

The Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training  
Foreign Affairs Oral History Program  
Foreign Service Spouse Series

**MARLEN E. NEUMANN**

*Interviewed by: Jewell Fenzi*  
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## INTERVIEW

*Q: This is Jewell Fenzi on July 6, 1990. I am interviewing Marlen Neumann at my home, a second interview with Mrs. Neumann to discuss spouse issues. Her first interview, with Penne Laingen several years ago, dealt primarily with her activities as spouse of the Ambassador to Afghanistan.*

*Let's amplify that. You had organized the Embassy wives' activities already [before 1972]?*

NEUMANN: Yes indeed. So for me the 1972 directive wasn't so terribly difficult. I had already organized the wives of the senior people in each Section: that is, the wives of the heads of departments even though they might not be senior in age. I already had a Wives' Advisory Council comprising them and somebody representing all the contract teams and someone representing the few private Americans (those who taught at two schools and one or two business people in Kabul). I continued that, but of course after the '72

directive we couldn't continue it with one senior wife representing each Section of the Embassy because there were no longer "senior wives." So the wives in each Section had to decide which among them would be on the Wives' Advisory Council. And, in Kabul we managed to carry on in that way. Do you want me to do Kabul and Morocco, or just Kabul?

*Q: For the moment, just how you organized Kabul, because that's where two of our interviews are full of praise for the way you organized the women in the Mission to keep up morale, even though it was post-1972.*

NEUMANN: Well, to me the Directive indicated that you were free to do what you wanted to do, and what I found was that the women who didn't want to do anything beforehand went on not doing anything afterwards, and the women who were interested beforehand went on being interested afterwards. I gave them, perhaps, a focus, and I took seriously my position as the honorary president of the American Women's Association. And I tried to enlarge that to include English-speaking Afghan women.

*Q: I find this very interesting. I thought you had come to Kabul. You had been in Kabul since 1966; you had this all set up under the pre-'72 "regime." And then you of course kept right on because everything was on track.*

NEUMANN: That's right.

*Q: So perhaps the most interesting thing is that when you went to Morocco, did you do the same thing?*

NEUMANN: When I went to Morocco there was a difference. As I said in the previous transcript, I had expected the Moroccan Moslem women to be like the Afghan Moslem women. I found that they were completely different. I had not, truly, expected that the American Embassy there would be different but I had been, shall we say, warned that whereas Afghanistan was an isolated country, Morocco was just close enough to Europe that Americans at the Embassy did not have to undergo elaborate proceedings to take trips. There were good restaurants and hotels throughout the country, people could easily go off to Paris for a weekend by air or they could drive up to Tangier and take the ferry across to Spain. And Morocco was a more open culture so they could find outlets. Therefore I was warned "don't organize the women when you get to Morocco."

*Q: How did you approach this?*

NEUMANN: Well, I approached it by not organizing the women, and also by being open to having calls made on me. I have tried different methods of calls through the years. At first it was always one woman calling alone, then I would take groups of women. In Morocco we tried to have newcomers call on us, husband and wife together, or husband and wife and children if they came together. And we'd have a lunch with them. We tried, also, mixing people -- to have a new Marine and a new secretary from AID and a new

spouse from the Political Section, so that they began to have cross-channels of communication. Otherwise people tend to get sort of stuck in their own little section. Sometimes we'd have cocktail parties. From year to year we'd change the pattern.

That was one way of finding out what the new people were interested in doing. I did talk to them and let them know that I would be of help in anything they wanted. And of course I've always found that an Ambassador's wife is a good two-way communications point. If she begins to know the country at all, she knows who are gardening experts to contact to get involved in the garden club, you know; and if someone comes in and plays bridge, the Ambassador's wife can tell her whom to contact for going on with special bridge games, and so forth.

Well, I hadn't been in Morocco very long before some of the women who'd already been at post came to me and said, "We want something to do." There I had an outlet. We discussed "What shall we do?" They wanted a book review group, so we started a book review group. Each person took a book to review. But that somehow didn't satisfy -- whether it didn't satisfy me or them, I really don't know at this point. Then I hit on the idea which had been sort of at the back of my mind for a long time that grew out of my League of Women Voters experience. Why didn't we try a "know your Embassy," as when the League starts in a new town the first thing the women do before they have a full-fledged League is "know your town" study.

So we did a "know your Embassy" study. An AID wife in our group would take the project of finding out what the Peace Corps did, and a Peace Corps wife would set about finding what goes on in a Political Section. We had a fascinating time finding out -- and we also found out what our own husbands did to a large extent! And we thought it would be very helpful if we could get the League of Women Voters in the United States to have an international branch. All the women of course came from different U.S. cities and states, so we couldn't have a city study. We could have a Rabat study. We couldn't have had a state study, but the women could pick up whatever state study the League was doing on in their home state, and we could all be involved in the international study looking at it from an outside viewpoint.

