

Susan Selbin Oral History Interview
Returned Peace Corps Volunteer Collection
Administrative Information

Creator: Susan Selbin
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Biographical Note

Susan Selbin served as a Peace Corps volunteer in Chile from 1967 to 1968 on a community development project, in Liberia from 1982 to 1983 as an English teacher, and in Swaziland from 2009 to 2010 as a teacher trainer.

Access

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Oral History Interview

with

Susan Selbin

June 21, 2019
Austin, Texas

By Christeen Pusch

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

PUSCH: [00:00:01] Today is June 21st, 2019. This is Christeen Pusch, and I'm interviewing Susan Selbin, who served in Chile from 1967 to 1968, Liberia from 1982 to 1983, and Swaziland from 2009 to 2010. Do you want to first explain what sector you were in each time? Do you remember?

SELBIN: [00:00:27] What do you mean by sector?

PUSCH: [00:00:28] Oh, what project were you working on?

SELBIN: [00:00:30] Oh, OK. The first assignment was CD, community development. What does it mean? They couldn't tell me, so it was really left up to me to decide what community development was. But when I arrived in country, the social worker and the engineer were attached to these communities that had been built as a result of the Alliance for Progress. Chile had gone through an earthquake, and so the rebuilding was being done under Alliance for Project for Peace. And I really got the

feeling right away about the social worker and the engineer that wasn't positive because I actually think they were ripping off some of the project funds. And so I tried to disassociate myself from them, and they did try to set me up, you know, by making it impossible for me to go home from her dinner unless he drove me home. And that was a setup that didn't work.

PUSCH: [00:01:39] But let's get into more details later. You want to just kind of briefly tell me what you did and then we can kind of get into more.

SELBIN: [00:01:47] So I was in a rural community and there was also the Instituto de Educación Rural, the Chilean version of domestic Peace Corps. So it was a matter of meeting with them and deciding who would cover what communities because we didn't want to interfere with each other. So I got some communities in various small towns around where I live, so I had about four different communities, two in the community I lived in and two outside. And through the vehicle of the mothers clubs, which was part of the Eduardo Frei policy for the whole state and the governor of each province, the woman of the governor or they were all wives at that point, they then ran the program. So during one point, they came to Nogales for some event and I personally met her and she said, you know, coming to Quillota, the center nearby for the region, the governor's region, to meet with her about some ideas she had. And so eventually I was her *assessora*. I went around the province with certain resources that the government provided. They would provide teachers and materials, mainly instructing women in things that we thought women would be employable in at that time. You know, sewing, hairdressing, things like that, so they could become self-employed and productive.

SELBIN: [00:03:34] So I went around the communities in the province talking to groups and saying, you know, if you can give me a venue and a place where the teacher can stay and you'll provide her room and board, I can make it happen. And it usually would be two weeks. I didn't have to be there. I just set it up and then it would happen and I would keep going around setting up new workshops like that. But before I actually fell into that, I was assigned with another woman, the only assigned women in pairs in those days. That was a concern, and my partner didn't really adjust. So she left early and then I was on my own, which was much

better because we both arrived during the holidays and the people took us to our little house and said, and there's a party tonight, we'll come and get you. Well, at midnight, she said, heck with this, I'm going to bed. I stayed up. I went to the party and from there on I was the party girl and she was a quiet type. In reality, we were the opposite. But so I found that the best thing that happened to me when Kathy left, that was one good thing. And the second thing was.

PUSCH: [00:05:00] So you were all by yourself.

SELBIN: [00:05:01] Yeah. Then I was by myself. And for some reason, I just started not getting paid. And I had no money. It was the best thing that could have happened because the community realized this was not a rich American, and she didn't have any money. Because there was one phone operator and one mailman. So they knew every kind of communication that came to me. And then one day I got a notice that I should go talk to the operator. She said, you're supposed to be in Santiago now for a meeting. And I said, oh, I can't go, I don't have any money. And the community took care of putting together the money. And so I got on a train and I got to the meeting. So it was the best thing that happened because they knew I was dependent on the community and a little bit I made as a Peace Corps volunteer.

SELBIN: [00:05:55] So the community came through in many ways. I worked with mothers clubs. We would organize projects, funding so that they could make money for their supplies, for their small businesses. And then I got a hold of a, I think it was a eight millimeter projector and we had a line of embassy movies that were all about U.S. government people. And I thought, you know, it's kind of boring. They loved anything because we put up sheets and be out in the country and show these films. And then I thought, oh Mexican movies. So every week the Mexican movies came on the train. I would go to the train station, pick them up. And then I was, Thursday night, Friday night, Saturday, Saturday night, showing movies that I almost memorized after that time. But it was a great fundraiser. I mean, we were the only movie in the places that we showed them.

PUSCH: [00:06:58] Because there was no television or anything.

SELBIN: [00:06:59] Yeah, no television.

PUSCH: [00:06:59] Was there any electricity?

SELBIN: [00:07:01] Yeah, we had electricity. Oh, yeah. We had electricity. And I had a well and an outhouse. So and then I got a little paraffin burning two burner stove, so I could cook on. No refrigeration, so but so we're living comfortably.

PUSCH: [00:07:22] OK.

SELBIN: [00:07:23] So I got to going, showing the films in various places, and on Saturday night I would take the bus with the miners up to the mines, and I would show films there. They really loved it and miners tended to be communists. So one time I slipped in some sort of pro-American political stuff.

PUSCH: [00:07:46] OK, alright.

SELBIN: [00:07:48] But it was followed by Laurel and Hardy, so I didn't get any negative feedback.

PUSCH: [00:07:53] So you showed these movies in town, but you also showed them to the miners.

SELBIN: [00:07:59] Miners, yeah, three communities in one.

PUSCH: [00:08:02] Did you get to know people that way?

SELBIN: [00:08:04] Yeah.

PUSCH: [00:08:04] Like, were community members also involved?

