

Davida Coady

Vaniser: This is an interview with Davida Coady on July 11, 2008 at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in Atlanta, Georgia about her role in the Smallpox Eradication Project. The interviewer is Chris Vaniser.

With this interview we are helping to capture for future generations the memories of participants and their families involved in eradicating smallpox. This is an incredibly important and historic achievement and we want to hear about your experience. I have some questions to guide you, but please feel free to recount any special stories or anecdotes that you remember about events or people. The legal agreement you signed says that you are donating the oral history to the U.S. Federal Government and it will be in the public domain. For the record, could you please state your full name and that you know you are being recorded.

Coady: Davida Coady, and yes I realize I am being recorded.

Vaniser: Thank you again for coming and sharing your memories about the Smallpox Eradication Project or Program. I guess to start, if you could talk a little bit about your early days before going on to college and if you knew what you wanted to do with your life, or what you wanted to be when you grew up; and share a little bit of that information with us.

Coady: I grew up in Berkeley, California in a family, none of whom had graduated from High School previously. I was fortunate enough though to be living in Berkeley, it had some good role models and decided that I wanted to do something worthwhile with my life. I met two women doctors, pediatricians, running a camp for diabetic children and I decided that I would try to go to medical school and I did so. I read about Dr. Tom Dooley and his work in Southeast Asia, and I decided I wanted to spend part of my life in the Third World and went to medical school with that idea.

Vaniser: Were you thinking of being more of a clinician?

Coady: I was thinking more about being a clinician. I went to Columbia Medical School and of the acceptances I got, I chose that school because they had an elected [inaudible 0:02:49] in Liberia in the fourth year, and I went there and I made a decision that I would definitely go into pediatrics. I also realized that I really loved working in a third world country. I think up until that point I had kind of a moderate complex. I thought I was going to die young of malaria or something, but it hadn't occurred to me really that I would enjoy being in the third world and working in places where you could be innovative and where people really needed you, where the young people; people who were being trained as nurses would be so eager to learn, and any time that you would spend with them, they would pick your brain about everything you knew, and I saw lots of people getting well. I also became aware of the need for Public Health. So during my Pediatric Internship and Residency at UCLA I found time to go to Mexico and then to Guatemala where I met Dr. Thomas Weller from the Harvard School of Public Health and I talked to him about career development and he persuaded me that I needed an MPH if I really wanted to work in Prevention which I certainly did by that point. So I went to the Harvard School of Public Health and then jumped into Third World work from there.

Vaniser: So where did you go then after Harvard?

Coady: I went first to Nigeria, only I was in the part that was then called Biafra. I was there obviously during the Nigerian civil war. I worked with a small relief agency run by Normal Cousins inside of Biafra and got out the night that the country collapsed. I was sent back to Nigeria on a Government assignment shortly thereafter as part of the relief efforts for what had been the former Biafran enclave and it was there I got really acquainted with Bill Foege and Stan Foster and people who became my heroes, my mentors, my gurus; and I became so interested in smallpox campaign. I then went to work at the Peace Corps, first as their Acting Medical Director and then as a Health Programmer and it was during that time that I met D.A. Henderson and he became one of my big heroes in life and I was involved in the Peace Corps involvement in smallpox at that point. Then later on I left the Peace Corps, I went to UCLA to teach and I went to Bangladesh after their revolution and was working there when I ran into Dr. Henderson in the airport in Dhaka. Actually he was getting off a plane and I was getting on a plane. He said "Hey Bill Foege is in India and he is looking for people to work on

smallpox on three-month assignments;" and I said "Oh wow, I am interested!" and the next day I got a telegram from Bill Foege asking me to come to Delhi and talk about it which I did and -

Vaniser: Where were you based with at the time? You were with the Peace Corps at that time?

Coady: No, I was still -- I had gone to UCLA at that point to be an academic, but I am not an academic, I don't like it. I like teaching, but I didn't like the rest of it, and by that time I was a part time academic, but mainly working on my own. For years then I taught one or two Quarters a year at UCLA and did international work the rest of the time.

Vaniser: So you got this telegram from Bill Foege asking you to come and talk to him in Delhi?

Coady: In Delhi--and I was actually on my way home and I did; and I arranged to go back a few weeks later. I was getting married at that point and my husband -- I thought it would be much easier to work out in the Boonies in India with a partner, and he was interested and we went back to India; Bill sent us to Gorakhpur. So I was the first woman field epidemiologist and there were a number who followed me. They were watching me very closely and --you know, it was a real highlight of my life, it was just such a wonderful thing to be part of. I've been part of lots of different Public Health initiatives of one kind or another, but this was something that was so clear that you could see the results. So we put a 1000 miles a week on our Land Rover, a lot of it on dirt roads going around to the villages in India and many villages there, in those Northern districts of the Uttar Pradesh, they had never seen a white woman. In fact they had really never had any women visitors and all kind of rumors would go around the villages about who I was. The one I liked best was that occasionally the rumor would go round that I was Indira Gandhi and so I -- that was kind of fun; and I would tell them that I was not, but I --

Vaniser: How long did you go over for? What was your -- ?