I did try to get the national League interested. They agreed that it was an interesting idea, but they saw it also as a costly affair. We would have had to pay \$36 a year for the League materials, and also it would have depended on my being there and I left soon after I got this idea going. So it didn't jell. The women really didn't feel equal at that point, 1974, to paying \$36 for membership in an American organization when they'd pay \$5 or \$6 to belong to something in Rabat.

*Q: Let me go back to Kabul after 1972 when you had this tremendous support system or organized Embassy spouse mechanism in place. As women came in after 1972, were there any rumblings about the situation? Did you meet any resistance from --*

NEUMANN: There may have been, but I didn't hear them, mainly because it was they

who had to tell me of rumblings.

*Q: Sallie said she spoke to you every morning on the telephone.*

NEUMANN: Did she tell you about the study we did together about different people complaining that their homes didn't have such-and-such, so we did a survey of every home?

*Q: She did, and how that helped post morale immensely.*

NEUMANN: Well, it was bound to. The Admin Officer wasn't happy about it -- (both laughing) but we got his permission before we did it. And he's still a friend. I'll tell you one funny thing that happened, though. The very last year I was in Kabul I disbanded the wives' organization because I did hear rumblings that it had become a [searching for a word] prestige matter to be on the Wives' Advisory Council. They weren't looking at it any more as the useful tool that I had considered it, and if somebody was on the Council she was more "important" than somebody else. So I decided that it had outlived its usefulness and I dropped it.

We did lots of different things. I had gotten involved with Afghan doctors through Afghan women in a variety of ways. There were so many volunteer activities that American women in Kabul could do if they wanted to. Well, there were lots of other things they could do, too. There were quite a number of swing marriages and people who switched husbands or played around with other people's husbands or wives.

*Q: I'm not surprised, really, in an isolated spot like Afghanistan.*

NEUMANN: What was surprising was that they thought they could keep it secret, (hearty laughter) because in any oriental country where you have servants, one servant talks to another servant's cousin who talks to somebody else who works for somebody else. In Morocco there was a library in a small building behind the Embassy. I didn't do much with the library but I encouraged others to work there and to build it up.

*Q: That's interesting. When we left, in 1969, four years before you came, that library was over at the little commissary and it must have outgrown that. I remember that library was very important in Morocco, though, because it was reading material in English and there weren't other English-reading sources.*

NEUMANN: Now that I'm involved in the AAFSW's Bookfair here, I'm surprised that I didn't get more involved in that library.

*Q: I can't even recall how we replenished it, if people gave books when they left or finished with them; I don't remember.*

NEUMANN: I don't either.

*Q: That's the one library overseas I never worked on. Well, there was so much else to do in Morocco.*

NEUMANN: There really were lots of things to do. Yet I don't know that on the whole I knew more Moroccan women than I had known Afghan women. There was only one charitable event in Morocco while I was there in which we Americans were involved, whereas there had been something every year in Afghanistan. But that became more difficult, partly because the American women were less willing to put their own time and money into it. You know, that's been tricky, because foreign women expect the American women to do things like that. I don't know what's happened in that respect.

*Q: We had a problem with that in Trinidad, where the Prime Minister's wife literally strong-armed the Diplomatic community into doing a fund-raiser for them. It was done with great reluctance on everybody's part, and finally the wife of the British High Commissioner went to Mme. Prime Minister and said, "Look, we can't afford to do this any more because it's gotten much more expensive than it used to be." We would have had to bring everything in at our own expense. I think the Ambassador thought it was important enough so that rules were bent a little bit. It seems to me the Admin Section brought in the hot dogs and --*

NEUMANN: Well, in Morocco we brought in things through the PX for that one event --

*Q: We didn't have a PX.*

NEUMANN: -- and the Moroccan Government permitted them to be brought in.

*Q: That was the other thing -- the Trinidadians held things up.*

NEUMANN: We got along fine in that respect. And then I turned my energy to helping in medical things. For example, the wife of the King's brother became interested in an organization for the blind. She was the honorary president for the Moroccan blind, and she asked Robert if we could get Braille watches for the blind people. So he did. Well, I didn't really do anything on that. But I helped very much with the Diplomatic Wives' Association, the Société de Bienfaisance, to find particularly a stove and other equipment for a school for girls who had rheumatic fever. Dr. Tazi came to the Diplomatic Wives' Association and asked if we could help. He was very concerned about these girls, who were recovering but couldn't get out and get paid jobs outside, and he was starting a school where they could do embroidery and other handicrafts that didn't involve a lot of activity. He found an old building with a very rundown kitchen and asked the Association wives to fix up the kitchen. I remember going particularly with the wife of the Saudi Arabian Ambassador, a marvelous woman with a deep voice who said, "We're going to the bazaar with our diplomatic money," and she browbeat -- well, not browbeating, really having a marvelous time -- bargained with merchants in the bazaar to get things that we needed. Then I managed to get stoves and things through the PX, which they made

available.