SELBIN: [00:08:07] Oh yes, they wouldn't let me go unescorted. Heaven forbid a woman unescorted alone. When I first moved into the community, in fact, I had one mother's club, one part of town, a small town and then 10 blocks

away another one. And they would, oh no, we've got to walk you there. And after a while I said, everybody knows me here. Nobody's going to mess with me. You don't need to walk with me. I'll just go on my own. Oh yeah, that makes sense because you do the Peace Corps thing. You introduce yourself to the mayor, to the police chief, to all the authorities, the city council people. And so you were a known quantity and you were actually protected by the whole community because they wanted you to like them and have a good experience. And they succeeded. I liked it.

PUSCH: [00:08:59] Were you the first volunteer at that site?

SELBIN: [00:09:01] Yes.

PUSCH: [00:09:02] OK. Do you think all volunteers, all female volunteers, were treated the same way by their community? Were they equally cautious, like wanting to escort them everywhere?

SELBIN: [00:09:14] I think so in Latin America, especially in the mid-sixties. You know, there was a lot of concern about women alone. No, if I would take a bus between communities, there would always be a woman or a family would, where are you going, to check on me. And if it was a place I'd never been before, I had a place to stay by the time I got off the bus. But sometimes I had a place to stay, but they wouldn't let me go anywhere outside without them because they felt I should be escorted.

PUSCH: [00:09:41] And so the women from the community also needed a man with them or someone with them to escort them.

SELBIN: [00:09:47] That was kind of the general view, but I think more so for me because I wasn't from there, and they felt that I wasn't aware of all of the things in the community that could happen or a woman's role. So it was very good. And as I said, not being paid was wonderful. They knew I wasn't rich.

PUSCH: [00:10:07] And how long did that last, that you were not paid?

SELBIN: [00:10:11] Oh, a couple months. And so that was wonderful because I would go to the store to buy something a little little. And I come back and there was, what's all this other stuff? And then I get home and they said. People would knock on the door. Oh, we have way too many so-and-so, so they'd give me more food. It was wonderful. It was also the very good bad luck.

PUSCH: [00:10:36] Yeah. How did the community see you? Like, I guess we kind of jumped right on in. So I guess. Well, I want to ask you like your entry into the community and then even to country, but I don't know how we want to. And then I want to know like why you joined the Peace Corps in the first place. I don't know what's the best way of putting all that together now.

SELBIN: [00:10:57] Yes. Well, the reason I joined the Peace Corps was Kennedy. John F. Kennedy.

PUSCH: [00:11:04] Why is that?

SELBIN: [00:11:05] I admired him and, you know, thought it was wonderful to be our president. And then when the assassination happened, I was. He started the Peace Corps so. And I think it was '63. The assassination occurred and I was finishing my sophomore year in college and I told my mom, I'm going to join the Peace Corps. She said, no, no. You'll be much more valuable when you have your degree. Just wait. I think she was thinking it would go out of my mind as soon as I graduated. In August I graduated in the summer session. In September, I was in the Peace Corps.

PUSCH: [00:11:41] What did you study in college?

SELBIN: [00:11:43] Education.

PUSCH: [00:11:45] And where did you grow up? Where did you study?

SELBIN: [00:11:47] St. Paul, Minnesota.

PUSCH: [00:11:49] OK. And so you what was the application process like? Did it take you a while then?

SELBIN: [00:11:57] It was hard for me to remember the details it was so long ago, but you had choices then. And I know now you're getting a specific thing. Take it or leave it and then go on to the next. But then you had choices and the idea of Latin America, I was thinking Africa, but they didn't have any Africa assignments for me at that time, so the choices were Latin America. So I said, OK, Spanish would be good.

PUSCH: [00:12:22] OK, yeah.

SELBIN: [00:12:24] And the experience was very good, really helped with the language.

PUSCH: [00:12:31] Had you had Spanish in school before?

SELBIN: [00:12:34] No, I didn't bother to take a language because the teaching credential did not require a language and I always thought book learning of a language wouldn't be like living a language, so it turned out OK. Since I was working with mothers clubs and a lot of the mothers, for example, they might have had family members who drove the bus, sons, husbands. After a while, I get on the bus and I'd go to put my money in the till, and they just did that.

PUSCH: [00:13:05] Even after you started getting paid again?

SELBIN: [00:13:07] Yeah, well, couldn't pay for the bus and the bus was crowded. There's always this little seat next to the driver. That's where they would say, sit there. They were going to take care of me, and then I would take busses outside of the, the communal busses, sometimes. And they got to know me a lot, and they said, look, you don't have to go into town to get the bus. Tell me where your bus stop is, your closest stop is, we'll just pick you up there. Just let us know when you're going to get on the bus. And people were very accommodating and the social worker out of the regional center who was working on birth control. Now we got joined together and she was not having any difficulty getting women to accept birth control

with or without their husbands knowing. And so that was her. She was OK operating that way.

PUSCH: [00:14:04] So like the pill or like, what kind of birth control? Is that the time of the pill?

SELBIN: [00:14:10] Yes, it was the time of the pill. Yeah.

PUSCH: [00:14:12] I mean, it's not that important.

SELBIN: [00:14:13] And there is also the IUDs. So yeah, so that was interesting. We went to communities in that capacity as well. So the films and the mothers clubs and.

PUSCH: [00:14:30] I mean, how did you get to know people from your community? Because it seems like everywhere you went, I mean, people seem to really like you and like the fact that you were there.

SELBIN: [00:14:41] And they fed me all the time, I must have gained 25 pounds.

PUSCH: [00:14:45] Oh, really?

SELBIN: [00:14:45] I was like, uhh. But just I was young, smiley, and they just felt protective. And then, you know, being protecting me gave me a way to also help get them to do what I wished to do. I wanted to do summer camp for kids, and the best way would be to find a school. Well, there weren't. I went and checked all the schools. They wanted us to be on the coast in a nice place, and all those schools were taken except the school that was not quite finished yet. And so they said, well, if you can get the architect and you can get them to agree to sign you, the school will do that. By the time I got through with checking all those people, they gave me money for the school, for my summer school. And so I had the teenage girls, mostly, there were a couple of boys. They were trained as camp counselors by the group that's in all countries training people. Anyway. They were officially trained and given a certificate because when the communist newspaper articles said, what is she doing? Propagandizing our youth and came back. Wait, she's certified as a camp director, cause I took a course.