Coady: I think we were there for a three month assignment and then we were extended for several months after that and then we went back to Los Angeles for a couple of months, and then went back for a second assignment, and the second assignment was in West Bengal. I had asked particularly to go to Calcutta, I love Calcutta, and so we were based in Calcutta in charge of the four

districts to the North and the East, East --- No I am sorry, it was actually the North and the West of Calcutta and then when Calcutta --- when West Bengal was free of smallpox we were transferred to Bangladesh.

Vaniser: Going back to Gorakhpur again, which was your first assignment in India and your first smallpox assignment, can you tell me a little bit about your team that you worked with?

Coady: We had an Indian doctor, Dr. Rao[inaudible name0:10:14], who was from South India who worked with us, and he kind of took two of the districts and I took two of the districts. We had a wonderful paramedical assistant and a driver who we became very close to; and we went touring around the countryside. I think one of the things that I did was I realized that the people working on it in the villages, the doctors, the health workers; they had no idea when I got there that this was part of an international effort. So I managed to get a map of the State of Uttar Pradesh, and another map of India, and another map of the world. These were not easy to come by in Gorakhpur, but I got them. Now we would take them around to the districts and we'd go through and I'd show them what they were part of, and hundreds of people would gather around and listen to this and they would get so excited and then when I'd go back weeks later or months later, they'd say what is happening now in Ethiopia. Are we going to beat Bihar, are we going to beat Bangladesh or are we going to beat Ethiopia in eradicating smallpox; and they'd get so excited and the quality of work would improve tremendously.

Vaniser: How were you received as a Caucasian woman working in that area of India, which I am sure that most of the physicians you were dealing with, I assume, were male?

Coady: Right.

Vaniser: At least most of the other people.

Coady: I think fairly well-very well in fact. I think in India there were no problems really. You know, I dressed appropriately and all, and got my legs covered and all those things, and in Bangladesh it was a little harder. If I went somewhere without my husband, people would say well bring your husband next time, and they didn't my traveling without him, and we'd often split up and did different parts of the work. But in India there was none of that. There was a village character in one of the villages who wrote a song about me and evidently the chorus --- he

was a man suffering from tertiary syphilis and was quite crazy --the chorus was translated to me saying: "Dr. and Mrs. Coady is a wonderful doctor, she's the best doctor in the whole world because she carries herself like a doctor and she acts like a doctor." So I thought that was very, very nice.

Vaniser: Very nice--Yeah respectful. Did you have any special challenges or events that happened when you were in that Northern part of India that kind of stand out as very memorable events during the smallpox?

Coady: Just that it was terribly, terribly hot. We were there in the pre-monsoon season and I don't remember anything really frightening. Our driver and medical assistant, and many other people were very kind of cautious when we first got there and they -- the person before us had made an error in trying to vaccinate a woman -- this is a male epidemiologist -- without her permission and the villagers had come very close to throwing him down the well. So they told me, they lectured me, but after about a week they said, "It is fine. We know you are not going to cause any problems like that." But that always made me just a little bit wary.

One thing we noticed was a -- my having worked in Africa before where people loved to get immunizations and loved to get vaccinated; was that the Indians, they wanted some conversation before they were vaccinated. They wanted an explanation and their views of the goddess and her role in all this varied really from village to village, and sometimes -- in one village they wanted us to come back next Tuesday because that's what the goddess wanted us to do instead of vaccinating people then. I think we finally agreed to do that, it was just easier, but many times they would say, "No, the goddess doesn't want us vaccinated;" and we'd sit down and go through all the explanations and just at the point when we were convinced they were never going to let us vaccinate anyone, they'd say, okay now we understand that it's a disease and it's not a goddess and please vaccinate us." I remember one elderly man, he said, "No, I don't want to be vaccinated because I'm getting ready to go to God;" and my husband looked him right in the eye and said, "I really think God would like you better vaccinated;" and I was just thinking "Oh my!" And the man said "Oh, alright fine," and he said, "Please, please vaccinate me." So a lot of it was just listening and realizing that nothing worked fast in India.

Vaniser: Now did you speak Hindi or did you have a translator with

you?

