

The Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training
Foreign Affairs Oral History Project

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INTERVIEW

Q: Starting with your early life, tell me a little bit about your family background. That can include what your parents did, what your grandparents were like in their lives, your siblings, religious formation, traditions, special occasions. Were you a recent immigrant, or of minority status? What languages were spoken at home?

ETIAN: I was born in Amman, Jordan, of parents of Armenian descent. In 1915, my grandparents on my mother's side and parents on my father's side lived in Turkey. My father was the first of thirteen grandchildren born to a very wealthy merchant. My grandfather, actually, was one of the successful exporters of dates and fruits from current-day Turkey to Europe.

When the Ottoman Turks began annihilating Armenians residing in Turkey, my immediate family had to flee. My father was a young schoolboy at the time; his family got on a boat to go to Cyprus. His grandfather refused to leave because he felt that he was such an important person in the community that there was no reason for the Turks to kill him. Unfortunately, he stayed behind and met his fate. Meanwhile, my father's family escaped to Cyprus.

While in Cyprus, my family, along with many other Armenians, waited as refugees to be invited into countries willing to take them in. Luckily for my father, Greece was very accommodating. As a result, his family was able to go to Thessalonica, where they found a considerable immigrant refugee population of Armenians.

My father attended an American high school in Greece and did so well that an American missionary sponsored his university studies at the American University of Beirut. He began his medical studies and was nearly finished when his mother contacted him to inform him that his family was destitute and desperately needed financial help. My father immediately changed his major to pharmaceutical studies, and, upon graduation, went to his uncle's home in Jordan and began to work at Petra Pharmacy. He was very successful, being able to both diagnose his patients and prepare their medications.

My religious background is Armenian Orthodox, similar to Greek Orthodox. Living in an Arab country, where the vast majority was of the Muslim faith, my father was a Christian

running the main pharmacy on the main street in Amman. Many distinguished residents had confidence in him. He didn't share medical information nor private gossip...and had King Hussein's father as one of his most distinguished clients. My father's reputation expanded in the kingdom; He introduced sulpha drugs to Jordan and was appreciated by the local population. My father also had a special relationship with members of the American Embassy.

Due to the instability of the country... and better educational opportunities for my older sister, older brother and me outside of Jordan, my father decided in 1953 to emigrate to the United States. We drove across America and resided in Los Angeles for one year. He was disillusioned about the role of pharmacists in America. Their jobs centered on counting pills, putting them in small containers, and typing labels. There was no diagnosing of patients, nor preparation of medications. When one of his Armenian colleagues living in Illinois offered my father a position in land development, he gathered his family and settled in one of Chicago's upscale suburbs.

I basically grew up in Illinois. I started first grade in the town of Barrington but couldn't speak any English. The experience was traumatic for me, especially when my first grade teacher invited pupils to get up in front of the class to read basic children's books. When it was my turn, I would try to sound out the letters. As a result, the children all laughed at me. I ended up quite shy, and I loathed studying literature well into my university years! In high school and beyond, I thrived in courses that didn't require reading extensive texts: mathematics, chemistry, French and Russian language up to the literature level... I think that's important to note because it influenced my later life. Today, I have a huge book collection and am passionate about reading books on European and Russian history!

Q: Before we go on, could you talk a little bit about your mother's background?

ETIAN: Oh, yes. My mother was born in Jerusalem, in the Armenian quarter. She was an accomplished pianist, having studied at the Conservatory of Music. As a young woman she was already betrothed to marry a man from the area. My father was looking for a spouse, and word came out that there was this young, dashing pharmacist who was looking for a wife. I think my mother got swept off her feet and cancelled the betrothal arrangement that had been made earlier. She married my father and went to Jordan and was pretty horrified to find that Amman at the time was not nearly as progressive as Jerusalem.

I considered myself lucky that my family came to the United States. The high school I attended was one of the most progressive during the early 1960s. It was one of the few that had Russian classes, fencing instruction, theater-in-the-round auditions and performances, and a very special program in mathematics developed by the University of Illinois for high school students. I embraced these activities and decided to major in mathematics at the University of Wisconsin-Madison.

When I discovered that the University of Wisconsin-Madison was among the best in the country for mathematics, I applied to go there as an out-of-state student. My father

insisted that I attend the university closest to our home (so he could keep an eye on me!) and threatened not to help with expenses if I chose to study in Wisconsin. Not only did I insist on my choice, I felt the need to get away from an Armenian household which restricted my movement as a girl.

I was a little bit naïve. But I plunged ahead, applied for scholarships, loans, work-study programs – any opportunities I ran across to help pay the prohibitive costs of going to a very large university outside my state! Wisconsin was very generous. They offered me in-state tuition, a scholarship, a generous loan and a work-study position.

I began my freshman year in 1966 but ran out of funds after my sophomore year. While a student, I was studying computer linguistics – combining my love of mathematics and foreign languages. Unfortunately, I found myself living at the computer center standing in long lines of students in the wee hours of the morning, waiting for access to the huge IBM 360 computers. We all carried around boxes of computer cards with 80 columns on them, and if we made one minor mistake on our programs (leaving out a period for example), the entire sheets of computer code would be rejected! I gained the name “Miss Diagnostics” as I had to keep re-running my programs until the code was absolutely spot on!!

As I said, my funds were depleted, and I quickly became tired of sleepless nights, so I returned home and sought employment in the area. I found an opportunity in the Data Processing department at Bournes Industries, a company producing huge cameras placed into reconnaissance flights flying over Eastern Europe and Africa. I punched holes and verified data in the 80-column computer cards during the day. I enquired if the company would support me in taking COBOL computer classes at the local junior college in the evenings. I was truly fortunate, the manager of the department not only gave me financial support, he made his programming team available to me when I needed help writing programs!

After one year, I had saved enough money to go to France to study. I enrolled at the Sorbonne University and spent a year in the faculty of languages majoring in Soviet studies. Concurrently, I attended a course called *Cours de la Civilization Francaise* (French Civilization course), and went to the *Alliance Francaise* (French Alliance) to brush up on my French. I practically lived in the Metro as I was travelling from one campus to another.

Since I went to France on my own, for an entire year and a half I didn't speak any English. I didn't even meet any Americans at the time. All of a sudden, there was the Revolution – the French Revolution (of Education) of 1968. Students were at the center of it all. Before I knew it, on every corner there were national guardsmen. One of my classes was in the NATO (North Atlantic Treaty Organization) building, and I would go and find large groups of students protesting with megaphones. It was a very exciting year to be a student in Paris.

Upon my return to the University of Wisconsin-Madison, the French department awarded me nearly two years' worth of academic credits. My proficiency in the French language was far superior to those students in the university group who had attended classes in Aix-en-Provence, a city which hosted many junior year abroad programs, and consequently, presented far fewer opportunities for Americans to speak French.

I returned to Wisconsin to finish my Bachelor of Arts degree. When my theoretical mathematics programs began exploring unfathomable 20 dimensional forms, I decided to switch majors in my senior year to Communication Arts. In the midst of the hippie generation, and anti-war protests on my campus, I felt more secure developing skills in the areas of television, radio, film, and photography. To assist with the costs, I became a resident advisor in a dormitory, and was awarded a Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation scholarship for my last few years. Mr. Gulbenkian was a prominent Armenian known as Mr. 5% because he benefited from the oil revenues generated in Saudi Arabia in the early years. With his profits, he set up a formidable foundation in Lisbon, and provided scholarships to Armenian, Arab, and Portuguese students who maintained a certain grade point average.

Q: I was going to ask you about your social life. It sounds like you've been very busy all this time. Did you have time for extracurricular activities or social life or sports or anything like that?

ETIAN: When I was 14 years old, I became enamored of playing tennis. I actually hired a professional tennis coach and played the game whenever I was free. In fact, I was playing tennis for four or five hours a day before I entered university. And when I registered for my courses, I also signed up for tennis classes. The founder of Nielsen TV Ratings donated 600 million dollars to his alma mater the University of Wisconsin to build a very large, modern indoor tennis complex. I took advantage of the complex during my student years and oftentimes, played with the instructors. At one point, I represented the state of Illinois on the professional tennis circuit. When my knees locked up several years later on the tennis court, my career and interest in tennis were over. I have undergone a number of knee surgeries since that fateful day.