And all the kids that are counselors were certified with counseling. So that ended that.

SELBIN: [00:16:18] So we had three sessions in the city of Viña del Mar with the teenagers. They sent a bus. They took the teenagers all around and it was wonderful. But, you know, we were in a school. Well, the schools weren't made for sleeping, so I called the army and the army sent cushions for the floor.

PUSCH: [00:16:43] Oh, wow.

SELBIN: [00:16:44] And because I met some military people, so they provided the cushions. The moms got around to all the large landowners and got food that way, and the moms came along and did the cooking. And so we had three sessions with kids, young girls, young boys, and then teenagers.

PUSCH: [00:17:07] So this was at a school that was just being finished?

SELBIN: [00:17:11] Yeah, it was. Nobody's ever used it. And it was like, oh dear, you know, it's not going to be as clean and pristine.

PUSCH: [00:17:18] When you were at site, you were kind of looking at kind of where to do this camp. And so you secured funding, essentially secured funding, to complete the school and then you got cushions.

SELBIN: [00:17:30] It was actually the architect and the school builders who gave me the money.

PUSCH: [00:17:34] Right, right. But you helped secure that.

SELBIN: [00:17:36] Yes.

PUSCH: [00:17:37] OK, so that was one of your projects when you were already at site?

SELBIN: [00:17:40] Yes. And it was along the beach. So it took some looking to find schools that weren't already pledged to summer camps. So got that going.

We had wonderful session. I was making money showing films and some mothers clubs are carrying on their projects. And then I started working for the governor's wife around the province, offering classes if they set up the venues and places for the teachers to stay, and also same as *centros de madres* which is.

PUSCH: [00:18:11] Explain that little bit. So you worked for the governor? What were you doing with him?

SELBIN: [00:18:15] It was well, he, his wife, it was a policy of the nation. The wives of the governors were the heads of the center, the mothers clubs, *centros de madres*, for the province. And they had resources that if you could get a vehicle to go to Santiago and purchase all these things with money you earned with your mothers clubs, you could have all those things taken back. So they had material and whatever supplies they needed for their projects. And so I was able to go around the province, kind of. We can provide you teachers and materials if you can get the venue.

PUSCH: [00:18:57] And that's what you talked about before. So what exactly is this mother's club? Yeah, what all did you do with them?

SELBIN: [00:19:04] Oh, I, that's what I attached myself to in my community. There was there was actually three levels. There was the mothers clubs, the community government, and the youth clubs. And so actually, with the youth clubs that got girls into basketball.

PUSCH: [00:19:22] Nice.

SELBIN: [00:19:23] And they were good, but. So in community government, that was a little more tricky because the person who liked me a lot initially, when he found I wasn't into taking things from the projects. Like we got the food deliveries through the U.S. government was providing food deliveries for places after the earthquake. And so we got that and they'd, you know, deliver it to each household. And if there was a household that didn't have a man who was working on projects, then we'd give it to the whoever was there. But part of getting the donation was to participate in the projects.

We worked on our own roads, we cleaned out *aseques* and things like that.

PUSCH: [00:20:14] What did you clean out?

SELBIN: [00:20:17] Places where the water would go through. It was much like in some places like New Mexico, where the water system worked.

PUSCH: [00:20:24] And you did all this work with the mothers club?

SELBIN: [00:20:27] Well, for this part, we were recruiting men to do the physical labor because that's just the cultural way to do it. And that participation would get them their share of the food that was delivered by *no se puedes vender ni cambiar*.

PUSCH: [00:20:50] You can't sell or change.

SELBIN: [00:20:53] Yeah, if this was from the U.S. government and I'm blanking on the branch of the government that did that. But, so we were able to help people that way. And also by having fundraising events where I showed films, the only movie.

PUSCH: [00:21:16] That was also with the mothers club?

SELBIN: [00:21:16] Yes.

PUSCH: [00:21:17] Ok. All right.

SELBIN: [00:21:19] So we provide a lot for the community that was didn't have much opportunities for entertainment and the kids didn't have an opportunity for summer camp. So we provided that as well.

PUSCH: [00:21:30] So I mean, most of your work was through this mothers club.

SELBIN: [00:21:33] Through this mothers club and through, oh, I forgot to mention. Cemento Melon, the cement factory. Major industry in the community, in the area. You need cement, we'll send it. We did a lot. One of them, my

community, um, did the prefab wooden housing project, but on the same site and near this other town I lived in, had all this rebar and brick that was just there from some project that never happened. And we said if we get cement, we got the rebar, we got the bricks. We can build the building. And we did. We built the building.

PUSCH: [00:22:24] Who did you build it with?

SELBIN: [00:22:26] With the moms and their husbands. Because there were men in the community with those kinds of skills to make sure it was done safely and properly. So it's mainly a weekend event where we grab the men. The women would, you know, provide food, and we built a building that was designed mainly for our mothers club. But when I went, I would go back to Chile every eight to 10 years, and I think the last time I was back was 10 years ago. That building. Well, first of all, the mayor who didn't know me, they had a dinner for me. To thank me for the work I did and for the building that we were having our dinner in, which was now being used as a school because the regular school was under repair. And it was just.

PUSCH: [00:23:21] When was this?

SELBIN: [00:23:22] It was about 10 years ago when I went back for a visit. And then, you know, there was, in the national newspaper, there was a little article about what happened in Nogales and a little picture of me. And so I made the newspaper. It was really fantastic. But I was just.

PUSCH: [00:23:43] What is Nogales?

SELBIN: [00:23:44] That's the name of the town. And in the *quinta región*, the center was Quillota. The larger *governacion*, the governor's office, worked out of there. But I was just so gratified, humble, whatever, the idea that people who never knew me, because most of the mothers I worked with were no longer around. I was dealing with the daughters of those people who remembered me when they were little when they came to camp. But and then the politicians of the town, they didn't know me. So it was really very nice. So I must say that Chile assignment was the most encompassing. I was so young and, you know.