Coady: We had a translator. Our paramedical assistant was our translator. I learnt a little bit of Hindi and just enough to get around, just a little to ask where ask directions and where people were, and of course the word for smallpox was Bashanto[0:16:56] which is also the word for springtime; and I relied a little bit less on my Hindi after one of our fellow epidemiologists, a man from France whose name I forget; he got very good at Hindi, but he spent a long time, he had a sprained ankle at the time, walking to a village looking for --- he'd asked if there was any Bashanto and everybody said: yes, yes. "Where is the person with smallpox?" And after he walked a long, long distance he finally found this man out on the field. It turned out that the man's name was Bashanto. So I was [crosstalk0:17:57]

Vaniser: A little bit more [crosstalk 0:17:56] after that about your Hindi. Was your husband a physician as well, or in the health field?

Coady: No, my husband at that time was not, he was not a ---

Vaniser: But he was --- he sounds like part of the team?

Coady: Yeah, he helped.

Vaniser: In terms of going out and-

Coady: He liked to write and he was collecting information and stories.

Vaniser: Interesting. So then it sounds like soon after that you went to Calcutta? Was that the same trip?

Coady: Right, we came back to the United States for a couple of months and then we went back and went to Calcutta.

Vaniser: How did that differ from Gorakhpur?

Coady: Well, we were in the city and Bengal was much more sophisticated, and there was much less smallpox. I saw hundreds and hundreds of cases of smallpox in Uttar Pradesh and many, many ...[inaudible0:18:58]. We were doing the last of it and the reward was being offered by that time and the amount of the reward was going up, and we went around to different groups

asking them to help us. One of the interesting things was, we went to see Mother Teresa to see if she would have her nuns help us in looking for and reporting any smallpox; and Mother Teresa like she always did --- I went back and worked for her later actually --- she turned it around on us and she got us to agree to bring our staff on our day off and vaccinate everybody in her feeding lines; and our driver and our paramedical assistant were just so thrilled to meet her and to be part of that, they took their day off too, and we did that, so that was kind of fun.

Vaniser: Did she also agree to have her nuns help with identifying any cases and reporting them?

Coady: Yes, yes they did. I can remember that they did. But then in those times we spent a lot of our time with people coming to us, being brought to us with everything from scabies to chicken pox to hives, with people trying to tell us it was smallpox and they wanted the reward. So I spent an awful lot of my time saying no that was not smallpox; and it was interesting, one man particularly who came to us; and I still have his little advertisement. He was an Ayurvedic Doctor of some kind and he had a little advertisement which I have still, with a picture that he'd drawn of somebody with smallpox and he introduced himself as a specialist in smallpox from a part of our district, North of Calcutta, and he had a man whose scabs were just falling off, or just forming I guess; and we said, "Why didn't you bring him sooner," and he said, "Because he just ran out of money," and we said, "Well, explain this." He said, "You see I charge people when they come with the fever, I charge them and they pay, I have a medicine to make the rash break out, I have a medicine to make the macules..." --- He knew the terms --- "...the macules form into papules, and the papules form into pustules, and then for the scabs to form, and then for the scabs to fall off and for the scars to go away. They come back and I sell them each of these medicines. But he has run out of money, so I came to get the reward." Then we talked with him further and he was able to tell us every case of smallpox, maybe then 25, 30 cases in that district, in that outbreak over the past two or three months, and he was able to tell us everyone of them and who got it from who and it corresponded exactly to the reports that we had gotten from the health workers. So he knew the whole thing.

Vaniser: But of course, he didn't have the vaccine. He was missing that part he had medicine to make ---

Coady: He had no interest in the vaccine.

Vaniser: That's right; it destroyed his business I guess. **Coady:**

Right.

Vaniser: How did you find the conditions?

Coady: They were difficult. Gorakhpur: it was hard to eat; we ate at the hotel where we stayed which was --- and then later we found a Chinese restaurant, but we didn't find that for about a month, and we ate at the hotel and everything was so terribly, terribly hot. I am used to hot food, but this was really, really hot. So we would just try things. Of course, we couldn't read the menu so we would point to things on other people's plates and they would get those for us, and it was challenging, but we were young. Life was easier in Calcutta, there was indoor plumbing and---

Vaniser: When you traveled up in Gorakhpur, were you out overnight sometimes in the neighboring districts?

Coady: No, we were always able to get back when we were in Gorakhpur. In Calcutta we did, we had these four districts; we'd stay in the districts, we found places to stay. In Gorakhpur we never--- [crosstalk0:24:17].

Vaniser: It was always maybe a long day trip, but you would always get back. How about any problems with getting safe food, safe water?

Coady: We would find that we'd buy bottled water and Coca Cola, and I think there was one time when we bought some cokes and it was adulterated and we all got very sick.

