in on conversations to catch on to what's, what was happening. And it was a few hours and paid no attention to me at all. So I said, okay, well, you know, what can I help you with?

MUSA: [00:45:53] Or they're sending a message.

WAITES: [00:45:54] Yeah, exactly. I was like, what can I help with? You know, I'm here, I'm ready. And the guy basically was like, well, you can come back tomorrow, but bring a book because there's nothing that we have for you to do. And I feel like the situation would have been different if I was a male volunteer but.

MUSA: [00:46:15] Were there males in the program too?

WAITES: [00:46:18] In the water and san program?

MUSA: [00:46:20] Yeah.

WAITES: [00:46:21] Yes, there were.

MUSA: [00:46:22] You communicate with them at all, I mean?

WAITES: [00:46:24] No.

MUSA: [00:46:24] Were they in similar situations? Do you know how that kind of worked out?

WAITES: [00:46:28] Yeah. Well, I. I didn't really communicate with many of them. Not very many of them were close at all to where I was. I didn't really. Because the only kind of thing that I had. So with that program, there's an engineer put in one of the cities and then you have, um, I don't remember what they called them, water and san technicians, people who weren't engineers, but kind of learned how to do it in the rural communities around. So the engineer was supposed to kind of help out and be there for all the technicians in the rural. So I had a bunch of technicians around me, but I didn't, I didn't have much contact with a lot of the other engineers. So but it was definitely prevalent with a lot of other female engineers that I knew, or the technicians had a lot of hard time working with because it's a very male dominated society.

MUSA: [00:47:28] Mm hmm.

WAITES: [00:47:29] So, so unfortunately I tried to work through that, but I was like, you know what? I'm only here for a year. I want to go where people want me. So similarly to Guatemala, I just got into my community, started chatting with people. My landlady knew everybody in town, started introducing me around, and I met the people with Acción contra el Hambre, Action Against Hunger, the local organization. And wow, they do things right. In Guatemala, I had gotten very disillusioned with aid organizations how they just like, oh you're poor and ignorant, here's stuff, bye. And didn't really get in the communities to understand what they need and how they work and their culture. This organization did it right. They made sure what they did was sustainable with their water program. They built water systems for communities who had no water for free.

WAITES: [00:48:30] But in exchange for that, every able-bodied man had to work to build the system. They had to form a water board and a sanitation board and educate people in the town about the importance of clean water, about the importance of washing your hands, about the importance of not going to the bathroom in the water source. You know, things like that. And

they charge everybody in town so that if something broke, they would have the funds to fix it.

MUSA: [00:48:58] Wow.

WAITES: [00:48:58] If the town was not willing to do.

MUSA: [00:49:00] That's impressive.

WAITES: [00:49:01] Yeah, yeah. They had to work for it because they had to feel ownership, like this is our system. Because if we just came in like, oh, here's a water system, first time something breaks, they're gonna be like, oh well, we'll just wait for more gringos to come and fix it for us.

MUSA: [00:49:15] Yeah.

WAITES: [00:49:16] That whole. So I was excited. And they wanted help training the local people on how to properly survey so that they knew that the water would get from the source to the town, you know? And, you know, if they could give everybody a tap stand in their house or if they were community tap stands, you know, the whole thing. So I came up with a program for them. I designed an Excel program where we could put in all the survey points and it would tell you exactly. It would map out exactly how to build it. And, you know, if we had enough pressure. And then I taught all the local people and we'd go up in the mountains and we'd be out there surveying. And I would teach them how to do that and plot the points. And it was awesome and it was such a success.

WAITES: [00:50:07] They got all the Central American Action Against Hunger groups to come to Honduras, and I held a big training for all the heads of the Action Against Hunger in Central America.

MUSA: [00:50:20] Wow. That organization, where did it start?

WAITES: [00:50:24] Oh, my goodness. Action Against Hunger is all over the world. Where it started, I have no idea. But they have, they have like a

headquarters here in the States. They have headquarters in Europe, but then they help.

MUSA: [00:50:39] So it originated outside the country and got established within?

WAITES: [00:50:42] Yeah. So that was just like a local chapter or whatever. And they also do worked with food security, helping with agriculture and stuff. I wasn't as involved in that part of it.