PUSCH: [00:24:37] So you said you'd wanted to join because of Kennedy. Any other reasons? Just, I mean, what appealed to you about it?

SELBIN: [00:24:47] Oh, well, I took Girls State. I was a Girls State for in Minnesota.

PUSCH: [00:24:54] What's a Girls State?

SELBIN: [00:24:56] Girls State is where they take girls and teach them about government.

PUSCH: [00:24:59] Oh, OK.

SELBIN: [00:24:59] And so Girls State kind of gave me an idea about politics. But it was the whole Kennedy mystique and the fact that he was assassinated and we had something called Peace Corps and travel, yes!

PUSCH: [00:25:15] And then I mean, I didn't even ask you about training. How did you guys get trained?

SELBIN: [00:25:20] Our training was in the U.S., in Albuquerque, New Mexico, where I now live.

PUSCH: [00:25:28] Oh, okay.

SELBIN: [00:25:29] Yeah. That's not why I live in Albuquerque, but it's coincidental. It was domestic training and where they thought that physical stress was equal to mental stress. They subsequently dropped that idea. But so your weekends were spent doing something strenuous, like they made you ride horses, for example. I love riding horses, and I got censored all the time. They always run when you're in front! That's right. I like to run on a horse. And then they made us do farming, which, you know, none of us really actually farmed as Peace Corps volunteers. They wanted, oh, and we had to climb up Sandia Mountains. It's ten thousand feet and you had to go up to the peak and then rappel down. Well, guess who loves rappelling? The first time I ever did it, but I loved it. And so it was kind of like, can I go up again and fell down? No, that's enough Susan. So the physical stress was

fun for me. It really was stressful for some other people, but there was no real link between physical stress and mental stress. They finally gave up that whole idea.

PUSCH: [00:26:38] Did you have Spanish classes?

SELBIN: [00:26:39] Yes, and it was. New Mexican Spanish was, which was not Chilean Spanish. There's a different accent and different vocabulary in many ways. When I say some words, when I first used them in Chile, I got these horrible looks, like what? That's a wrong word for whatever you're trying to say, and we never say that, that's kind of insulting.

PUSCH: [00:27:06] And so how long did you have training in Albuquerque?

SELBIN: [00:27:09] It was around four months.

PUSCH: [00:27:11] Four months. OK. So the whole training and then did you find out your site assignment in Albuquerque?

SELBIN: [00:27:18] Before, I knew what the assignment was.

PUSCH: [00:27:20] Oh, even before?

SELBIN: [00:27:21] Yeah, we knew what we were training for.

PUSCH: [00:27:23] And you knew what place you would go into?

SELBIN: [00:27:26] You didn't know the specific community, that came later. And, oh, for Peace Corps training in Chile, the old way, you showed up at the place and they gave you an address and a name and you were supposed to go there and spend the weekend and have a little project. What? So I ended up finding, it was a small community somewhere, and I remember going in. I had to walk around a dead body and.

PUSCH: [00:27:59] You had to walk around a dead body?

SELBIN: [00:28:01] Dead body in the street. Mm hmm.

PUSCH: [00:28:03] And how did, what happened?

SELBIN: [00:28:07] I don't know.

PUSCH: [00:28:08] And was that common? Did that ever happen any other time?

SELBIN: [00:28:11] No.

PUSCH: [00:28:12] Ok. Alright. But you walked around a dead body.

SELBIN: [00:28:15] Oh my gosh. And then I had to do a project with basically guys not much older than me. It was kind of weird, but I can't even remember what we did. We didn't bury the body. But I think it was we gathered some data or something. I mean, it was something they, you know, hungered to. I don't know what they do.

PUSCH: [00:28:41] So this was during training or?

SELBIN: [00:28:42] This was during training in Albuquerque. It was kind of the first day I reported for training, they gave me the slip of paper that said, go there. Where is it? Well you figure that out, just go there.

PUSCH: [00:28:51] And so this dead body was Albuquerque, New Mexico.

SELBIN: [00:28:54] It was not in the city of Albuquerque. It was in that community I went to.

PUSCH: [00:28:58] Ok, so it was usually a lower income area I would guess?

SELBIN: [00:29:03] Yeah, and it was kind of like, go out there and survive and do something positive for a weekend. Yeah, but they no longer on-site. When they're in-country training, I'm not sure exactly what they do because I subsequently had two other Peace Corps assignments. But once you've been a Peace Corps volunteer the first time, they don't feel that you need the full orientation the second time.

PUSCH: [00:29:31] Oh really?

SELBIN: [00:29:31] So they would just kind of give me a two-day run through with the Peace Corps staff orienting me, but I didn't have to do the full training.

PUSCH: [00:29:44] Ok, let's get back to that. Ok, so this first time you were in Albuquerque, New Mexico. You had three or four months training the whole time and then they gave you like they told you, like the name of the town where you were going to be while you were there.

SELBIN: [00:29:57] I think we got that once we were in country. We arrived in Chile, and it was, as I said, during the holiday time. And I remember they took us to a barbecue kind of event. It's very nice. And then they told us where we're going to be assigned and assigned women in pairs. And they said the social worker will take you there. And also we'll take you shopping so you can buy a bed and you can buy a few other things like that. And that happened. The social worker who I said never was fond of, she didn't tell us you could get normal beds. She took us somewhere where we got a bed where the mattresses is in like two halves. So you know, your butt's always sore and it was lousy for sleeping. For a while I thought, that's the only kind that was available. Anyway, it was very interesting.

PUSCH: [00:31:02] And then after that, you got brought to site?

SELBIN: [00:31:06] To site, yeah. And I had my, Kathy was then involved. You know, there's a lot of U.S. military training with the Chilean military, and some people thought of you, oh, Americans, Americans. So they brought us two Green Beret people to our door to meet us one day. And I was like, I'm sitting there, uh, you better go. You better go. Kathy said give me your key.