*Q: Were you aware at the time from 1966 to 1976 that you were witnessing truly a change in the spouse attitude toward the Service?*

NEUMANN: Yes, I was. That was pretty obvious, really.

*Q: (laughing) Not to everyone. Well, yes, it was obvious to everyone but not everyone knew how to handle it in a positive fashion. Perhaps my question is wrong, perhaps I should ask, "How did you handle that change in your positive fashion that you obviously did?"*

NEUMANN: I handled it simply by doing the things I had already been doing, because I had come into Diplomatic life from years of civic activity, volunteer activity in America. So my approach generally had been one of not demanding that people do what I hoped to achieve but asking whether they would cooperate. And that works very well.

*Q: Of course it does. That's the key to volunteerism.*

NEUMANN: We always had orientation for newcomers. It wouldn't be exactly on a certain date.

*Q: How did you manage the change in spouse attitudes and perceptions --*

NEUMANN: I was mentioning orientations, because I think that in a way helped. We had periodic orientation, where I always spoke about the place of the women in the life of the Embassy and different people spoke about Afghan culture and all sorts of other items as one does in an orientation. In addition, my husband always had wives' Country Team meetings: he had a Country Team for wives. He shared information with us. Once we even met in "the bubble" and I hadn't even known the bubble existed before then; one doesn't know about the Security bubble. There was something then going on between the Government of Morocco and the United States and it was rather vital, so we met in there.

His point was, women are just as important as men are, and there are really only very few items that are top Top Secret and there's a lot flowing from them that can be discussed and known. A wife is the one who's going to sit by a cabinet minister at the dinner party and the more wives know about the relations between the American Government and the host country government, the better the dinner table conversation will be and the better the information the wives will learn.

That leads me to think that, I don't know, maybe another thing I did may have helped, though I can't say it did. That was that Robert got me into the idea of going to receptions with business in mind. Receptions can be rather dull after you've gone to four a night or something, but I'd go to find out something that was happening in Afghanistan or Morocco: "What is the women's attitude toward such-and-such?" I would get angles on a

situation which the men at the Embassy with all their contacts couldn't get because all their contacts were male. And I've even heard nowadays, wasn't this one of the tasks proposed for some Foreign Service Associates? Or was it proposed for spouses of Ambassadors, that they have paying jobs as reporters on what was going on the host country, finding out the women's angle on things?

*Q: That may have been part of the Associate proposal made a few years ago.*

NEUMANN: Anyway, maybe these different things helped.

*Q: When you were there, were there women at these receptions? Because people who were in Kabul 20 years before you said that they had to meet secretly with the Afghan women. Were they out of purdah by your time?*

NEUMANN: You see, before I got there, King Zahir Shah and Queen Homaira had broken out of the old tight tradition, not in the public over-emphasized way that King Amanullah had done when he issued an edict that everybody had to wear Western dress; no. Queen Homaira appeared unveiled at a Bozkashi -- a big event where men on horseback, chapandaz, all furiously ride their horses together; one of them manages to grasp a beheaded calf from the ground and to carry it around to a goalpost and get it back. And of course other chapandaz are always grabbing the goat or calf that away. Up north these games are always played over miles and miles of plains, but for the big ceremonies in Kabul they're played in a fairly restricted area, which is still much larger than ten football fields but still it's encompassed by the eye. All the dignitaries, all the diplomats and their wives, sit in a pavilion.

So seven or eight years before we arrived in Kabul, Queen Homaira had unveiled, and so had her daughters. By the time we were there, a great many women in the capital were not veiled at all: they were wearing Western clothes. They were wearing long-sleeved dresses and long-sleeved blouses. That changed in the six years and ten months that we were in Kabul. Toward the end they were wearing short-sleeved blouses. When the American pants suits had tunics extending below the hip, then Afghan women began wearing pants suits.

During our time in Kabul changes had occurred. When we arrived there were women in the university but there was no women's dormitory; an Afghan girl from outlying country or towns who wanted to go to the University of Kabul had to live with relatives. If she didn't she was considered a prostitute. Two or three years before we left Kabul, Mary Lou Miller, wife of the head of the Contract Team from Indiana University, helped to start a dormitory for girls in a house near the University. It was so successful that the next year the adjacent house was bought, a gate was cut through the wall between them; and Afghan girls were attending the high school and the University in Western dress. In 1971, in protest against this, a young mullah who came to town threw acid at the Afghan girls. And they demonstrated, marching through the streets--the first time women had demonstrated in Afghanistan--and demanded that he be turned over to them and stoned to

death. He was not.

*Q: ...when we were at the height of the feminist movement here! So some of it even spilled over as far away as Afghanistan.*

NEUMANN: And out in the countryside, where the women were still wearing the chadri. Where I went to have my hair done was the German wife of an Afghan man. The Afghan woman who worked in the beauty parlor with her went around in the beauty parlor all day unveiled. Men came in with mail or whatever and she was unveiled. But when she went home to her working-class district she put on the chadri for protection and respectability in her area.