Through tennis, I met a number of people. My brother and I used to play doubles and were labeled Spiderman and Spiderwoman on the court! I'm very short, but my brother was very tall and between the two of us, we didn't let too many balls get away from us!

Another interest of mine was meeting foreign students and learning about their livelihoods. The University of Wisconsin hosted and sponsored a phenomenal number of foreign students. You can imagine my delight when in 1976 I was chosen to become a Graduate Student Advisor in the Graduate dormitory that housed several hundred foreign students!! I set up an international meeting area for the students, and organized international dinners, dances, ice cream socials, lectures, sports activities, etc.

The city of Madison is absolutely beautiful, surrounded by two gorgeous lakes. The university hosted the largest sailing club outside the Navy (or so I've been told!)...so, I

joined the sailing club. I learned to sail, but my instructor told me, after a near-death experience (his, not mine!), that I wasn't meant to be a sailor, so that opportunity came to a complete stop! I tried a number of activities, such as international folk dancing, belly dancing, singing in choral groups, and playing on a women's basketball team. I even performed Russian folk songs on my guitar as part of a university-wide talent show! I never quite managed to become proficient in any of these pursuits however!!

Q: Alright, I'm going to ask you to start talking about activities after school, the progression of your career. What did you do after graduating from the University of Wisconsin?

ETIAN: After graduating with my B.A. and completing a year of a Masters Degree at the University of Wisconsin, I joined the Peace Corps. I ran into a Peace Corps recruiter at the student union and immediately signed up to become a tennis coach for a secondary school in Ghana. Nine months later, I received an invitation to go to Cote d'Ivoire (Republic of Ivory Coast in W. Africa) as an English teacher in a secondary school! I was perplexed! After all, English was my very worst subject in school! I found out later that the tennis coach position was for a male coach, as the school was strictly a boys-only institution! And due to my proficiency in French, Cote d'Ivoire requested the most advanced French speakers for their primary school students. I swallowed my pride and off I went in 1973 to Dabou, a small village of 3,000, and taught English to beginning language learners 10-12 years old.

I had 60 pupils in each class and taught five classes a day. I decided to make every student speak at least three times in every class. My classes were very unruly, active, noisy. I would bring in visual cues, musical instruments, flashcards...have the students create monologues and perform in "mini plays." The French teachers in surrounding classrooms complained because my classes were the loudest of any of them, but when it came to the final exams at the end of the year, my English-speaking students far exceeded everyone's expectations. My students were far more enthusiastic than their students; they thoroughly enjoyed playing games in class and were already engrossed in American rock songs on the radio. James Brown was a favorite at the time!!

While I was living in Cote d'Ivoire, Muhammed Ali was in the Congo for a professional boxing match. The President of Cote d'Ivoire managed to have the match broadcast on local TV and radio all over the country. The villagers were ecstatic! After the match, you could hear the entire village screaming for joy because Muhammed Ali had won!! It was a fantastic time to be an American in West Africa!

I returned to the United States in 1975, a changed person! Peace Corps opened my eyes. I believed so much in this international development grassroots program that upon my return I became a recruiter and eventually the head of the Office of Recruitment and Communications in Madison, Wisconsin. In time, the office became the number one recruitment office for Peace Corps in the country!

At one point, I returned to the university to explore the use of communications in third world development, concentrating on empowering disadvantaged populations in the area of public health. I returned to Cote d'Ivoire in 1980 to work on the French-sponsored educational program based on the use of television in the primary schools. During my initial volunteer service I had visited many villages and noted that the primary school pupils learned basically by rote memorization. The experimental program using televisions in the classrooms was put in place to teach critical thinking skills, as well as to teach the primary school teachers how to inspire their pupils to ask questions and make their own discoveries on a variety of subjects. During my second tour as a volunteer, I noticed the changing thought patterns of the young pupils. They were no longer regurgitating information; rather, they enquired about their environment, and participated in student-centered education. My Masters thesis on the utilization of television as a medium of education in primary schools in Cote d'Ivoire was met with great acclaim by my thesis committee and development workers in the field.

Unfortunately, there was a step that the French program planners had not anticipated. The high school teachers had not been trained to work with the pupils graduating from the progressive, student-centered primary school education program. Expecting polite, respectful, compliant, obedient students, high school teachers were shocked to receive a class full of raucous pupils full of questions and observations!

In 1981, I was offered an opportunity to work in the Nigerien Office of Radio and Television. I directed a weekly educational television program utilizing the local languages Hausa, Zarma and French on the efforts of women all over Niger. The cameraman, soundman, two production assistants, plus generator operator and I produced documentaries on women making pots out of local clay, applying colorful vegetable dyes to cloth, working in perfume and fabric factories, drying local produce for future consumption, protecting their young children from changes in weather, etc. Since there was only one TV channel at the time, the city population and those living in electrified towns were able to view our program entitled *Magazine de la Femme* (Women's Magazine). Villages in various parts of the country watched on solar-powered TV sets established by the government.

During my stay in the capital city Niamey, I noted many young girls 13-14 years old loitering at the local hospital. Since they didn't look sick, I enquired as to why there were so many young girls there. I was told that they were "rejects." Girls as young as 12 were either offered or sold to Nigerien men looking for a "wife." Men were allowed up to four wives in the Muslim culture. Thus, the girls would be "betrothed" to significantly older men who oftentimes already had two or three wives, and wanted yet another one. The men would consummate their marriages without realizing that their young wives' bodies were not adequately developed to bear children. The consequences of pregnancies at such an early age were significant. Many of these girls became incontinent; some had both bladder and intestinal problems. Consequently, these girls were considered "damaged goods." They were rejected by their new husbands as well as by their parents, and found themselves hovering near medical facilities. Local physicians had not had training in fistula procedures.

My team produced a documentary warning parents not to surrender their very young girls to potential life mates and reprimanding older gentlemen to allow time for their young wives to physically mature. Meanwhile, the Ministry of Public Health sent physicians to Egypt to learn how to operate on fistula patients.

Early marriage in Niger was a controversial topic, and I was duly afraid that I would be invited to leave the country due to my lack of cultural sensitivity. I was pleasantly surprised to have the support of my Nigerien supervisor at the Office of Radio and TV, officials at the Nigerien Ministry of Public Health as well as people in the general TV viewing population!

I was able to meld my background in communications with my interest in public health. In 1990, I returned to Niger with the Centers for Disease Prevention and Prevention (CDC) as an Advisor to the Nutrition Division of the Ministry of Public Health. Given the discovery of pockets of persons scattered throughout the nation infected with Human Immunodeficiency Virus/Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome (HIV/AIDs), I surreptitiously ordered boxes of condoms for distribution.

Many unemployed Nigeriens would travel south to Cote d'Ivoire in search of work. Some would seek the company of women, at times local prostitutes, during their year-long stays. And some would unknowingly contract the HIV virus, return home to the Sahara, and infect some of their wives. Although HIV/AIDs was not a part of my portfolio at the time, I proposed beginning prevention programs with my colleagues at the Ministry of Public Health. I guess I was a bit too enthusiastic, as the head of the health department scolded me stating that I just couldn't place condoms out in the hallways and distribute them left and right, giving them to policemen in the streets and army staff around town as well as deliver them to street sellers willy-nilly. She exclaimed that my intention to distribute condoms so freely was not in the Nigerien culture – it was, after all, a very delicate health matter!

I was forlorn. As I was sauntering out of the Health Department office wondering what I was going to do with the 40,000 condoms piled inside and outside my office door, the Department Head gingerly asked me if she could have a small box! Aha! I thought that if SHE wanted a small box, perhaps I could distribute the condoms discreetly.... Well, of course, I was delighted and offered her the small box of condoms and went about "discreetly" planting boxes of condoms everywhere there would be recipients happy to receive them!!