PUSCH: [00:31:35] Why did you want them to go so badly?

SELBIN: [00:31:37] Ah. Military, U.S. military, and I'm a Peace Corps volunteer? No, no, no, no. But then Kathy started seeing one of the Green Beret guys often, but not in any way that anyone would know that was happening.

And she just never got her mind into the whole Peace Corps thing, and she eventually, I think after eight months, she left.

PUSCH: [00:32:00] Were there a lot of people who left? I mean, was there anyone who after the training in Albuquerque already left or in country too?

SELBIN: [00:32:07] There were some people, yeah, that just decided they weren't going to go, from the get-go, even though the training was in the U.S., not overseas. And there were some dropouts once they were in country, but Chile's a long country. So we are not, I did not get together with other Peace Corps volunteers, except when they called us together for an event. Otherwise, I was strictly living in my community, which is one of the things I. Peace Corps now and social media. Unfortunately, I think volunteers can, unless they're very, very strict with themselves, they can spend a lot of time on social media. Families and friends come to visit now because it's more possible than way back when. And when I was in Swaziland, which was my third assignment, very small country. On weekends, I noticed volunteers would get together and socialize the weekend in Mbabane.

PUSCH: [00:33:17] But in Chile it wasn't like that?

SELBIN: [00:33:19] Oh no.

PUSCH: [00:33:19] OK, so you feel like, how did that impacted your experience there?

SELBIN: [00:33:24] Much better. I mean, I was part of that, that was my community.

PUSCH: [00:33:26] Yeah. Ok, so you integrated a little bit better.

SELBIN: [00:33:28] Oh, much better. I was sad to see that in Swaziland because they besides having social media now they're friends and they're saying, we're Americans and they met in the weekend in the capital. I don't feel that they were really depending on their community for their lives. In the early Peace Corps, you did. That was your life. You didn't have all the

other facilities or the. Send a letter home and a month later, you get a letter back.

PUSCH: [00:33:58] Yeah, and that was the only really communication. Could you call your family?

SELBIN: [00:34:02] You could call, but that would be very expensive. So, mail.

PUSCH: [00:34:10] All right. Ok, I think you've talked a lot, I mean, is there anything else about your actual experience in Chile you want to mention?

SELBIN: [00:34:18] Nah.

PUSCH: [00:34:18] Ok, so I want to ask you about kind of coming back. What did you end up doing when you came back? How do you feel like it had changed you?

SELBIN: [00:34:29] I was considering extending a third year and I said, now wait a minute. This is not the real world for me and everybody wants me to succeed here. And so they always make things work for me. It might not be exactly the way I have in mind, but it'll always work out because they like me and they want me to be successful. That was how everything worked, and I thought, that's not real. Let me go back and do what I was trained to do. Let me teach school in the United States, and I student taught in Minneapolis in a very private school. Well, first they sent me to the University High School, where I was lousy because those kids were kids of professors and that's not my group. And then they put me in an inner-city middle school in Minneapolis and that my advisor, seeing me the first time, came the second time and said, oh my god, this is you. Because, yeah. The kids, I don't know. We started doing plays, writing plays and doing plays, and I don't know. It was fun and they had fun. And I had one American Indian kid who had been absent and he was huge and he was known to be bad news. They said, you want this kid, you know, as soon as he does something, you throw them out. Well, the first time he did something, I said, well, no. Went out in the hall, and said, glad to have you in class, but there are certain behaviors. And then he, boom, the locker, you know, it sounded like a gunshot. And everybody thought I was.

PUSCH: [00:36:06] You had been shot.

SELBIN: [00:36:07] And he and I go back in the room and everybody's like, oh! And he sat down and he was fine. It was just, I don't know. I didn't ever have problems with discipline. It was kind of like, let's discuss it.

PUSCH: [00:36:24] You were teaching and then how?

SELBIN: [00:36:26] Yeah, yeah, I always would do my own discipline. A teacher who was sent their kids to the office I thought was a bad teacher.

PUSCH: [00:36:34] I mean, how would you do your own discipline, like taking him out in the hallway and talking?

SELBIN: [00:36:37] Talking to him. And, you know, like, maybe I'd get a group broken in. A new student would come in and, you know, the usual on the floor when you put the stuff in front of them. I'd already primed the kids. Ice cream on Friday, we notice nothing unless it's what we're doing as a class. And they bought into that. And so a student might maybe hold out for a week maximum two before they were part of the group. And it was just positive reinforcement. I don't believe in negative.

PUSCH: [00:37:08] So you were teacher. How long were you a teacher?

SELBIN: [00:37:11] Let's see. So there was student teaching. Then I, oh, I ran a preschool program for migrant workers' kids, it was a summer program, so in Illinois, Marengo, Illinois, and my job was to go to the field and and talk to the parents and see if I can get them to bring their little kids, that we could pick them up and take them to a preschool every day. And that was very good. It was in a church and I had to organize everything and I got teachers. I was the head mistress, I wasn't the teacher, but I got all the materials and put it all together. And then I decided, well, I'm going to go to San Francisco. San Francisco, flower child. So I went and I could only get a job as a substitute because a lot of people wanted to go to San Francisco at that time. But I can't remember how I knew. I met a school psychologist in the second assignment I had. They sent me to a school

where she was a psychologist. She was a black woman. I was her friend. Oh, this is a school full of black kids. Yes. She has some black friends so she can work with black kids.

PUSCH: [00:38:37] OK.

SELBIN: [00:38:37] Yeah, that whole thing. It was kind of funny, but I'll be your long-term sub. Fine. And then after that, they finished that year. Then I became a direct hire in San Francisco Unified School District. And that was a regular ed teacher. But somehow or another, I ended up in special ed and I became actually acting supervisor of special ed because I didn't have an administrative credential. So I was acting supervisor of special ed, mainly L.D., and I also, the kids that I picked up my, I think the first two years I was probably a teacher and the administrator for the program really liked me. So then she wanted me to be a resource teacher for the other L.D. teachers. And as soon as she got me into that, she retired. So she had.