*Q: We were talking about the change in the spouse attitude and perception of her role, just the change in general from 1966 to '76.*

NEUMANN: Now I ran across something interesting. While I was in Morocco I received a letter from Dorothy Stansbury, I have a copy here; you probably know about that.

*Q: Anything you have about her I'm fascinated by because she is one of the directors of OBC whom we can't interview.*

NEUMANN: She wrote to Ambassadors' wives all over the world asking us for materials about the post for use in the reference section at OBC for families coming to Morocco. I'll make you a copy of her letter. Her letter solicited two kinds of information: about the post, and about local employment requirements for wives of American diplomats in Morocco. That was July 1974. I wrote to each wife of a head of Section asking if she would find out what the wives in her Section were doing. Lo and behold, I have all their answers still, which Bilgay Reid gave me. Then I asked her in the Embassy if she would pull them together, because I was going off with Robert on vacation. She collated their responses and sent her report. This was the first time I had ever been asked about American women working in the post. I could read this for the transcript, if you like?

*Q: Yes, please.*

NEUMANN: "The approximate number of U.S. Government wives in the Sections from which data were collected is 74. There are 16 U.S. Government wives in paying jobs. In other words, 20% of the above 74 women are working at paying jobs, and these 16 women are employed in the field of education and in the Mission. Of the 16, eight, or 50%, are in education; eight are employed within the Mission. Of the eight in education, five are teachers at Rabat American School, laboratory assistants at Agronomics Institute, private music and piano teaching, organizing private nursery programs. Of the eight in the Mission, four are employed as secretaries, two are registered nurses, one an Arabic translator, and one in property inventory."

Then the second part of the questionnaire wanted answers to whether the wives of senior

Officers "can successfully combine a job with other personal and official responsibilities." Then "would wives employed outside of U.S. official orbits, where permitted locally, be enhancing the impressions made by U.S. wives?" And "what are the most commonly mentioned useful volunteer activities?" They also were asked for a "rating of the significance of volunteer activities in which they are indulging."

*Q: May we have a copy of that? And even the letters, if you have them.*

NEUMANN: Surely. Then the local employment requirements are given here as to what the Moroccan Government rules were for working. I mention it because by the time I went out to Saudi Arabia in 1981, I found that 90% of American spouses in Saudi Arabia were working. So that was a very different situation, and yet I wish I could have stayed longer. I was there from May to August, not a very long time, and we left because Robert supported AWACs for Saudi Arabia in that big hassle in Congress about AWACs. Secretary of State Alexander Haig definitely opposed it, and Haig simply said to President Reagan, "Either I go or Neumann goes." Neumann went, of course, though he was very discreet about it and tried not to relay anything much to the press, but it was a very difficult time for him; and I was still out there.

Well, what was interesting about this was that I didn't try to organize the American women at post because 90% of them were working. But people came to me saying, "Is there anything you can do about providing a place where singles can meet, because in Saudi Arabia we can't meet outside the Embassy. For a single woman and a single man it just doesn't work." So we began to work on that. I called a meeting to see if people were interested, and a lot of them came to the Residence and we began developing plans to add on to the snack bar. Then I left before that was finished.

The second thing was the teens wanted some place where they could come, could ride their bicycles and be teen-age without having to cope with the restrictions of Saudi society. Of course the Embassy was still in Jeddah at that point and we had a fairly big compound.

Then I started a project from which I learned from some mistakes. Robert and I were appalled by the condition of the offices where Saudis came to get visas to come to the United States. These were separate from the Chancery and were entered by a separate door on a rather long walled corridor, one wall being the outside wall of the Embassy compound. Beyond where people came to get visas was the USIS library. Really, it was not what I would recommend as a place for people to see their first vision of America. Robert said, "You be the head of a committee to get this changed." We wanted color, and some bright red and blue paint along the wall. My mistake was that, instead of just talking to one or two people and then saying to the Admin Officer, using authority which I'd never really used, you see...

*Q: Do it! (laughs)*

NEUMANN: Yes. I got a committee together: the head of USIS, the Admin Officer, the head of the Visa Section. And it took three months for the committee to agree on any plans. And so I left before that was done. We did get the Visa office improved. We got a water cooler so people could get a drink while they were waiting, we got decent chairs, refurbished floor, paint, and so forth, so it looked a lot better.

*Q: Was the 90% spouse employment in Jeddah helpful to spouse morale? It must have been, must have helped enormously.*

NEUMANN: Oh yes. It seemed to me that spouse morale was good. And the DCM and his wife, Jim and Mimsie Placke, were a wonderful couple. Mimsie was splendid support to the American spouses. She knew all the Saudis; she had contacts everywhere. So I'm sure that spouse relations were good when I got there because of Mimsie, and because they were working.