In no time at all, local people, thinking that I was a physician, approached me asking for a condom or three.... using such obscure terms as "suitcase" or "envelope" to describe an item that was quite embarrassing for them to talk about. When I was told that condoms were being "confiscated" and taken to the border, I happily exclaimed that what a great idea that was... distributing the goods to far reaches of the countryside!! In no time at all, I was addressed as Dr. Condom! And prior to leaving my post after four wonderfully

fulfilling years, the Nigerien Minister of Health presented me with a Certificate of Appreciation for actively assisting in the battle against HIV/AIDS!!

Q: You mentioned the CDC, yes. So, somehow you switched employers...

ETIAN: I was in Niger twice – first with the Peace Corps in 1981-82 as a volunteer and later, staff member, and then later from 1990-1994 with CDC as part of the American official community. I was the lone CDC Health Official in the country at the time, assigned to the Ministry of Public Health as an Advisor.

I'd like to backtrack a bit. Well after I completed my Peace Corps Service (twice – in Cote d'Ivoire and in Niger), I was hired to be a Public Affairs Officer in the Office of Recruitment and Communications in Minneapolis, Minnesota. I was responsible for public awareness and recruitment campaigns for a three-state area. My job entailed speaking to university city groups, recruiting diverse groups of Americans, participating in television and radio programs, and organizing public affairs sessions.

In September 1983 USAID hired me as a Personal Service Contractor to serve as the Director of the Nutrition Planning Center in Bandundu Province – a center located in the breadbasket of the Democratic Republic of the Congo (called Zaire at that time). I oversaw a five million dollar, four year project which had a goal to reduce the level of malnutrition in children under five years of age. With a staff of twenty-made up mostly of medical personnel and support personnel-my team proposed a three prong approach: training of medical/community workers in basic health and nutrition, introducing a nutrition curricula in the primary schools, and financially supporting local nutrition and agriculture projects aimed at increasing the nutritional value of the populations' diet.

From 1983 to 1987, I lived in a town called Kikwit, 240 miles east of the capital Kinshasa, which in 1995 had become the epicenter of a severe outbreak of the viral Ebola hemorrhagic fever that affected 317 people and killed 245. Many of the villages that we targeted were unfamiliar with healthy breastfeeding and maternal child health practices. My teams travelled throughout the region to train local medical staff, community health workers, health assistants, and concurrently, to encourage the family's production and consumption of locally produced vegetables and fruits.

My living situation was quite unique. Although I had a home that resembled a house for Catholic nuns, I didn't have electricity nor running water. Solar panels were installed on the house to allow me to heat water that was pumped daily from a large outdoor water reservoir, and to run fans and tube lights. I ordered an inverter (12 volts to 110) so that I could run my small Apple II laptop. If there was no sunshine for three consecutive days, I merely took the large battery out of the project truck and attached it to my solar system in my home! My refrigerator was run on kerosene. It was a fascinating time for me as I was able to set up a darkroom in my home in order to produce visual aids that would be used in training sessions with village women.

Q: Give me one or two stories.

ETIAN: During my fourteen years living and working in Africa, I had some very interesting experiences exploring how to get village women to adopt positive health and nutrition behaviors through various communication interventions. My team noted that flies were absolutely everywhere in many of the villages: on young childrens' eyes, on the food, on tools used to prepare meals, near the latrines, etc. We decided to film one of the villages, focusing on the abundance of flies everywhere. We would also show positive examples of how to address the problem by safeguarding the food with covers, having mothers wash babies' faces, fanning their children, etc. The village women were delighted to attend the film being projected against a village wall. Afterwards, we posed questions, asking mothers if these scenes were familiar to them. They were aghast!! "Look at the SIZE of those flies!!" they'd exclaim! They felt so sorry for the villagers in the film!

As a filmmaker, shooting images of flies requires close-up shots. In approaching these flying insects, the flies appeared to be monstrous in size. As a result, the villagers could not at all relate to the didactic messages intended for them to change behaviors.

I had a similar experience in India among tribal women who were not familiar with photographs or magazines. I presented a group of them with a photo of a well, as we were working on a water project. None of the women recognized what the photo represented. I asked one woman to draw me a well on a piece of paper. She presented me with a big black dot and announced that it was indeed a well! I approached another woman with the same request and received another picture of a large black dot. When I showed other women these pictures, they recognized that those black dots were wells!

I was stunned.... All I saw was a big black dot. So one day I accompanied one of these women to the well. When she tried to fetch water in the well, I, too, looked down the well. What did I see? I saw a very deep, dark well. It was round, and it was black. So there was the big black dot. That was a well alright!

I realized that if I was going to succeed in getting any messages across, I had to find out how local people saw things around them, how they interpreted various things in their lives, who they listened to, and how they were motivated to act upon new realities. I realized that in Niger, there was a tradition of Hausa theater. Local village theatrical groups performed for their communities. I observed that even in cloistered villages, where women were not allowed to perform in public, men would actually dress up as women and act in their specific roles!

With the help of a Washington-based contractor AED (Academy for Educational Development), the Niger Nutrition Division team encouraged village theatrical groups to perform plays incorporating positive nutritional messages. The Niamey-based radio club would record the various performances and play them on the local radio station every week, thereby creating an environment of competition! Our team created a "Festival of Green Leafy Vegetables and Liver" in which various Nigerien village groups would

compete once a year to be the best theatrical group! The jury was made up of local dignitaries, and prizes of African cloth would be given to the best performers.

As an example, some children in the area had a case of temporary blindness right around dusk due to a deficiency of Vitamin A in their diet. One play would focus on this by having a child stumbling in the village at dusk; his mother quickly feeds him a mango, or prepares a vegetable dish and adds some liver, or gives him carrots-any foods that contain Vitamin A. Sure enough, the child would immediately pop up and begin playing with his friends! Research later indicated that our messages were understood and acted upon; the incidence of “night blindness” decreased, and consumption of Vitamin A foods increased.

Q: Okay. So, these were some of your early experiences, and then you moved on?

ETIAN: In 1988 I went to India as a Country Representative with a private health firm John Snow International. I supervised a national staff in New Delhi and worked along with two sub-contractors. Our mission was to train medical personnel in two provinces of India: Gujarat (Panchmahel’s tribal groups) and Maharashtra (Chandrapur). We also sought to computerize and centralize the health data of Indians across parts of the sub-continent.

For our training initiative, we had two mobile training teams of six medical people. We covered an entire province in 8 week periods, two weeks dedicated to travel to and from each village, and 6 weeks to train local nurses, community health workers, and traditional birth attendants in primary health care, birthing practices, nutrition etc.

Most challenging was having illiterate and elderly traditional birth attendants learn hygienic birthing practices, such as sterilizing string used to cut the umbilical cord, replenishing babies with liquids during diarrheal episodes and preparing and administering rehydration salts for the suffering babies.

The common practice was to stop giving babies with diarrhea any liquids, thinking that the problem would stop. Well, it did stop with the death of the babies!! To counter this belief, my trainer would hold up a plastic bag full of water and state that this represented a normal baby. She would then poke the bottom of the bag with holes, and immediately, the water would trickle out, leaving a completely crinkled empty plastic bag. This second example would be considered the dead baby. What was the solution? It became obvious to the birth attendant that to keep the baby alive, the plastic bag had to be continuously filled with liquids so that the baby would not become completely dehydrated and die! Continuous liquids, plus the oral rehydration salts, would allow the baby to slowly recover....

Utilizing visuals that the medical personnel could understand and having them practice the various tasks were very promising improvements. As a training advisor on this project, I also had to ensure that the training was adapted to the level of the trainees. One distinguished physician on the team was used to giving lectures and stood up looking down at the participants. It was not an easy task asking him to eliminate the sophisticated

medical terms in his vocabulary and bring his talk down to the level of the local medical staff. When he refused to sit on the floor along with the local health workers, I immediately sat on the floor and created a circle to demonstrate that we were not in a formal classroom setting. Embarrassed, he finally joined our ranks on the cement floor and slowly adapted a less formal approach to teaching!

I must admit, initially I was very surprised that I was hired to work on a project of this nature in a country that boasted more PhDs and Medical Doctors than in the United States. When I first arrived in India, I attended a meeting in which 16 medical people were sitting at the conference table: 8 were medical doctors, and the others all had PhDs in a variety of medical disciplines. I was the only non-Indian, and the only one without a high academic degree in public health. I questioned why I was even here!