PUSCH: [00:39:34] Let's kind of go back to Peace Corps. I just was curious about how long you were a teacher for. So you had a career in teaching?

SELBIN: [00:39:42] Yeah for eight years. And then when my kids, I picked up in middle school, moved on onto kids. I kept them all three years and then we all moved to the same high school and then they graduated. And then I was, I don't like San Francisco anymore. I'm going to go to Alaska. I was depressed and I didn't realize what was going on. So then Alaska, I was based in Nome and I was doing education, teacher training and supervision of student teachers, both non-native and native. And I did that.

PUSCH: [00:40:18] What made you go back into the Peace Corps again? Because you said then you had service in Liberia.

SELBIN: [00:40:21] Yeah.

PUSCH: [00:40:24] So you were in Alaska until '68 and then '82 you joined again. So that was fourteen years?

SELBIN: [00:40:30] Yeah. So in Alaska, you know, this program and there was a lot of. The person running the program was taking advantage of native women. And you know, and I think by the end he lost that job. And but then it was suggested that maybe I should leave that program. And so then I went to the public school districts and all the school districts because they knew everything was small. They all wanted to hire me.

PUSCH: [00:41:04] Oh, really? OK.

SELBIN: [00:41:05] Because I, the program that they didn't respect for teacher training, I had taken on. So I got my choice. And so I was in one school district for two years. But then the superintendent, the special ed director, they were all really not good. I thought, OK, I'm just going to join the Peace Corps again, and I'll come back when they're gone.

PUSCH: [00:41:29] Oh OK.

SELBIN: [00:41:31] So anyway then I went to Liberia and it was a university assignment and I was assigned to just freshman English. It was like I was back in middle school again, so that was kind of the level. And I liked it, but it was kind of like, oh, that's only three hours a day. I got a whole rest of the day. So then I looked into how they did teacher training, and they didn't teach him about lesson plans about planning. Can I volunteer in your teacher training program? So then I did that, and I have some parties and the American ambassador came to my parties and he said to me, Susan, you should join the Foreign Service.

SELBIN: [00:42:17] I said, well, I'm 40 and you know, I don't want to be a junior officer. He said, no, there's a program for mid-level. Just apply. So I applied and I got a letter back that said, you know, you've been teaching all your life, just keep teaching. And then one day he saw me and said, so how'd it go? And I said, they said thanks, but no thanks. He said, give me the letter. Then I got a new letter. Report to Washington for the Foreign Service.

PUSCH: [00:42:41] Oh, wow.

SELBIN: [00:42:42] When a career ambassador says you should take this person, they take the person. And then so I do my training. And he somehow now.

PUSCH: [00:42:52] You were under university assignment in Liberia. How long were you? You were there the whole two years, right? Or you were?

SELBIN: [00:42:59] Yeah. I did the whole two years.

PUSCH: [00:43:02] And after that then you applied for Foreign Service.

SELBIN: [00:43:06] Yeah, I think it was one of those parties. The I'm, you know, I'm leaving soon parties. And then the ambassador made the suggestion and got me assigned to the Foreign Service. And so I did that for twenty years.

PUSCH: [00:43:20] Oh, wow.

SELBIN: [00:43:20] I retired as Foreign Service officer. I get a pension as a Foreign Service officer. And they counted my Peace Corps years for federal assignment and computing my pension. So all that is good. So that Social Security and I'm a happy camper.

PUSCH: [00:43:35] Yeah, yeah. I would love to know more about Foreign Service, but I mean, I guess just briefly, because this is supposed to be about Peace Corps, right? But how did your experience in the Peace Corps kind of help you in the Foreign Service? And where all did you go, just very briefly, where did you go in Foreign Service?

SELBIN: [00:43:52] Let's see. I'm trying to figure out. Well, this is why the ambassador suggested I could join because I was so much into the community and dealing with locals and socializing with locals. I thought, you know, that's what we want in Foreign Service. We don't want the officers who are apart. So that's, my Peace Corps experience definitely. I wouldn't have been in the Foreign Service without it. And then I went again. I did teaching in San Francisco in 2003. When I retired from the Foreign Service, I moved to Albuquerque, and then in 2009-'10, I decided, well, I wanted to go to Peace Corps again, so that's how I ended up in Swaziland.

PUSCH: [00:44:46] Ok, what made you want to join the Peace Corps again? Had you already retired?

SELBIN: [00:44:50] I was retired, so I was, I was doing. State Department would call me to cover it for absences or fill in, so I was still going overseas at the government's expense, making a salary on a job I liked and then going traveling after that. But then, why did I go in 2009-'10? I guess just decided I going to do it again. And Peace Corps is a nice way to do something, and you have the backup, the support, but then you, you live on the economy. And so I was assigned to teacher training in Swaziland. I was in a small community outside of the center. And there again, you know, certain cultural expectations. The director for my region had a vehicle and I was supposed to have him take me places in the vehicle. Well, maybe he could take me places twice a week and say, hey, I'm here to work, not to sit around. So I started taking local busses again and then getting off at the closest spot to to a school. And then I walked to school. I'd show up and they'd say, oh! And then the people in the central office said, well, you can't have workshops with teachers if we don't provide food. I said teachers want workshops, they will bring the food, you know? And so it's just nonsense. So I was just wandering around different places in Swaziland, mainly places I can do by bus or close to. And I was doing workshops.

PUSCH: [00:46:36] Ok, so now your main work there was doing workshops?

SELBIN: [00:46:39] I was teacher training. So that's what I did. I would show up and I was talking about a particular technique that I used. It was designed for kids who were going to have learning problems, maybe. But Slingerland method, multisensory. Yes. See it, say it, do it. And it worked really well. And teachers really liked it because their classrooms had all kids with all kinds of levels of skills, abilities, disabilities. And this kind of got everyone involved, even kids who maybe really couldn't properly hold a pencil because that's the part of their disabilities. But yeah, they liked it, and they would provide the food for the workshop. And so I just began doing that and Peace Corps was fine with it, they knew what I was doing. They just said, you know, you're in Swaziland, don't go into South Africa, you know,

stuff like this, without permission. You have to get permission from South Africa from them.