*Q: So there was some contact between Mimsie and Saudi Arabian women?*

NEUMANN: Oh Lord, yes. She gave a marvelous introductory tea for me, which was attended by any number of Saudi women. She took me to call on one of the main Princesses. I met another Princess at a painting-on-cloth class that was organized by one of the American spouses who wasn't employed but who "employed" herself in that capacity. Relations were very good with Saudi women.

Relations of American women in the business community were not nearly as happy in Jeddah as of the American Embassy spouses, because these business spouses did not have jobs, a lot of them; some managed to. They did not have access to cars. In the Embassy we had a car pool and if one wanted to go somewhere, one called the office handling the car pool and within about 20 minutes you could get a car and make a trip, a lot of women sharing it. We'd go out shopping or doing errands or whatever, so we were mobile. Business wives whose husbands had a car and went off in the car in the morning were often stranded, because women weren't permitted to drive. One woman told me how she spent four hours trying to get her four-year-old and a friend's four-year-old together.

We did have an American Wives' Association, I was asked to be honorary president and I was. It had contacts with the Saudi welfare organizations, because there are poor Saudis. It had interesting meetings. So that was one outlet that had a lot of business wife members.

*Q: It seems to me that maybe the most important factor in your attitude as an Ambassador's spouse was all the civic work that you'd done before. It was just an extension of what you had always done.*

NEUMANN: That's right.

*Q: And it wasn't any conscious effort on your part to perform like an Ambassador's wife.*

*You just did what you had felt was right before and what you thought was right...*

NEUMANN: I did certain things consciously as an Ambassador's wife; that is, I was always "Mrs. Neumann." Well, you see, I had been taught that in Washington -- that the Ambassador is "Mr. Ambassador" and that the wife is "Mrs. Neumann." And I felt that I was going into a society where this was the habit and if I started people calling me "Marlen" it might make it more difficult for them under the next Ambassador who might be a stickler for the old practice. So as long as I was an Ambassador's wife I was always "Mrs. Neumann," except to close friends. I remember Sallie saying she didn't want to call me Marlen on post because it broke the pattern. Now of course to anybody who was there then, I'm "Marlen."

So I did certain things consciously, I changed some patterns consciously. I arrived in Kabul not wearing a hat, not wearing gloves. My predecessor had been a stickler for the old style, but Afghan women didn't wear hats; I didn't see any need to wear them. And when I went to Afghan funerals I always wore a scarf. I couldn't see the point of gloves in a hot climate. In the winters they were useful.

So I did break with traditions, but consciously, or followed them consciously. There are lots of things about protocol that are useful. Now, what else did I do consciously.... Well, you know, the rule was all American women were supposed to call on me before I'd been there 24 hours. I discussed that by mail beforehand and we worked it out that in Kabul the wives of heads of sections met me the day I arrived and then each one took me to meet all her people in the following weeks. And in Morocco, more or less the same thing. By then conditions had eased a lot, too: it wasn't obligatory to call.

*Q: Which is really a shame in an Embassy, because in a large one the lack of calls are just people you're not going to meet; you're not going to know your colleagues.*

NEUMANN: Well, you probably know that I lecture once a quarter to Military Attaché wives at the Defense Intelligence College about life in an embassy and an Ambassador's wife; what they can expect. And always I make the point: you try to call on the Ambassador's wife. Go through the Ambassador's secretary, find out what her pattern is; it's her loss if she doesn't see you. And if she doesn't, try to meet the DCM's wife. And I urge heads of sections to call on their counterparts in the host country as well as their counterparts in all the other Embassies. Because how are you going to know people if you don't make the calls?

*Q: You can't. I was fascinated by your work with Dorothy Stansbury, because I thought she was a very interesting choice for Spouse Training when she was selected, because she was an ardent feminist. Also she was a member of the Women's Action Organization. To me she was a very strange choice. She had been a spouse of course, but I thought she was a very strange choice to do spouse training. One of the things that she did--I wonder if you have any insight on this -- when she came in to Spouse Training, it must have been about 1971, she was asked to call together a task force of wives to set forth guidelines for*

*the Foreign Service spouse. Now, remember, this was in '71 at the very height of the women's movement, and Dorothy Stansbury brought together a group of 27 women, predominantly State, some from among the Attachés, USIS, I think AID too. The guidelines they developed for Foreign Service women were released as Management Reform Bulletin 20, published also in State magazine. For their day I felt that they were very restrained, really didn't make an awful lot of unreasonable demands.*

*Perhaps the greatest is that one of the things they pointed out that should not be considered as a representational duty was for a young wife to have to clean their Embassy.*

NEUMANN: Oh yes, I've seen that.

*Q: Apparently the women did not know that that would be released as a Management Bulletin when they did it. Management Bulletin 20 sparked two very outspoken articles in the Foreign Service Journal, one written by Eleanore Lee, perhaps you know her, the other written by a young woman named Carol Pardon. And that helped spark the '72 directive. Carol Pardon and other women from WAO went I believe first to Mildred Marcy, I'm not certain.*

NEUMANN: Mildred was splendid.