The discussion centered around what the expectations were for a young 15 year old community worker assigned to community centers that fed very young children and taught them basic skills. My esteemed colleagues began suggesting all sorts of activities these young girls should be responsible for such as dressing wounds, vaccinating the children, teaching the youngsters about health and hygiene. They kept adding more and more responsibilities to this untrained teenager. I had gone to a village shortly after my arrival just to witness the activities at one of these centers, and to meet one of these young uneducated women entrusted with the children of their village. I had to enquire at the meeting of medical professionals: “Who knows what one of these young women are like? They’re 15 or 16 years old, with very little education. How many of you have actually been to a village and met one of these young community workers?”

None of them had. None of them knew one of these community workers. None of my esteemed colleagues from New Delhi had even met one of these girls. That’s when I realized why I had been called to work in India. My medical colleagues had worked very hard and achieved success in their fields. Yet, they had no clue what was happening in the villages that they left years ago.

My life overseas was so fascinating, fulfilling, rewarding. I so enjoyed working with such a variety of people in such diverse environments. All those experiences truly influenced my career path. I wanted to join the diplomatic service in a health capacity. As a Foreign Service Officer with USAID (United States Agency for International Development), you don’t actually implement projects in the field. You would actually manage them. Occasionally I would encounter managers who lacked the hands-on experience. I truly felt that my work in the diverse countries—14 years in Africa, five years in Russia, five years in Armenia, two years in India— prepared me for management positions in the foreign service.

Q: So, after India, then where did you go?

ETIAN: I left India in 1990. The same year, CDC (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention) contacted me to work as a Nutrition Advisor to the Ministry of Public Health in Niger under CDC’s Technical Advisor for AIDS and Child Survival program. CDC

Health officers were familiar with my work in the Congo (1983-87) and asked me to represent their organization in Niger.

When I presented myself to my counterpart in the Ministry of Public Health, I was taken aback. My colleague informed me that I was not needed. That Nigeriens didn't want nor needed American money in their country. He stated that they were a very proud people and could do everything on their own.

I faced my Nigerien counterpart and wondered to myself why I had been assigned to Niger. Then I remembered that literacy was 11% at the time, and that was among the men. Life expectancy was forty. I didn't see many people with grey hair, and the market women I had purchased vegetables from were younger than me but appeared to look much older. Statistics on child mortality were also dire. And I remembered from my earlier experience in Niger that I had lost 40 pounds without even trying as food in the villages was not plentiful and food preparation wasn't the most hygienic. Meals were often served from one bowl in which everyone would help themselves with a scooped hand. Women and children were often the last to eat whatever remained. There were so many problems that were difficult to solve. I wondered that if Nigeriens had only lived in their country their entire lives, perhaps they really didn't know what could be...

My response was to meet every individual in my department to find out what their positions were, what their academic background was, what their professional experiences were, what programs they currently worked on, what they wanted to accomplish in their position, what they saw as problems that the department could address, and how I could assist them if indeed they would be open to my assistance. I discovered a hierarchy in the team: the men had the senior positions and took on the important responsibilities. Women were relegated to less important tasks. I discovered one very impressive woman with a university degree in nutrition reading magazines as no work was assigned to her!!

Slowly but surely, I started to create a team by encouraging my counterpart to call and direct regular meetings. He was soon discussing important nutrition concerns in the nation and trying to incorporate everyone in pressing issues. Meanwhile, I attracted "outside" projects and when the men refused to lead those projects due to the lack of a financial incentive for leading the project, I promoted the women to take the lead. Although they were hesitant, I ensured them that I was supporting them at every stage.

It didn't take long to become a member of the team.... In fact, by the end of my four year stay, I participated in many health policy decisions and expanded my relationships to many of the other departments within the Ministry. I won the respect of the Minister, and as I mentioned earlier, received a Certificate of Appreciation from him. Also, the woman who was reading magazines when I first arrived in Niger ended up working internationally at UNICEF and FAO, giving compelling presentations on nutrition at many international conferences!

Q: So, it looks like you were working with the CDC from August 1990 to November 1994 based on your CV (curriculum vitae).

ETIAN: Yes. As someone who was very positively influenced by Peace Corps, I decided after my CDC position to apply to become a Peace Corps country director. Normally, you aren't supposed to ask for a specific assignment, but I went ahead and asked to be placed either in Cote d'Ivoire where I had been a volunteer or to Armenia to discover my roots!

In 1992, I received a phone call from Peace Corps headquarters offering me a country directorship in Bishkek and given 24 hours to make a decision. I was too embarrassed to ask in what country Bishkek was the capital. It didn't appear on any map, and when I called the nearest travel office asking for a round trip ticket to Bishkek, the travel agent had never heard of it!! Communications were not that easy, plus, I was still in Niger.

Luckily, I found a recent, beautiful *National Geographic* magazine focused on the countries of the former Soviet Union. There was an article about Kyrgyzstan, and its capital, which used to be called Frunze. It had been changed in 1991 to Bishkek! That's why I couldn't find it. I opened the article and was very excited until I saw a color photo of unusually dressed men on camels playing polo, using the forehead of a sheep as a puck! I was horrified. I convinced myself that going to Bishkek would be like traveling back to medieval times!!

I informed Peace Corps that although I would love to serve in Bishkek, I still hadn't finished my commitment with CDC. I thought I had destroyed my chances at getting an assignment but was happily surprised six months later when I was offered the post in Rabat! Morocco!! I immediately accepted the offer, only to be told by my CDC supervisor in Atlanta that they would not release me so soon!! The Nigerien Ministry had expectations of me staying on.... Refusing a posting in Rabat was so very difficult for me, and I was convinced that I had lost my opportunity to work as a senior staff member in a Peace Corps country!

By some miracle, a posting in Armenia actually became available. The timing was right, so I flew from Niger directly to Washington for an entire day of interviews. The first seven interviews were a breeze... I had intimate knowledge of Peace Corps having been a volunteer twice and domestic staff member for a number of years. The eighth interview, however, truly threw me through a loop.

The interviewer must have been an area expert on the Caucasus as he began his questions asking me about my impressions of the conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh. I had just been living in Niger for four years... I had never even HEARD of Nagorno-Karabakh! Although I was an Armenian, I had never stepped foot in Armenia. I had never even had contact with anyone in Armenia so when I was asked "Do you have family in Armenia? How do we know that if we hire you, you would defend the United States of America and not the Armenian government?" I was frazzled!

As bravely as I could, I responded, "I have never been in Armenia. I don't have family there. I became an American citizen at the age of eleven. All of my education was in America. I'm very much an American. I can't even imagine such questions." I walked out

of the interview convinced that I had completely ruined my chances for employment at a senior level. I shared my impressions with a friend who had been the Peace Corps Country Director in Niger.

To my surprise, Peace Corps phoned me a few weeks later and offered me the Country Director position in Armenia! I later found out that Armenia was on the agenda of politically minded Armenians living in America, and they desperately wanted the position, and several had even applied for it! None of them had ever served in the Peace Corps, nor did they have any international development experience. Their interest was solely political!!

I was mortified. Peace Corps staff is forbidden to have a political agenda overseas. And given that I was so very clueless about the political situation in Armenia, yet very informed and experienced with the Peace Corps program, I was awarded the position! Immediately afterwards, the Armenian diaspora enquired about me. How was it that this unknown Armenian had never participated in their political gatherings nor had an active role in their organizations?

In the fall of 1995 I flew to Armenia, sharing the passenger area of the Armenian airline with huge boxes, tractor tires, and all sorts of strange equipment which should have been in the hold, under the passengers. I was just about to ask the stewardess about the lack of a seat belt at my seat, when I noticed a younger passenger sit down next to me whose seat brusquely plummeted to the floor of the plane!!

I looked out the plane upon arrival at the Armenian airport. There were very few lights anywhere. It was difficult to fathom arriving in a large city with no lights. The bus that picked us up to take us to the airport had broken windows and was exceedingly filthy. Once we walked through security, overly enthusiastic Armenians were crowding us, yelling "Taxi! Taxi! Taxi!" It was a startling experience.