PUSCH: [00:47:48] Oh, okay.

SELBIN: [00:47:54] So they were very supportive and they just wanted me to tell them what I was doing because very seldom did they ever come out. On any of my Peace Corps assignments, very seldom did Peace Corps staff actually come to site to see what I was doing. Or if they did, they kind of were more seeing how or where I was living, how I was living, and I would say, let's go, let me show you this project. And there was never time. They were usually busy just hitting a lot of sites.

PUSCH: [00:48:26] So I mean, your main assignment there was just teaching the trainers, right? Teacher training?

SELBIN: [00:48:33] Teacher training.

PUSCH: [00:48:34] OK. All right. And then you said you hardly had, I mean, you didn't really have training in-country in Swaziland or Liberia, right? Because you had done Peace Corps before.

SELBIN: [00:48:45] Correct. It was just a two day kind of orientation with Peace Corps staff in the country to tell me about basic things.

PUSCH: [00:48:52] And you're not, you weren't Response? You were a true Peace Corps volunteer.

SELBIN: [00:48:57] Let's see. Swaziland might have been, what's it called, Peace Corps Response, but it still was expected to be a long assignment.

PUSCH: [00:49:05] So it was supposed to be two years?

SELBIN: [00:49:07] They all were long assignments. Um. I think what they think, once you've been a Peace Corps volunteer, you know the routine, we'll just need to orient you to the country and to the norms. And you do your usual, introduce yourself to the mayor, the police, all those things.

PUSCH: [00:49:26] Is there anything that sticks out for you from any of your, like from the countries you went to? Like if you were to describe Chile, how would you just describe it, Liberia, Swaziland? The country and then the people there?

SELBIN: [00:49:41] Yeah. Well, in all the places in the people were receptive. You know, they loved having whatever help you had to offer, especially if it was, for them, was free.

PUSCH: [00:49:53] Ok, yeah, right.

SELBIN: [00:49:55] So I'd say the less welcoming. My colleagues might have been at the university level in Liberia because there I was assigned and I didn't work up through their system. I was just assigned so that the department head, for example, he didn't have any choice about selecting me or putting me in. So in that system, it was a little more hierarchical and, you know, but um.

PUSCH: [00:50:29] But what about the country itself or the country? I mean, I've never I've never been to any of these three countries. I mean, for someone who's never been to these countries, how would you describe them?

SELBIN: [00:50:38] Well, with Chile, like, I mean, yeah, here's this young 22 year old cute little thing until they fatten me up. Then I wasn't so little. But they just all wanted me to have a wonderful time and appreciate their country and help me in any way possible. And they did. And then my second in Liberia, that was a whole different thing. I was assigned to a university, a whole different way of doing things. And they thought I was maybe a little bit too much of an eager beaver to want to. I was in theory being paid for three courses and one student counseling session. And there I was willing to do a couple more sessions. It was kind of, it probably was not the norm, you know, I was giving away, but I was free. But they were OK. And there was one other American woman whose husband was working and she was teaching.

PUSCH: [00:51:43] And so, yeah, were there any other volunteers in Liberia?

SELBIN: [00:51:46] So each time I went, except for being assigned with Kathy the first time, I was the only one and I was so glad I didn't get assigned, you know, now they go out in groups. They might be assigned to a group and they live in a school housing and they're still together, possibly in education. I don't know why I'm thinking. So I definitely liked being a volunteer on my own. And for me, it worked out better to be where no volunteer had gone before. There were no expectations.

PUSCH: [00:52:16] Was that always the case, Chile, Liberia, and Swaziland?

SELBIN: [00:52:20] Yes, it was. Hadn't had a Peace Corps volunteer before, and so.

PUSCH: [00:52:25] Oh no, go ahead, continue.

SELBIN: [00:52:27] Yeah. So that that was good because I didn't have to live up to someone else's expectations. And likewise, I don't know how they felt, people who might have gone in after I was there, but I don't think there was another Peace Corps volunteer in my community in Chile, for sure.

PUSCH: [00:52:46] And then how would you describe Swaziland? I mean, what was it like?

SELBIN: [00:52:50] Swaziland is also a very delightful country, but country with the highest rate of HIV Aids in the world. And I found that lifestyle tended to be promiscuous.

PUSCH: [00:53:10] Really, more so than in the other countries you went to?

SELBIN: [00:53:12] Yeah. Well, I think at the time. That changed so much, you know, from the mores when I was in the mid-sixties to being 2009-'10, where the internet's there and there's all these things available. And it was a country that had the highest rate of HIV, and I found the way some interaction was with male and females, it seemed people weren't taking it seriously.

PUSCH: [00:53:45] What do you mean by that?

SELBIN: [00:53:46] There was just a lot of attempts of seduction and stuff, you know, without.

PUSCH: [00:53:54] Yeah, OK. So I mean, you kind of said people were somewhat promiscuous you thought.

SELBIN: [00:53:58] It seemed to me and that in this case, I hope I don't want to offend the culture. It wasn't just that, but the whole issue of a kingdom was most interesting because the previous king, when he passed away, his son was now king and he had his lifestyle. Somehow, the purse strings are controlled from outside of the country. They're such a small country that certain things are handled, there's a group in Switzerland or some other country. I've forgotten the details, but say he wanted a personal jet. And they said, no, your country can't afford it. And it's a very small country. You don't need a personal jet. And then his father had had a wife in most villages, but they stayed in the villages and they lived there. But the son already had four wives, and he'd built four huge identical compounds, and he wanted to continue to have more wives. And they said, no, you can't fund that.