*Q: I think she then took them to Macomber. They somehow got from there to the Secretary's open forum and Rick Williamson and Bill Salisbury, both of whom had law training. I know Williamson did. Two lawyers drafted the '72 directive and went back and forth with various drafts to...*

NEUMANN: (with emphasis) And nobody realized that the way it was drafted was going to create the wholly new problem of the Foreign Service spouse who suddenly felt she was a nothing. It didn't say, "You are a nothing" at all...

*Q: But it just made you one by implication.*

NEUMANN: Well, only if you chose to take it that way. You did not have to take it that way.

*Q: But see, you didn't. That's why I think it's so interesting to talk to you*

NEUMANN: [Beginning of sentence is lost.] ... that it really wasn't that different. So perhaps I didn't appreciate at that moment how other women were going to feel affected by it.

*Q: I don't think any of us did, really.*

NEUMANN: That makes me feel a little better!

*Q: My husband was a mid-level Officer in Curaçao. I was already working surreptitiously -- the Consul General said "yes, you may be a script writer for the local advertising agency but don't go down to the office, work at home." So, keeping a low profile, I would go down, pick up my assignment, go home and write in the solitary splendor of my own room. But of course what I really liked was the brainstorming sessions at the agency, which I was free to go to after 1972. So it really didn't make much difference in my life, although I came out of the closet afterwards (both laughing) and could be employed by Dovale Advertising Agency in Curaçao.*

*The resentment came from the local community: the women I still played bridge with, though not quite as often, whom I still did all the traditional things with. Because the aristocratic Antillean women had no options: their life was more constrained than mine at that point. And if anything there was resentment from them because I didn't have to play the game any more. Thus in Curaçao I was very often exhausted because I was trying to do both things.*

NEUMANN: How about the other American women at post?

*Q: A number of them had small children, and reading my own letters reminds me that when you have small children your life is pretty much taken up by them.*

NEUMANN: To me, the reaction of the Foreign Service spouses who felt that they'd been left out on a limb didn't become apparent for several years.

*Q: I don't think so.*

NEUMANN: And I've always felt sad that they took it that way. I can understand it when you've been mentioned on your husband's Efficiency Report all those years as being, whatever you were -- suddenly not being mentioned any more did give you a real feeling of abandonment. I had not even known that I was mentioned on -- well, who writes an Ambassador's Efficiency Report? Anybody?

*Q: I don't know. Maybe there's some evaluation from the Inspector, I suppose. I don't know.*

NEUMANN: So I wasn't really aware. That was a defect of coming in from the outside: I had not come up through the ranks, I wasn't prepared for that.

*Q: I never read Guido's Efficiency Reports but I did read one years later, about 1980, because I felt he should have been promoted. It was the strangest feeling, because only half of what we were doing was reflected in his Efficiency Report. The other half wasn't there. Because we had always worked very closely together as a team, I felt as if I'd died! (both laugh heartily) I just wasn't there.*

NEUMANN: That's interesting, because that shows what some of the women felt.

*Q: Yes, but by the same token, what you had an opportunity to do was go out and create your persona in the local community in the way that you wanted to do it, and mine in Curaçao and Brazil was writing cookbooks. This was a wonderful entree into a rather -- as I said, the women of the society were more constrained than I was. I would go into their homes, I would taste something at one of their parties and say -- I was very forward about it -- "I'm going to come back and talk to you. Will you give me the recipe?" Well, they have all these handwritten cookbooks from their mothers and grandmothers. There was really no Joy of Cooking for Antillean cuisine.*

*So I went into their homes and established a contact with them on a level that they could relate to. Now, I'm not a very good cook and my sole interest was in getting those things down and then taking them home and having the woman who came in three days a week to work for us, try things. I'd say, "Don't clean there. Try this." (hearty laughter) And then in Brazil I did have a cook and she tried them all. I've always felt that in the Third World, the people who are not in positions of power, who are the survivors...*

NEUMANN: Exactly.

*Q: ...we could learn a lot from them. They were interesting to me. Whereas as I sat, night after night after night, and I'm sure you ran into this too, at receptions where the women were separated and you talked about -- in Brazil, for instance, you talked about your face lift, about your trip to Disney World for their vacations. If they really had a lot of money, then they'd fly to Hawaii, which is very much like Recife, stop in Washington to look at anything, never go to New York to plays or museums; and it was diet, babies, plastic surgery...*

NEUMANN: In Afghanistan, it was food, diet, babies, marriage, servants. The Afghan women didn't talk like that, the rich ones. They were rather modest about their wealth. In Morocco, when one met husbands and wives, the husband was sort of "in front": not walking, but in front, and the wives were very nice, very talkative and all, but you didn't find out much about them. Unless you probed. Then I found out that almost every Moroccan woman I was meeting, whether cabinet wife or whatever, had an activity of her own. One was the head of the computer section at a Ministry. Another was an organizer of nursery schools for the country. Another was involved in museum work. Another ran a pharmacy. These were Moroccan women, 1973-76...