MUSA: [00:50:53] Okay. Wow.

WAITES: [00:50:54] Yeah, it was great.

MUSA: [00:50:56] That's impressive.

WAITES: [00:50:56] It was fun.

MUSA: [00:50:56] Yeah. Okay. So you did that for?

WAITES: [00:51:01] A year. I did that for a year. And so I was basically, well, either training or mostly up hiking in the mountains and working with local communities out and about with them every day. Getting chased by killer bees once, that was fun. But, um, yeah, it was, it was, it was a lot of fun.

MUSA: [00:51:23] What was the source of water? There were just streams up in the mountains?

WAITES: [00:51:27] Yeah, so we would have to find water sources. But most people in the communities would know because it's where they would go to get water. And sometimes, like one community we worked with in the dry season, they had to hike five miles to get water. It was horrible. But we either tried to find, you know, we tried to find the highest point so it'd be the cleanest water away from everybody. And either, you know, like dam up like a piece of river so that we could divert the water, or find like a little spring we could tap that had enough pressure that would come out. So yeah.

MUSA: [00:52:03] I was. You're talking about those up high enough so it wasn't impacted by forces that might pollute the water?

WAITES: [00:52:13] Yes.

MUSA: [00:52:14] Was there any kind of water testing done?

WAITES: [00:52:17] No.

MUSA: [00:52:18] No.

WAITES: [00:52:18] But, you know, because most of the pollutants there were biological, so people, cows, pigs. So we would bring the water down to a high spot right above the town. And just build a big tank where they would basically just add chlorine to clean the water. And then it would come down into the community. So yeah. Very, very simple systems, but definitely with a way to disinfect it.

MUSA: [00:52:47] Who was in charge of adding the chlorine and making sure that that was done properly?

WAITES: [00:52:50] The water board. They had to form a water board and designate like, okay, this is your job is to go out every X number of days and add chlorine. Because we would tell them, we would calculate, you know, like how often it would be added and how much. So they knew exactly what to do.

MUSA: [00:53:11] Chlorine wasn't hard to get?

WAITES: [00:53:13] No.

MUSA: [00:53:15] That sounds very, very workable.

WAITES: [00:53:16] Yeah.

MUSA: [00:53:19] We didn't really touch on the housing that you were in when you were in Honduras.

WAITES: [00:53:24] Um, so I found that. There was another volunteer in the city when I got there. So she was great and I stayed with her again a couple of weeks and she introduced me around and I met, uh, well, I called her my landlady, but she actually didn't own the house I stayed in. It was her. I can't remember exactly the family relation, but anyways, they actually lived in Miami. They owned this house. It was an old family home, but it had been just sitting vacant. So they said sure and rented it to me. And it was, it was beautiful. It was great. And in Guatemala, you know, you lived in generally there were adobe homes and every room was separate. You didn't hardly, there was, it was rare that you would have a house where you would be in one room and you could go into another room. You'd have to go outside and in because they built them as family compounds. So the parents would be there and then their sons would bring their wives and they'd have kids and everybody and it was all kind of built around a courtyard, an interior courtyard.

WAITES: [00:54:28] Where this house was kind of similar. But I actually my bedroom, bathroom, and living room all connected. I had an inside bathroom, which was amazing. I was like, oh my gosh. And then my kitchen, you had to go outside. But I had this big, beautiful courtyard with a garden that was just doing its own thing. There was roses and poinsettia trees, which I didn't even know poinsettias grew like trees so. And it was all walled off as all the homes are there. But yeah, it was nice.

MUSA: [00:54:59] Okay. So you had water supply in in the town that you were in.

WAITES: [00:55:03] Yes.

MUSA: [00:55:03] But the water supply projects that you worked on were really in the surrounding areas.

WAITES: [00:55:07] Yes, because I lived in the city, I always had water. I never, I don't think water ever went out, which was so great. But yeah, so I worked in just the really rural communities around the city. So we were based in the city and we'd just travel out.

MUSA: [00:55:21] And how did your vegetarian diet go over in terms of other people caring when you were in Honduras?