Luckily, I heard my name. The out-going Country Director had arrived to pick me up to take me to the main hotel in town. Since the break-up of the Soviet Union, Armenia experienced a myriad of problems. People were freezing, there was no electricity, no dependable running water, very little food in the stores. I had not been forewarned! The Peace Corps volunteer group was relatively small: less than a dozen volunteers remained from that very first group. To stay warm, Peace Corps had given them butane gas or diesel fuel burners, depending upon their locations. They had a very challenging time living with their host families in remote villages and in such a cold climate...I was convinced that they were among the bravest young people I had ever met. I encountered Armenians that informed me that due to the cold, they never left their beds! Every weekend, the Khachaturian concert hall would host performances by exceptional Armenian musicians. As the huge concert hall was heated during the performances, every seat in the huge concert hall was taken.

My initial six months were extremely difficult and I was constantly contemplating my departure. Little did I know that the Peace Corps staff, made up of over a dozen

Armenians, had sent a letter to headquarters stating that I—as a woman—couldn't possibly come to Armenia as a Peace Corps Country Director. After all, there were men who worked at the Peace Corps Office in Yerevan. Somehow, my whole world turned around after an initial period. I received a butane heater for my house. Our new set of volunteers arrived from the states, and I introduced them to life in Armenia. With my team, we managed to find them host families, and soon, the training program began. The volunteers impressed me with their progress in learning to speak Armenian! At the end of training, they travelled to their “permanent” host families and began their jobs with enthusiasm. I found these volunteers to be dedicated, adventuresome, friendly, and absolutely fabulous individuals!!

There were two distinct groups of volunteers. The younger group was destined to teach English, while the older volunteers set up business centers, taught entrepreneurship, introduced income-generating loan programs, and introduced the local population to technology.

I grew to love the country and its people. I found the Armenians to be very hospitable, and protective of the volunteers that stayed with them. Although they only had the bare necessities, Armenian families would invite me to their homes and treat me to fabulous meals! And as the situation with electricity and water improved, living in Armenia became so much more pleasant. Several of the Peace Corps men married Armenian women and took them home upon completion of their service. My staff also was phenomenal, and we truly became a team, working so very well together. I was able to implement a new health program, and volunteers were recruited to work in the area of health education. My administrative officer even got an environmental program off the ground, so the Peace Corps Armenia program flourished well after our departure. I departed Armenia in 2000, having worked for five years or two full tours.

Being of Armenian heritage had its advantages. Although the dialect spoken in Armenia differed from the Armenian I had learned at home with my parents, I was able to understand a great deal of conversations around me. Plus, the local Armenians felt that I was a kindred spirit, and went out of their way to make me feel welcome.

Q: Well, I do have a question, because it sounds like you were doing a lot of direct participation, in your other assignments and jobs, with the people of the country you were working in. It sounds like this one was where you really had to be more of an administrator of Americans who were there. How did you feel about being a manager like that for those five years?

ETIAN: The difference between managing local staff and managing an American organization made up of American volunteers was quite different. Armenia, in particular, did not have a history of entrepreneurship. Business volunteers, in particular, had to overcome cultural barriers that they had not encountered before. During the early breakup of the Soviet Union, people had no experience with capitalism. Making a profit from selling goods or services was frowned upon during the Soviet area. Thus, it was difficult for the volunteers to engage local people to launch businesses, apply for loans, keep

accounts listing financial transactions and the like. Luckily I had American staff members with business and agro-business backgrounds to lead the business initiatives. It truly is impressive to see young people in Armenia today who excel in information technology (IT), and have launched successful enterprises. The country has been recognized in recent years as the source of IT expertise.

While in Armenia, next to the American Ambassador, I represented the largest group of Americans in-country. I attended country team meetings and participated in official functions. What comes to mind was a question posed by the Russian Ambassador to Armenia. He was an elderly gentleman who was suspicious of Americans scattered throughout the nation. He quietly enquired, “What are your volunteers really doing in the villages?” I could not have volunteers taken for information-gatherers, as this would pose a serious security concern. So I responded with, “What do you think my volunteers are doing in those villages? Are there secrets in those villages?” My questions put an immediate stop to his curiosity. To ensure volunteers’ safety, they were not allowed in those early years to visit the U.S. Embassy or any of the American organizations that were working in Armenia. Nowadays, USAID and the State Department finance some of the projects that the volunteers work on.

Q: It looks like your next assignment in 2000 was in the United States. It looks like you may have had some administrative types of jobs. So, let’s talk about your return to the U.S. and, in particular, to the Washington, D.C. area.

ETIAN: I returned to the United States to work as a Senior Program Officer with a private health firm Family Health International (FHI). Their portfolio focused primarily on HIV/AIDs prevention and care programs. I was responsible for managing programs in several francophone African countries as well as former countries of the Soviet Union. My first assignment was in Rwanda, and I arrived in the solemn country barely six years after the horrific genocide. My mission was to assist the FHI country director in creating voluntary HIV counseling and testing centers at both government and private hospitals. I also drafted health education proposals aimed at prevention of HIV in youth.

On the sixth anniversary of the Rwandan genocide, which was close to the anniversary of the Armenian genocide (April 24), I hired a taxi to take me to the genocide memorial. Anticipating seeing a substantial sculpture or monument, I was surprised to be taken to a technical college after a two hour journey. When I questioned the driver, a soldier approached the taxi, informed me that this was indeed their memorial and accompanied me to one of the entrances of a classroom.

Oh my God. Every room had a small table covered with plastic sheeting, on top of which were 20 to 30 bodies that were killed six years previously; they were covered with caustic soda, a white powder that was unable to hide all the horrendous slashes on the victims’ heads and bodies. The expressions on the faces of men, women and children alike were horrific. My first reaction was sheer horror, and I screamed at the soldier, “How could you possibly show this? Why aren’t these people buried?”

He calmly responded that his countrymen wanted everyone to witness this scene so that such a calamity would never ever happen again. I was unable to eat for the next two days.

After three weeks overseas, I returned to the Washington area to prepare for my next overseas assignment, this time to Russia. In 2000, the two nations with the fastest growing incidence of HIV were Russia and Vietnam – based primarily on transmission through the use of needles among drug addicts. I already had a basic knowledge of Russian and was excited about returning to Moscow and St. Petersburg. However, my parents had recently died within months of each other in California, and by default, I became the executor of their estate, which the family was anxious to settle. I also had not been able to grieve properly, having gone from one job to the next without adequate time in between.

I returned to California in 2000 to take care of family affairs. After several months, IRS (Internal Revenue Service) recruited me for their newly launched strategic program aimed at identifying diverse persons to work in IRS offices throughout the nation. I invited two dashing Puerto Ricans from their local IRS office for a photo shoot in the nation's capital. Huge posters of the fashionably clad gentlemen were produced and distributed to many states with the logo of the IRS and a statement attesting to their successful work with the government agency. An attractive IRS female accountant, who was afflicted with spina bifida and worked in a wheelchair at her IRS office turned out to be a Special Olympics equestrian champion in the area of dressage. Taking photos of her in her wheelchair and atop a magnificent Arabian horse with her English riding attire resulted in a boon to our recruitment of physically challenged employees. Ms. Hand actually became quite a celebrity after our publicity efforts!

I remained with the IRS for only six months. I no longer suffered from periods of grieving and was able to return to my love of international development work. I joined USAID in 2001 as a Public Health Officer, and after an extended period of training at headquarters-which included intensive Russian language instruction at the Foreign Service Institute-I was assigned as the Deputy Director of the Office of Health in Moscow.

Prior to joining the USAID staff in Moscow, I underwent a total knee replacement. I was absolutely dumbfounded when Foreign Service Officers-some who I had never met-donated their vacation leave to allow me to recuperate at home!! I also took advantage of my homestay to undertake projects in the areas of TB and Quality Assurance with specialized Washington-based senior staff as part of my training. I developed an on-line course on Tuberculosis for the in-coming health officers and conducted research on quality of health care facilities in various African countries (which ended up in a prestigious public health journal).

Q: So then, you went off to Russia? Talk a little bit about what you were doing in Russia.