*Q: That was after we were stationed there. My contacts with them was with the students, because I worked with the Experiment in International Living.*

NEUMANN: I didn't have that contact at all.

*Q: Virtually no one from the Moroccan Government community -- we didn't even invite them. The few women who spoke French in the 1960s who were in any positions of power*

*just didn't come to a Vice Consul's home. So the students were our next best entrée into the community.*

NEUMANN: By 1973 when I got there, when I asked to call on every Cabinet Minister's wife and was received by over half of them, several of them were French. The Moroccan men had studied in France and met and married French women.

*Q: Of course. And the Moslems were very chic, the women very chic and Parisian-oriented and flew up during Ramadan so they (laughing) didn't have to fast. There were two Moroccan women of prominence who spoke English and they were in demand at every Embassy for every dinner and every reception, so I hardly even spoke to them.*

NEUMANN: When we went to Morocco I was told there would be no Moroccan women coming to Embassy parties. We ignored that and invited couples to our first party and they came.

*Q: You didn't get "Madame est fatigué"?*

NEUMANN: No, I didn't.

*Q: Oh, Madame was always fatigué in the 1960s. (she laughs)*

NEUMANN: I think part of it was because we both speak French, and the word got out immediately: "the Neumanns speak French." And I think that was it, they came because they knew they could talk.

*Q: Yes, that's an initial barrier down, right from the beginning.*

NEUMANN: Of course we were told in Saudi Arabia, "You don't expect to have women come to parties." And we found out there, through Mimsie, who knew Saudi women quite well, that yes, Saudi women will come with their husbands but you have to share the guest list in advance with every family, so that they will know who else is on the list. And if there's a Saudi man coming who's indignant at having women at the party, then the other couple won't come -- the man may come. That's one thing. The second is, as you meet these different women they will decide whether they like you or not, and then when a husband brings home an invitation his wife will say, "oh, I don't like her, we won't go to that party," or the wife will say, "yes, I like her, we will go to that party." Because the wives have a good deal more authority in the home than we Westerners often think. I'm sure you discovered that.

*Q: Oh yes. You know, I think you had such a nice attitude toward these things. They weren't defeating challenges: it was "Let's find a way to work within the system in Morocco and Kabul and make it work for us, make it work our way as much as possible." That's the fun part of being in another culture, really.*

NEUMANN: Exactly.

*Q: As a mid-level wife by the time we got to Curaçao, I could do the cookbook because that gave me an outlook that didn't tread on any higher-ranking toes, as it were.*

NEUMANN: And I suppose the assistance I've given in rehabilitation of physically handicapped -- getting mattresses for a school in Marrakech and so on --

*Q: -- wasn't necessary in Curaçao. And in Brazil it was so overwhelming, and there were only two of us at the Consulate, I couldn't do it, I couldn't. So I thought because they were so interested in their food I would flatter them by showing an interest in their...*

NEUMANN: That's marvelous and I wish that I had taken more of an interest in local cuisine.

*Q: But you know you approached it in another way.*

NEUMANN: I had a cook and a cook's helper in Kabul, and a cook in Morocco, a Filipino cook in Saudi Arabia. I inherited very good servants, in most cases, and kept them. And since Qurbon Ali, the cook in Kabul, had been trained at a big American construction/road building company, where he learned to make bread, potato chips, American food, he didn't have many Afghan recipes. And my husband didn't want Afghan food served at the residence. He said it should be American food. So I really didn't learn many... but if I'd had your interest in cooking and had gone to my friends' homes, I might have learned.

*Q: My problem in Recife was that it was so much easier and less expensive to do the local cuisine, because they had wonderful fruits that they liked. The meat wasn't very much, but it was just easier for me to go to the market than to try to haul everything up from Rio.*

NEUMANN: Oh Lord yes.

*Q: Just to get that Embassy consignment -- and half the cans would arrive looking like they'd been stepped on.*

NEUMANN: I didn't have to cope with that. We had a PX.

*Q: If it's right there you do it, but if it's not there -- and they did have all these wonderful fruits and vegetables, and meat was plentiful if a little tough at times.*

NEUMANN: We bought all our foods and vegetables, and often chicken.

*Q: Oh yes? (she laughs) Is there any place in the world where you can't buy chickens and*

eggs?

NEUMANN: I learned to buy chickens by weighing and feeling the breastbone to see if it was tender, as well as kauk [pronounced "cowk"], a kind of partridge. I did teach Qurbon Ali how to stuff kauk by an American recipe.

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### BIOGRAPHIC DATA

Spouse: Robert Gerhard Neumann

Spouse entered service: 1966

Left Service: 1981

Status: non-Career ambassador

Posts:

1966-1973 Afghanistan

1973-1976 Morocco

1981 Saudi Arabia

Place and Date of birth: December 20, 1915, in Miraj, India; American parents.