WAITES: [00:55:29] Yeah, they thought I was again weird, but quickly got over it and, wow, the food there is different. Like the Hondurans love fried food. Like almost everything was fried, which I have a big weakness for. So I was really excited about that. I'm like, fried. Like they would take. There was this one guy who was on my walk from the office to my house.

WAITES: [00:55:52] So we'd be up in the mountains. They'd drive me back to the office and I'd walk home. And after being up in the mountains all day, there's this guy on the street. He would just put out this big kettle of boiling oil and they would call them *pastelitos*. They were like little tortillas, like masa. What is that called? Like a dough, I guess, the raw dough. And they would fill them with stuff. Some of them had meat. The ones I loved were filled with almost like a mashed potato. And then they would fold them over and like these little triangles, fry them, pull them out, and then put them in a little baggie with, like, shredded cabbage, this red sauce, and like some shredded cheese on top. And you just go and eat out of this little baggie like these little fried. I got that, I think, every night coming home from work. They were so good.

WAITES: [00:56:45] And in Guatemala, there is like nothing fried, like you don't fry anything. So it was interesting. It's like a bordering country.

MUSA: [00:56:52] Yeah.

WAITES: [00:56:53] But the food. Like in Guatemala, everybody eats black beans. Except once a year there was a season of these big white beans. Like, I've never seen them here in the States, but they're these big, fat white beans that are so good. So you'd have that for like a month. And then everything else was black beans. In Honduras, no black beans. Everything is like this red bean. That was also really good. But it was interesting, just like bordering countries and they're little countries, like a little state, you know.

MUSA: [00:57:20] And not that far apart.

WAITES: [00:57:21] Totally different culture, food, everything. It was neat.

MUSA: [00:57:25] Okay. After you finished your work then, um, you were there for a year. Did anybody come in to replace you?

WAITES: [00:57:34] Yes, actually, um, a couple came in. And they though were assigned to, I think only one of them was water and san. I cannot remember what the other one did. They did two different jobs. But again, to get a Peace Corps, at that time, to get a Peace Corps volunteer for an organization, that organization has to request it. They have to petition with the Peace Corps. And so I was trying to tell them. I was like, you guys need to petition to get, and I don't know if they ever did or got the paperwork, but a volunteer was assigned with a different organization. But I told them, I was like, even if it's just a side project or if your other doesn't. Because they were assigned to work with the water board or the water company, but it was a man.

WAITES: [00:58:26] So I was like, it might work out for you, but if it doesn't work with Action Against Hunger, like they are great. They are doing really good things in this country. So I tried to put the word in and set them up, but I didn't really keep up with them, unfortunately. So I don't know.

MUSA: [00:58:42] Okay. Do you keep in touch with any local people from the countries you served in, after you came home?

WAITES: [00:58:48] Definitely from Guatemala I do. I did a little bit in Honduras, but then I've lost touch with everybody. I haven't kept up with people like I should have. But Guatemala, yeah. One of my best friends. She actually ended up moving to Spain for several years and married a man over there. And I went and I think I visited her in Spain three times. I still have not been back to Guatemala, but I want to so badly.

MUSA: [00:59:15] How was your transition back into the United States culture?

WAITES: [00:59:21] It was.

MUSA: [00:59:21] That's often as difficult, if not more so than going overseas.

WAITES: [00:59:25] Yeah, it was actually really, really hard for me. At first when I came back, you know, most people when they were leaving, they were already applying for jobs before they left the country. And me, I was like, I have been away for almost three and a half years. I just want to enjoy myself for a little bit and visit people, because I have friends all over the country. So I was like, I just want to run around and visit friends and play. And I made it up the East Coast to see my friends and then I started going out west. But by that point it had been two months I was back in the country and then I had like a nervous breakdown. I was like, I'm visiting these friends who all have lives. They have jobs, they have a place to live there, they have friends, and they're doing things. It's like, I have nothing. I'm like, what am I doing? Like, I like freaked out.

WAITES: [01:00:22] So I cut my trip short. I told my other friends, I was like, I can't visit you right now. I've got to get a job and a life and figure out what I'm doing.

MUSA: [01:00:30] You had some wonderful experience they didn't have, though.