ETIAN: I went to Moscow as the deputy director of the Health Office, which was comprised of seven Russian nationals, four of them physicians, and several Americans.

Our office was responsible for HIV/AIDs, TB, maternal and child health and family planning programs as well as private-public partnerships. Our yearly budget was approximately \$24 million dollars. I also served as the USAID Health Representative for the \$4.8 million Russian Far East program; identified funds for and coordinated the \$1 million Slava Rostropovich Hepatitis B program, and oversaw the \$25 million multiple year flagship communications and healthy lifestyles program entitled Healthy Russia 2020.

I had many opportunities to work in the field. One such trip took me to Irkutsk on the Transiberian Railway. Drugs were flowing readily into the area, so I joined my colleagues at the Russian Red Cross to make midnight road trips along specified highways and make stops at designated intervals. The American government did not allow us to do needle exchanges at the time, but the Russian Red Cross brought along their supplies of clean needles, condoms, informational pamphlets, lists of where addicts and prostitutes could go for medical care, etc. At every stop, young and old adults would approach our car, hand over their used needles in exchange for clean ones, seek condoms and advice, and discuss their current situations. I participated in educating them to the dangers of their activities and seeking answers to how to change their lives through referrals, methadone programs, counseling, etc. In Moscow, we partnered with a local group that set up specific health centers where HIV-infected persons could get medical care. This was especially vital at that time as public nurses and doctors in government sponsored medical facilities would refuse to see HIV patients! We uncovered secluded locations where organized crime groups made prostitutes readily available for paying customers. Trying to reach these young women with condoms and information on how to escape their predicaments was not as successful.

At one point, the actor Richard Gere spoke at a conference to Ministry of Health officials. He asked if anyone in the group knew someone with AIDS. No one raised their hands. Then he enquired if anyone in their families had contracted AIDs. Richard Gere went on to explain that as an actor there were many friends and colleagues – actors, screenwriters, production staff, etc. – that he lost to AIDS, and he couldn't believe that Russia managed to avoid AIDS in their large population!

By the end of the conference, a few participants opened up, stating that some of these individuals presented themselves at health clinics with the classic symptoms. In time, the problem of HIV/AIDs was brought to the top of the health agenda in Russia. With the support of WHO (World Health Organization) and a very active UNAIDS (United Nations AIDS Program), along with developmental and financial assistance from USAID, efforts were being made by the Russian Ministry of Health.

One of the most promising interventions was launched by the USAID AIDS Advisor. It was common knowledge that Russian Army recruits were rejected by the military upon the discovery that they had the HIV virus; yet, the Russian military refused to admit that there were any soldiers in the country with AIDS. Thus, a very large military conference was organized by USAID, and Navy medical personnel from San Diego were brought in to lead the entire gathering.

The sight of very large tough-looking Russian military generals laden with medals and insignias on their uniforms was absolutely overwhelming. Admitting that they didn't even have cadets with AIDS was mind-blowing. These claims were quickly brought to rest when the American Naval Officers related worldwide statistics on military personnel with HIV/AIDS. They encouraged their Russian counterparts to have a better look at their health statistics in the military. By the end of the week, not only did Russian military personnel admit that they had soldiers with AIDS, but that they were kicking them out of the service upon discovering they had AIDS. They were not even admitting gay soldiers in the various branches of the military.

Our USAID team was relieved that by the end of the conference, the participants had drafted a proposal on how to proceed with candidates and cadets who had AIDS. The report indicated what kind of medical interaction and/or referral service would be needed, as well as prevention strategies accompanied with written materials.

My tour in Russia was extremely illuminating and rewarding.

Q: Today is November 9th, 2020. It's our second session with Sylva Etian, USAID former employee, who's had a very interesting career. We're going to be recording this on Zoom. I'm also recording it on Rev, on my phone. Sylva, do you have anything more you'd like to talk about regarding your time in Moscow working for USAID? Anything you want to say?

ETIAN: I noticed that the U.S. Embassy and the USAID offices were in buildings close to one another, so I had easy access to people in the State Department. They had a lot of respect for us at USAID, and we actually did a few projects together. When PEPFAR was launched, the Ambassador called for a committee made up of representatives of all the various American agencies, so work on HIV/AIDS was shared.

Being an officer in Russia was very special for me as a first tour. Not only was I able to work concurrently with State Department personnel, CDC, and Department of Health and Human Services representatives, I attended a number of high level negotiations with Russian Ministry of Health Officials. Secondly, I was able to travel extensively in the country, and address many health concerns.

In less than a few years, life expectancy among men in Russia was decreasing, from 77 to 58. The population of Russia declined from 144 million to 142 million during my time in Moscow. So, I enthusiastically embraced a program entitled Healthy Russia 2020 which addressed the very challenging problems men faced, such as unemployment, lack of skills to embrace a society based on entrepreneurship and not repetitive factory-oriented work, heavy smoking, exceedingly poor diets, depression, and ultimately, suicide. My healthy Russia team launched a number of interventions: created a foundation made up of famous sports stars, astronauts, respected professionals, and Russian personalities that assisted in programming activities to influence the adult population. We had a live feed from the international space station with the Russian astronaut explaining that to be one, he

participated in sports, led a healthy lifestyle, didn't drink, and studied hard at school! The Healthy Russia team actually produced a professional film depicting students tempted to turn to drugs and the consequences of such behaviors. We utilized comic book characters in educational materials. It was an enterprising time for us all, and an exceptional experience for me to work with diverse teams.

Q: Can you tell me a little bit about what you did in Moscow that was not exactly work-related? Anything that excited you and what you felt was a cool thing to do in Moscow.

ETIAN: I come from a musical family. My uncle was a violinist, my mother and her two sisters were accomplished pianists, my own sister started as a musician, as did my brother. I couldn't imagine a better place to be in the world, as Russia is recognized as a world leader of talented musicians, artists, singers, circus performers, orchestras. I spent many an evening at the Bolshoi theater, I thoroughly enjoyed presentations of folk dancing that only the Russians could excel at. Oftentimes, the Tchaikovsky Music Hall would invite world renowned orchestras to perform. Whenever I had visitors from America, I would indulge them by showing them the remarkable presentations boasting young, athletic Russian performers.

Although I was not very fond of heavy Russian food and vodka, I did marvel at all the new westernized restaurants that were opening up! I most certainly took advantage of my time in Moscow to discover all the novelty restaurants and shops that were opening up. I especially indulged in the city's huge souvenir market and came home with a Russian balalaika!!

The surprising thing was I became quite the dare devil when driving on the huge boulevards of Moscow. Initially, I was intimidated, even though I had CD (*corps diplomatique*, diplomatic corps) plates...but still, the traffic police would stop me! I learned to trick the policemen by pretending that I was weak in Russian. The terms, "I don't understand" and "I am not Monday" sounded so similar in their language that in my best American accent, I would pronounce the latter! The policeman would be perplexed, roar with laughter, and let me go!! It was great fun uncovering tactics to get around some of the minor problems that I encountered.

Q: My understanding, then, is that USAID would have the budget, and contractors would be hired to work on projects. But the creativity sounded like it was within USAID, deciding what kind of projects might be best.

ETIAN: Yes. On many occasions, USAID would hire contractors to implement projects, well after doing an assessment, deciding on a budget, and writing a detailed scope of work. An example is the contractor hired to work in the maternal child healthcare program. Under our supervision, the contractor John Snow Incorporated worked in an entire region to improve maternal health care and birthing practices. This program was so successful that women from non-USAID districts would come into our district to have

their babies. It was very obvious that the mortality rates had decreased considerably in our districts, and people had heard about our methods of safer birthing care.

Because most of the physicians working with us were all women, we actually enjoyed some time off together by going to the *banya* (Russian baths). If you can imagine being the only American, with all these gifted ladies taking everything off and jumping into the pool to get refreshed! We'd all sit around a fire later and have a drink. I'm not really a drinker, but I would sip a little something. Experiences such as these banya visits created an incredible bond with all these wonderful people I worked with. I was so fortunate; they really felt close to me and I felt ever so close to them. It was a wonderful, heartwarming experience, working with Russian teams of female physicians. I truly enjoyed working with the dynamic teams of contractors as well.