Vaniser: Any other events that stand out from your time in India? Now you came back to the States before going back to Calcutta and then [crosstalk0:25:01] from Bangladesh also?

Coady: Then we went directly from Calcutta to Bangladesh. I know it was before Christmas because we spent Christmas in Bangladesh.

Chris **Vaniser:** Then, how was that in comparison to India?

Coady: It was very different. In Bangladesh they didn't have the structure. In India they had the structure, these Health Centers

and there was always somebody who was in charge that you could work with and some of them were wonderful and some of them were not at all interested; but at least there was a structure. In Bangladesh we were in the North in Saidpur, which is a larger Bihari City and which was good because they spoke Urdu which I could understand; I never really got hold of the Bengali language at all, and the Urdu I could understand from the Hindi that I knew. There was no structure, we just had to do the work and hire the vaccinators and find the epidemics and it was much harder and you had the feeling that you weren't teaching that much. You were just trying to get the cases and get the work done.

Vaniser: When you say you had to do the work, it was actually you and your team that was more -- not the Bengalis that were there as counterparts?

Davida Coady: Right. We didn't really have counterparts, we had vaccinators that we trained and hired to work for us.

Vaniser: What year was that, when you were in Bangladesh?

Coady: That would have been '75; in late December '74 and then into '75.

Vaniser: So I guess -- it sounds like you also had just an incredible time as part of the Smallpox Program and you had brought to it a lot of experience, international experience, specially from Africa and other places, Guatemala and other international locations that you had worked in. How did the smallpox experience affect your future career and your involvement in Public Health?

Coady: I became very, very convinced that the idea of eradicating infectious diseases was very doable and feasible and helpful and everything right about it; and I have been very disappointed that other diseases have not been eradicated. I thought surely the lessons would be learned. We had this wonderful seminar this morning that I thought surely guinea worm and polio and measles and some of the others would be gone by now with the lessons we learned, and I think people made such valiant efforts to promote the principles. Dr. Henderson and Dr. Foege, Dr. Foster; and all of them; they had such a wonderful plan to really use all these principles to eradicate other diseases and it's been very disappointing that there wasn't the political will and the finances -- the political will to do it.

Vaniser: [cosstalk0:29:05] the difference perhaps?

Coady: Yeah; and I think the idea that an international effort like that could work, has kept me going through some hard times and some of the battles I fought are harder than that and you have more foes, there weren't too many people against smallpox eradication. There were a few people who made money off smallpox. I remember one very overweight politician in India railing at me one day, when we drove up with the smallpox vaccines --- with the smallpox van; and he said then: Why don't we foreigners and smallpox people go home and let our people die of smallpox before they starve to death from overpopulation; and this man was fat and he was eating a plate of food, and he was one of the few people I ever met that said: eradication of smallpox is not a good thing to do. It just seemed so clear; one of the battles that I fight today in my hometown in Berkeley, is we are fighting the tobacco industry very hard and the pharmaceutical industry and the illegal drug industry; and I work in the addiction field now and you have these giants, the Alcoholic Beverage Industry and the Tobacco Industry, and all the rest, are such hard foes that I look longingly at the time when I was fighting smallpox which didn't have those big interests against you.

Vaniser: [crosstalk 0:31:01] with lots of money to ---

Coady: But it has given me --- I had training in epidemiology, but the smallpox work gave me the field experience to see what epidemiology could really do, and it of course greatly influenced my teaching at UCLA --- but really the way I look at everything. I am in the addiction field now because I looked around my own community with the tools I learned as an epidemiologist and said: The biggest cause of homelessness and crime and misery and violence and child abuse in my community is the substance abuse, which is not being treated. So that's why I made that decision.

Vaniser: That's a pretty big decision to have ended up --- it sounds like you had spent time in international health and trained as a pediatrician. Correct?

Coady: Right.

Vaniser: And now you are working in smoking and addiction control because of lessons learned through the smallpox eradication.

Coady: Right.

Vaniser: Well, thank you very much again for sharing your stories. This sounds like it must have just been --- again an incredible experience.

Coady: It was a peak experience; it is something that I just wouldn't trade for anything. I am just so happy I was part of that.

Vaniser: And it sounds like you made quite a few friends along the way that are legends in their own right in the area of Public Health and---

Coady: I did.

Vaniser: Not just smallpox, but Public Health in general.

David Coady: Right; and I just loved India and Bangladesh, but particularly India. I loved working there. I loved the people. I love to look now at pictures of Indians and see that nobody under 30 has got smallpox scars. That just chokes me up.

Vaniser: There's nothing else that you can really say that of-that has been so eradicated and know that you had a part in all of that. It was just a huge accomplishment. Thank you again.

Coady: Thank you.