WAITES: [01:00:33] I did. I did, but I just totally had a nervous breakdown. So I went and moved in with my sister in Miami and started looking for a job because I wanted to. I'm a Florida girl, I love it. So I started looking around Florida for a job, but I. It was really tough because, you know, my entire. For three and a half years, my life was in Central America. And my frame of reference and the culture so different. Coming back was really odd because people want to hear the fun stories for like 5 minutes and then they're over it. And they have all this stuff in the pop culture here in the States, which I knew nothing about, and my frame of reference they knew nothing about. So I felt horrible reverse culture shock. You know, they tell you about that when you get ready to leave. And I'm like, whatever. I've been away three and a half years. I am ready to go home.

WAITES: [01:01:30] But then I get home and even going into a grocery store made me have like a panic attack. I'm like, I just want normal juice. I don't want orange, mango, kiwi, you know, and 20,000 bottles of it.

MUSA: [01:01:42] So many choices.

WAITES: [01:01:43] I was like, just it's just orange juice. It freaked me out. It was, it was horrible. And then, like, honestly, I kind of shut down about it a little bit, and I felt like I cut off, like I didn't talk to my friends back in Guatemala and Honduras for a while because I was just like, I couldn't, I couldn't deal with it and I didn't want to talk about the Peace Corps anymore. Like, I really. It was rough for probably a year and a half after I got back, I felt like I was almost in like this depression. And I was just like, I couldn't, I couldn't deal with it. I was like, I just need my life. I need to move forward and I don't want to think about it and I don't want to talk about it. And that was, so that was really hard for me. And I felt bad because I felt like I alienated a lot of people. And I tried to reach out and everybody, again, and it was after like a couple of years. And of course nobody was like, oh, I hate you. You didn't talk to me for two years.

WAITES: [01:02:42] But yeah, it was, it took me several years to really want to be around other Peace Corps volunteers or get to know the Peace, RPCV community where I was living and so, yeah, it was, it was hard.

MUSA: [01:02:57] Okay. You're happy that you joined the Peace Corps?

WAITES: [01:03:03] Yes.

MUSA: [01:03:03] And had that experience?

WAITES: [01:03:05] Yes. A lot of times I hated it while I was there. I've always been kind of an even keeled person. And during my service, I've never been on such an emotional roller coaster. Like, you know, I feel like, you know, somebody said something, you know, made some bad joke about me or whatever. And it was like the worst thing in the world. And I hate it here and everybody hates me and what am I doing here? And then my neighbor would bring me tortillas, you know, fresh off the *plancha*. And I'd be like, oh my God, this is the best ever. You know, it was just like up and down. Crazy roller coaster of emotions. And there was times where I felt like huge failure and nobody wanted me there. But overall, like, you can't

have an experience like that and, you know, to learn so much about other people in a different way of life. Completely different. Like all the way that I function and think in the States just doesn't work down there.

MUSA: [01:04:09] Yeah, well, that's one of the big reasons the Peace Corps was established.

WAITES: [01:04:15] Yes.

MUSA: [01:04:17] Yeah, your time serving the country is appreciated. I don't know if there's anything you want to add, any, um, thing maybe?

WAITES: [01:04:31] I don't know. One thing, you know, I'm super excited about this initiative and hopefully people outside of the Peace Corps sphere will listen to these and hear more about it.

MUSA: [01:04:45] The oral history project?

WAITES: [01:04:46] Yeah. Yes, exactly. Because I feel that, you know, like you said, we've done a service to our country. We weren't out there with guns fighting. But I think, you know, our presence in these countries, I like to think, oh okay, I did a little piece that will help the local people and their goals. But really, I think opening the door and just having better relations and people understanding us and us understanding them and bringing it back, I feel personally is as big of a contribution as our military. And yet everybody sees a soldier and says thank you, and I thank them too. I'm not diminishing that. But I was out there. I put my life on the line and did not have any way to protect myself.

WAITES: [01:05:38] You know, I knew a volunteer who him and his girlfriend were kidnapped and tortured. And, you know, and other volunteers have lost their lives. And we are put, like Guatemala was a super scary place when I was there. It was not safe at all. I felt safe in my little town. But any time I traveled outside of my town, it was scary. And we're targets a lot of times. And, you know, we're not given guns or a whole group of people around us to protect us. We're thrown out there like on our own. Okay, fine. Have fun. Bye bye. See you when you leave. And I feel that that isn't

recognized, where we're peace building and community building like the military does. But they have so much support. And as Peace Corps volunteers, we don't.