Q: Do you have any comments about the embassy management there? I know you were AID, but is there anything you want to say about the life or management of the embassy itself?

ETIAN: I will say that I had the deepest respect for the people in the front office, people like Ambassador John Beyrle, DCM Eric Ruben and Ambassador William Burns who not only were extremely cognizant of their surroundings and responsibilities, but sincerely cared about the American personnel at the mission.

As I commented before, State Department personnel and USAID employees felt like one large team. We shared a portion of the services. As time passed, we used the embassy transport services, the services of the housing department, and various other benefits that State Department offered their personnel.

Q: Great. Well, we can move on.

ETIAN: My next assignment with USAID was as the head of the Health Office in Senegal, West Africa. To me, that was like coming home. I had already spent a number of years in Africa, and I'd always wanted, even though I had visited Senegal in the past, to live there. Once again, I was very impressed with my health section. My colleagues were either physicians, or medical personnel with a great deal of experience. They knew their country and its needs extremely well, and gave me an exceptional orientation to the health sector in Senegal.

Q: Could you tell me the date of when you left Russia to go to Senegal? Do you remember the year and month, possibly?

ETIAN: I was in Moscow from 2003 to 2006. So, I went to Senegal in the summer of 2006 and departed two years later. I was the Director of the Health Office, and member of the senior management team with full responsibility for the Mission's \$28 million per year health program (which was over 75% of the USAID Mission's budget). I participated in policy discussions, program planning, implementation and evaluation of our programs. I supervised ten professionals and oversaw the five-year \$127 million

strategy launched in July 2006 in the areas of HIV/AIDS, TB, Maternal and Child Health, Family planning and health policy and financing initiatives. I was also responsible for the \$64 million per year malaria program launched under the President's Malaria Initiative.

Malaria was the primary cause of death among children when I arrived in Senegal. The Gates Foundation had invested a significant amount of money into vaccines to address the problem. My team set up a variety of interventions in the area including distributing mosquito nets doused in pesticides, spraying homes, training local personnel, providing technical support. We asked our Ambassador, Mrs. Janet Jacobs, to participate in a program with Senegalese grandmothers, who, in turn, would dance and sing lyrics incorporating mosquito nets. Ambassador Jacobs made a welcoming speech, posed with the grandmothers, and showed them how to douse the nets with a special insecticide.

A very pregnant younger representative of the grandmothers announced that upon birth, she would name her baby after the Ambassador! She was excited to be getting this free mosquito net from the hands of the American Ambassador. We were all thrilled, as was the Ambassador. However, three months later when the representative had her baby, it turned out to be a boy! So, a village representative enquired as to the Ambassador's husband's first name! Today, there is the ambassador's husband's namesake in this small village in Senegal.

We were delighted to be the first country to host the former Navy Admiral, the Washington-based head of the Malaria Initiative program to Senegal. We accompanied him to various villages where he had the opportunity to speak to many of the recipients of our assistance. He was pleased to see such a successful program.

PEPFAR (President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief) was being rolled out in many nations of Africa, but due to Senegal's very low incidence of HIV/AIDS, the \$5 billion budget was distributed elsewhere. This was predominantly due to the work of USAID and non-governmental organizations working for many years with village imams and dignitaries in villages all over the country. Those efforts, including testing and counseling people, holding informational meetings in the villages, etc. proved to be extremely promising interventions. Senegal proved to be an example for others to emulate.

Q: And that was with USAID?

ETIAN: Of course, yes. I developed an exceptional rapport with the Public Health Ministry as well as with the medical personnel in the field. The relationship between Senegal and America was also very positive.

Q: Were you using French, during all these communications?

ETIAN: Absolutely. I think the only time we used English was with our English-speaking American colleagues in the office. Everyone at USAID/Senegal spoke French. For me, it was second nature because I had studied in France, lived in a number of francophone African countries, and scored extremely high in French at the FSI Institute.

Q: What was your social and personal life like in Senegal?

ETIAN: Senegal is a beautiful country. You can go to the beautiful beaches scattered all along the coast. Even in winter, sitting on the beach consuming delicious seafood was a treat. Watching people, catching the sun's rays, chatting with villagers selling crafts or treats to passersby was delightful. As a former French colony, Senegal boasted a number of exceptional French restaurants as well as unique cafes with Senegalese cuisine.

The USAID offices overlooked a hotel with a swimming pool, so that, too, was a benefit of the area. Swimming after a day in the office was always relaxing. Traveling in the interior was always a treat because the countryside and desert areas were striking, certainly at dawn and sunset. Villagers were very hospitable. Mosques and local architecture were intriguing. I found the downtown capital also very enjoyable: the numerous painted public buses, the hustle and bustle of residents, the colorful clothes worn by the ladies and magnificent boubous worn majestically by the men.... Wandering in downtown Dakar was a delight to the senses. My only complaint was the humidity. Half the year was very pleasant; the other half, difficult to enjoy the out of doors!

Q: So, it sounds like you traveled around the country?

ETIAN: Oh, yes. We traveled to many of the health centers, and a few times, flew to Casamance in the south. Some of the American military bases were happy to donate their hospital equipment to local hospitals, so we would fly to Kolda in the Casamance and present the equipment. The health authorities were always appreciative, and we had the opportunity to discover different sectors in the country.

I did have an interesting visit upon my arrival in Senegal. I was only in Senegal for a week when one of the contractors asked me to accompany her to a place called Tambacounda to visit their USAID-sponsored education project. They wanted to incorporate nutrition sessions in their local grammar schools. I accompanied the contractor and while I was visiting the school, I observed the Senegalese women preparing food over large vats of boiling liquid. As I stood watching, I heard them speaking in a language I understood! I was amazed... so amazed that I responded in THEIR language!! The women were shocked, having been told that I had just arrived in Senegal a week ago.

And knowing that their official languages in Senegal were none that I had been familiar with, I realized that they were speaking a dialect of Mali's national language Bambara! While I was a Peace Corps Volunteer in Cote d'Ivoire in 1973, I had learned Dioula, which was also a dialect of Bambara! Yet, these women exclaimed that they did NOT speak Bambara nor Dioula but what they claimed was AHONKE! Since Malians had the reputation of being traders, working in markets all over West Africa, their language, and dialects of it, must have spread over part of the continent! All of a sudden, these amazing ladies in colorful African garb became quite excited, grabbed me, adopted me! I was pleasantly surprised and welcomed by these intriguing African chefs!!

Q: I'm guessing that security wasn't the same as in Russia, so you were able to socialize and get to know local people?

ETIAN: Absolutely. In Russia, you always had to carry your passport, show who you were when entering or exiting the US Embassy. In Senegal, I was extremely free to come and go. I always felt safe. I don't think security was a problem whatsoever.

Q: How about the embassy structure there? It must have been smaller than Moscow. Can you talk a little bit about how you interacted with the rest of the embassy?

ETIAN: Let me tell you, the embassy was well over an hour away. In Moscow, we were two minutes away. In Senegal the US Embassy was smack in the middle of hustling, bustling Dakar. Our offices were northwest, in Almadies, an hour or more away. The traffic was horrendous, so you needed a good reason to go visit the Embassy.

Since my departure, a new US Embassy has been built in the Almadies area, and it incorporates the USAID offices.

Q: I see. Alright. Anything more you'd like to say about Senegal?

ETIAN: Yes, I was surprised to find graduates of my alma mater's Department of African Languages and Literature in Senegal, studying local languages and culture. One brilliant student had completed a doctorate and was working with Fulani languages. Another had set up an institute for languages where American students would come to study Wolof or Mandinke or other local languages. It was wonderful to see them and socialize with them and compare notes and assist them when they needed help. I visited some of their projects. They'd ask me to come and talk to their groups.

Q: Interesting, that connection back to your educational days.

ETIAN: Yes. It was an interesting connection. During my graduate studies, I asked my advisor if I should switch my major to African languages and literature. He replied that my major should open up professional opportunities to go to those countries and use the languages you wish to study and my minor should be in the areas of my interest. How right he was!!

Q: You had an interesting departure after Senegal. As I recall, you returned to Russia but this time, with the State Department as a Foreign Service Officer. Talk about how that happened.