SELBIN: [00:55:13] Yeah. So it was very interesting. But I think education level, this is quite good. You know, visiting with schools and teachers. They did not have any system for substitutes. So if a teacher wasn't there, the teacher wasn't there, the kids would show up. And I remember particularly once going to a school, going to this room. It was like a kind of a stepped room and there were a bunch of little kids there, like first graders, you know, and I walked in. Good morning students! Good morning teacher. I thought, what are we going to do? Gee, this is a big group of students. How many are you? They kind of, well, do you know how to count by twos? OK, let's count off and they'd go round and count by twos. And we got up to 50 and there was one more. Oh, students 50 and one more. How many are there?

PUSCH: [00:56:20] How old are they?

SELBIN: [00:56:22] They were like first graders or so. And so we went into OK, 50 and one, 50 plus one. You don't know this thing, but they really weren't used to doing 50 plus one. And we finally got there. 51, yes! And by that time, I think it was getting close to the end of the day. But I went to the administration and they said there's no substitute. If the teacher's not here the kids will just stay until it's time you go home. And but they had, their teachers had a good number of, they're not unskilled, they have some skills. And I thought that they had a lot of prospects. And McMillan Swaziland was the provider of all books. And you know that providing books for a school system is very lucrative. And I was teaching teachers how to teach using any books, and you don't have to buy new books, the teaching method was. So I was trying to put together some materials for teachers, and the special ed program was interested until McMillan Swaziland, I think, was the reason why all the positive suddenly turned to, oh well, no. And what I should have done in retrospect, I should have approached McMillan Swaziland with some ideas to see if they would be willing to publish it because I was going to kind of put things through a cheap publishing system or something.

PUSCH: [00:58:10] And then it was big business.

SELBIN: [00:58:12] Yeah, so it was my not understanding the situation until it worked against me because I didn't approach it correctly. But otherwise. And the special director was very supportive. But when that kind of happened, she kind of said, well, she couldn't get around that.

PUSCH: [00:58:40] All right. I mean, is there anything else you want to share about your time in any of these three countries?

SELBIN: [00:58:48] In all three it was, I thought it was fun and the interaction and I didn't find any people trying to undermine me really. Found them supportive. There was the one guy and the political differences who wanted to be the chair of the community government group. And nobody wanted him and he didn't get it. So then he was mad. But that was pretty much.

PUSCH: [00:59:21] And what did he do?

SELBIN: [00:59:23] He didn't really do anything. He just didn't support.

PUSCH: [00:59:28] And then, I mean, how do you think Peace Corps has changed your life?

SELBIN: [00:59:31] My life?

PUSCH: [00:59:32] Yes. What impact has it had on you?

SELBIN: [00:59:38] Um, hmm. I volunteer for all sorts of stuff, you know, continue volunteering. And I do film festivals. I loved showing films in the Peace Corps. And you know, people are so responsive to films. So my first film festival was It's All About Water in 2012. And with, of course, it's not just films, it's speakers and influential people to try to educate the public about this is the problem you've seen, now how can you address it? You know, how in your personal life might you change? And then we had one April, this past April, and that's about fracking. Climate disruption. And then they have one coming up in September 6-7. Also climate disruption.

PUSCH: [01:00:28] How do you show these films?

SELBIN: [01:00:31] I buy them. And then.

PUSCH: [01:00:34] But do you show, are you involved in a. This is kind of off topic. But I mean, do you, I mean, do you show them with some kind of organization? Are there big groups of people?

SELBIN: [01:00:46] I get. No one organization is organizing it. I'm organizing it and then they may support it. Like the two, the last one in April, I did. The city donated the location, so no charge for that site. And then, you know, I made contracts for food and some other stuff. And when it came down to it, NGOs, environmental groups, they all pitched in enough money to pay for the food and whatever was involved. This next one, then, is going to be about sixteen hundred dollars because I wanted a place with classrooms so we could have breakout sessions. Because one of the things last time

we talked about, and we never had an ability to do it, is to get climate change into the school curriculum. So we're going to have breakout sessions. That's one issue. The other one is sportsmen and how they're involved in protecting the environment, because one of our senators is a well-known hunter but he's also a conservationist. And so we've got two of our breakout sessions lined up already, and I've got four venues lined up, so we'll focus on a couple more.

PUSCH: [01:02:15] All right. So I think, all right. So you just kind of individually still stay active in the community and still have your same interests that you had way back in the day, right?

SELBIN: [01:02:24] Yeah. And because of Peace Corps and being successful just going out and doing it, I carry that with me now. I get an idea. I can do it. I did it in Peace Corps. I can do it here.

PUSCH: [01:02:36] And then any advice you would have or anything you would want to share with anyone thinking about joining the Peace Corps or with an interest in Peace Corps, just learning more about it?

SELBIN: [01:02:48] I would encourage them to do so. And now that you're training is in country, that should let them know if they're going to be up to that culture. And the language and serving. So I think that's a great improvement that communities in country. I would say go for it. I think your older volunteers end up being more productive. Couples do very well also because they have that internal support. So but I mean, it's just a matter of maturity now. I was, when I felt I was very successful, I was 22, 23, so I think it's just a matter of how you approach it.

PUSCH: [01:03:33] But how do you say, I mean, you said, you know, couples do well because of that internal support? What about older volunteers? Why do they do better?

SELBIN: [01:03:40] They have the world experience. They have more things that have worked that they can offer. You know, more grounded suggestions, but sometimes not grounded suggestions are great. Like, let's have summer camp.

PUSCH: [01:03:56] Well, you made it work. OK. I don't know. I guess we can end it on that note. Is there anything, anything else?

SELBIN: [01:04:05] Just I'm looking for my next assignment, Peace Corps. Oh, I don't want a two year, I want a shorter.

PUSCH: [01:04:10] OK, Peace Corps Response.

SELBIN: [01:04:13] Yeah, Response.

PUSCH: [01:04:13] All right. Yeah, so thank you very much. So three. Oh man, I wanted to end this really quickly, but so you've already served in three countries and looking for a fourth, right?

SELBIN: [01:04:24] That's correct.

PUSCH: [01:04:25] All right. Thank you.

[END OF INTERVIEW]