Schools:

BA, Rollins College, Florida, 1936

Diploma, Zimmern School of International Studies, Geneva, Switzerland,  
summers of 1936, 1937

Certificate, University of Grenoble, France, 1937

MA, Yale University, 1941.

Date and Place of Marriage: July 27, 1941.

Children:

Ronald Eldredge

Gregory Woodsmall

Marcia Woodsmall, (deceased)

Volunteer and Paid Positions held:

A: At Post:

Volunteer:

- Honorary President, American Women's Association, Kabul, Afghanistan, 1967-73
- Member, Diplomatic Wives' Organization, Kabul, Afghanistan, 1967-73; Secretary, 1968; President, 1970; Assistant Treasurer, 1971; Vice-President, 1972; Treasurer, 1973

- Member, Board of Directors, Afghan Society for the Rehabilitation of the Physically Handicapped, 1970-73
- Honorary President, American Women's Association, Rabat, Morocco, 1973-76
- Member, Cercle Diplomatique de Bienfaisance, Rabat, Morocco, 1973-76; Treasurer, 1975-76

B: In U.S.:

Paid/professional:

- Private Secretary to Ruth Woodsmall, General Secretary of World's YWCA, on official trip to Orient, 1938-39
- Assistant Warden (director), YWCA Summer Conference Center, Ootacamund, India, 1938
- Professional Lecturer on India and International Problems, Wisconsin, 1941-43
- Taught Economics and Political Science at State Teachers College, Oshkosh, Wisconsin, 1942-43
- Information and Liaison Officer, Department of State, Washington, DC, 1943-45
- Extension Teacher, correspondence courses in American Diplomatic History for University of Wisconsin, 1946-47, for University of California at Los Angeles, 1949-50
- Editorial Associate, YEAR- Mid-Century Edition, 1954
- Contributing Editor, YEAR, 1952-56, including YEAR's "The Bible and Christianity," 1952, "Pictorial History of America," 1954, "Pictorial History of the World," 1956
- Supervisor, Association of American Foreign Service Women's BOOKFAIR Bookroom, 1977-80
- Lecturer on Embassy Life for Military Attaché Wives, Defense Intelligence School, 1978-present.

Volunteer:

- One of founders of League of Women Voters of Oshkosh, Wisconsin, 1942; President thereof, 1942-43
- Director of State Fiscal Policy Study, State Board, League of Women Voters of California, 1947-50
- Member, Board of Directors, League of Women Voters of Los Angeles, 1949-50; 1952-54; 1956-57; 1961-62; holding various assignments such as UN Item Chairman, Foreign Economic Policy Chairman, Program Coordinator, Assistant to President
- Consultant on Community Affairs, League of Women Voters of Los Angeles, 1959-60
- Director of National UN Study, State Board, League of Women Voters of California, 1962-64
- Vice-President, League of Women Voters of California, 1964
- LWV Delegate to Los Angeles Area Council of Non-Governmental Organizations Accredited to the United Nations, 1952-54; Chairman of NGO Council, 1956,

1957

- Los Angeles City Civil Service Commissioner, March 1958 to
- July 1961 (appointed by Mayor, confirmed by City Council) Chairman, World Affairs Committee, Women's Division, Los Angeles Chamber of Commerce, 1958-62
- Member, Board of Directors, United Nations Association of Los Angeles, 1959-64; and President of Association, 1964-66
- Member of Governor's Commission to Investigate the Los Angeles Riots (only woman among eight members appointed by Governor Pat Brown), 1965-68
- Recording Secretary, Altar Guild, St. Columba's Episcopal Church, DC, 1979-1981; member of Altar Guild from 1976 to present
- Alternate Treasurer and member of Board of Directors, Association of American Foreign Service Women, 1980-81
- BOOKFAIR Director, Association of American Foreign Service Women, 1982, 1983; Chairman of Volunteers, BOOKFAIR, 1984
- Elected member, Board of Directors of Sumner Village Community Association, 1982-83, 83-84
- Member, Writers' Group, Association of American Foreign Service Women, 1985-present.

Languages:

French, German, Persian, some Spanish, touch of Arabic

Honors:

Chevalier, Confrérie de l'Ordre de Tastevin, Dijon, France, 1974 AAFSW-AFSA Merit Scholarship named for me in 1986

Publications:

- Poems in Florida Poets, 1936, edited by Vivian Y. Laramore, The Galleon Press, N.Y., 1936
- Articles on India, American Diplomatic History, Religion, published in Survey Graphic, YEAR, The Los Angeles Times
- HISTORY OF THE AMERICAN EMBASSY RESIDENCE IN KABUL, AFGANISTAN, 1971
- Poems in Foreign Service Journal, Guide; children's magazine stories
- "Emily, Shareefa of Wazan," in A World of Difference, AAFSW Writers' Group, 1987.

*End of interview*