MUSA: [01:06:27] Yeah. Uh huh.

WAITES: [01:06:28] If that makes sense.

MUSA: [01:06:30] Yeah. No, absolutely. But, you know, you touched on something. I, uh, we didn't really discuss the conditions in the country when you were in Guatemala. Maybe you could elaborate on that a little bit. Why was it as dangerous as?

WAITES: [01:06:44] Yeah, well, at the time, you know, they were fairly fresh out of civil war and, you know, just mass genocide of the Mayan population. There's a very strong divide against the Mayan people and what they call the Ladino people who were, you know, European descent, even though there is a lot of Mayans who will leave their small town and say, no, I'm Ladino, just because it's and they can't get jobs, you know, local economies are suffering. They have a hard time supporting their families and they're so discriminated against. There's a lot of crime against Mayan people, but then a lot of Mayan people fighting back and just doing what they needed to do to survive. So there was a lot of just danger from that. Like when you were in the capital, I knew several volunteers just taking a bus to get into the Peace Corps office, and there was like a shootout on the bus. Luckily, nobody was hurt.

WAITES: [01:07:46] But, you know, and then there's other things like obviously being a foreigner, you're a target. And people rob foreigners all the time. So, you know, I actually was the only volunteer that I know that did not get robbed during service, but I was very vigilant. I'm like, where my site mate would fall asleep on the bus and then she'd be like, darn it, they got my purse again. I'm like, cool, seriously? But, you know, and then honestly, tourist vans and stuff. You know, there would be tourist shuttles and vans. A lot of those were targeted. You were lucky if you were just robbed. A lot of people were killed, you know, they would take people hostage and things. You know, the biggest thing that I was scariest for me, the town

next door, the mayor was super corrupt. So they ended up like firebombing his house and trying to lynch him. And you know that there weren't police in that town. There was police in my town. So they tried to go and help and then they started attacking the police.

WAITES: [01:08:47] So I was like sequestered to my town. Peace Corps was like, you cannot leave your town. I'm like, okay, I don't want to.

MUSA: [01:08:54] I wondered what measures Peace Corps took to protect their volunteers.

WAITES: [01:08:58] So they would, um, so certain areas of the country were off limits. Like I said, in the first year, the Petén, which is the whole northern section of the country, most of it's jungle. That was like crazy dangerous, wild wild west up there. So we were not allowed to visit or travel up that way at all. The second year they opened it up and I visited there no incident. But that, the one Peace Corps volunteer I knew who got kidnapped, it was actually up there.

MUSA: [01:09:31] Uh huh.

WAITES: [01:09:32] So, you know, it was, it was just not. I felt very safe in my community because it was small. Everybody knew me and they were very pro law abiding. They love their police force things. A lot of towns were not that way. They had vigilantes and militias and stuff. So it was interesting when I went to Honduras, other than one city was kind of notorious. It was not the capital, but kind of one of the bigger, bigger cities right outside the capital. Super dangerous. So they were like, do not go there, ever. But other than that, that country was so peaceful. Like I never was scared to travel. I would fall asleep on a bus and nothing would happen to me. And so it's shocking to me now. And I don't know if this is still the case, but as of like five years ago, all of a sudden, Honduras is the murder capital of the world. And I was like, it was so peaceful when I lived there.

WAITES: [01:10:30] So, yeah, in Honduras, you know, I would go out to a dance club and then walk half an hour to my house at 2:00 A.M. Never worried,

never had an incident in Honduras. Now I would not go out to a city and do that.

MUSA: [01:10:51] Uh huh. Wow.

WAITES: [01:10:51] So, yeah.

MUSA: [01:10:52] Very different experiences.

WAITES: [01:10:55] Yes.

MUSA: [01:10:55] Each volunteer says their experience is very different from someone else's. And here you had two very varied experiences, both in the work you did and the environment and culture. Well, unless you have anything else you want to add, I think we'll finish the interview. And again, thanks for your service.

WAITES: [01:11:20] Thank you. This was great.

[END OF INTERVIEW]