ETIAN: Yes, It's very interesting and unusual. Since 2001, I have been a direct hire Foreign Service Officer with USAID. The State Department sent a memo to USAID stating that they had difficulty in recruiting a Public Affairs Officer and a Political Officer for the Consulate-General in Vladivostok, Russian Far East. As I had such a rewarding

experience in Russia from 2003 to 2006, I was excited about returning, this time to the Russian Far East.

I sent a letter to the Consul-General Thomas Armbruster stating that I was a USAID FSO with the educational qualifications, experience in the field of communications, and facility with the Russian language. He was delighted to offer me the Public Affairs Officer position, interviewed me at the State Department in Washington, and authorized a long-term session at FSI to reinforce my Russian language skills.

Prior to going to Vladivostok to live, I checked out a globe of the world to see what latitude and longitude it was located on, hoping to find out what kind of weather I would expect. What I discovered was that Vladivostok is located on the same latitude as Marseille, France. I have been to Marseille and it has a pleasant climate. So, I thought living in the Russian Far East would be bearable, although I knew Moscow could be freezing!

I had the shock of my life! Winter was debilitating: -40 degrees! One day, my car made such a horrific noise when I tried to start it that I went to the mechanic stating that my Subaru was crying and weeping, he curtly replied, “Lady, you would too if you had to get started in -40 degree weather.” So, you can imagine that the one terrible thing about Vladivostok was that the winters were jarring, freezing, debilitating.

Q: Nothing like Marseille, right.

ETIAN: Nothing like Marseille. And I realized that because it’s east of Siberia and east of China, the winds coming off just froze the entire peninsula. In fact, it was so cold that some of the trucks would actually drive on the ice to get to the other side. They used some of the frozen inlets to drive on!!

I will say, however, that there was one particularly horrible storm. I don’t know how I did it, but my American neighbors and Russian colleagues scrambled into my rear wheel drive station wagon. It was miraculous, but we ended up getting to the consulate intact, and I was unofficially awarded the “Mama of the Soviet Union Award” for being the only vehicle that was able to arrive at the consulate before noon on that perilous day.

Q: Nothing like Moscow. I think Moscow is rather... doable. Where did you live in Vladivostok? Did they give you a house? Where did you live?

ETIAN: There was a gentleman who had built a complex of four townhouses on a hill overlooking a spectacular bay. Each townhouse had four floors, with its own generator, and water supply. One entire wall was made of floor to ceiling windows and looked out on a bay similar to the Bosphorus in Istanbul. There were magnificent ships, the beautiful sea, a bridge, and when lit up, the view was absolutely breath-taking!

I was given the largest of the four units, because as a public affairs officer, I was responsible for planning social events. One active group called FLEX was made up of

Russian teenagers sent to American high schools for a year. Before their departure and upon their return, I would host them at my home.

Q: Well, tell me more about your State Department position. This is so totally different than working in health programs with USAID.

ETIAN: On a crossover assignment to the State Department, I supervised five professionals in the Public Affairs Department of the Consulate-General in Vladivostok. I was actually responsible for the Russian Far East's public diplomacy portfolio which served as the platform for change in public attitudes. The ultimate aim was to influence the formulation and execution of foreign policy. I worked with my team to identify and implement programs in support of the U.S.-Russia Bilateral Presidential Sub-Commissions' dedication to culture, education, and sports diplomacy. I managed over twenty grants a year, using the funds to invite American cultural figures – dancers, musicians, professors, journalists, personal trainers, computer experts, astronauts, orchestras, bands etc. – to the Russian Far East. They would do presentations at universities, at the American corner in local libraries, in performance halls, sports complexes, public areas and various venues etc. I also did a number of presentations, to university students, high school teachers, professors, students in English language classes in various parts of the far east. The presentations included one on Martin Luther King, another on Ernest Hemingway, a third on social media (which was not so familiar to most of the teachers and some of the students), and on generational differences. I was even asked to do a presentation on the Russian regarded as one of the greatest authors of all time, Count Lev Nikolayevich Tolstoy, better known to Americans as Leo Tolstoy! Since every Russian student was familiar with this great writer, I concentrated on the less familiar story of eight of his thirteen children who were both supportive or against Tolstoyan beliefs!!

One successful project involved a famous and popular American cartoonist Daryl Cagel who would conduct presentations at various sites and with diverse audiences. Concurrently, my team invited a Russian cartoonist whose job during the Cold War was to create cartoons that criticized the United States. We brought the two together for memorable discussions with university students, and even created a beautifully illustrated book of competing cartoons that we distributed throughout the region.

When I asked young Russians which American musicians they'd like to hear in Vladivostok, they mentioned Michael Jackson, Santana and other famous musicians. My budget would not permit financing such illustrious personalities, but I was able to invite one of the guitarists who performed with Michael Jackson, or one of Santana's famous band members. To hear these performers, Russian musicians spent two days on the Trans-Siberian Railway – the longest railway-line in the world completed in 1904 -to Vladivostok to attend the performances of these stars in their very own Philharmonic Hall!

I was considered a rock star among these local musicians, not only because I brought more “modern” performers to the area, but that these performers skipped the popular sites

of Moscow and St. Petersburg to come directly to their part of the world!! Rural people in the Russian Far East often felt ignored by the capitol administrators nine time zones away!

We brought professional dancers from America who worked with the local dance companies, and later performed for Russian audiences. We had public art created in outdoor spaces, thanks to an American artist who specialized in public artworks. An American journalist gave classes on social media and American journalistic practices to university students. Our American astronaut joined a Russian cosmonaut, and together, they made presentations and traveled throughout the region to the delight of hundreds of young pupils. We had American filmmakers represented at the annual Vladivostok film festival...and one year, an American film actually won first prize!! And hundreds of American sailors from the 6th Fleet visited hospitals, orphanages, and youth centers, playing games and listening to children sing and dance. Many orphans had an opportunity to visit the huge ships that docked in Vladivostok as well! And a chess tournament between American sailors and Russian middle school students was held on an American submarine. You can guess which side won!!

Now, the other part of my job, of course, was that of a press attaché. We reviewed articles in the Russian newspapers; accepted interviews with those papers for our Consul-General; initiated a community of people interested in American-Russian affairs; started the first Facebook page for the consulate; and promoted activities for young people based on current affairs.

Being a Public Affairs Officer was the ideal position for me! I loved meeting people and bringing them together. My team was exceptionally gifted, hard-working, and dedicated. The employees at the Consulate were very close, and parties were plentiful in and out of the consulate to celebrate Women's Day, birthdays, the arrival of Alice Cooper to the area, the departure of American diplomats, etc....I was sad when my tour was coming to a close. Although my supervisors in Vladivostok and Moscow requested my presence for yet another year, the USAID Administrator in Washington insisted that those of us on loan to the State Department had to return to home base.

Q: Well, just imagine where Russians stand now with their abilities to hack and disrupt all over the world because of their computer skills. When you were there, was that evident? In the early years? You were there between 2009 and 2011....

ETIAN: I must talk about my experience with technology. The middle aged and older Russian Professors were really thrilled when I accepted their suggestion to talk about technology. They professed that they didn't understand why their students were looking underneath their desks and doing something using their fingers. They had never seen a cell phone during the time I was there. They had no clue about social media. So one day, I brought in my cell phone, an ipod, an ipad, a laptop, all sorts of technological wonders and began class with a powerful you tube presentation that introduced all these technological tools in a very provocative manner. The presentation was quite alarming as

it ended with “One day, we’re going to have baby computers inside us, implanted in ourselves!”

The professors were taken aback; they couldn’t believe that these tools were commonplace in America. Nowadays, many of these young Russians are experts in communication technologies, even in the remote city of Vladivostok. Most of them have had excellent educations in the past, especially in the fields of mathematics and science. And their proficiency in English was quite impressive. Especially surprising as the far majority of English professors were Russians.

I lived and worked in the Russian Far East from 2009 to 2011. No one was even thinking about hacking computers at the time I was in Russia. I imagine that Moscow was ahead in this area, but during those years, it was not evident!

Q: Right. When you were talking to these professors, colleagues and students, about Russian students being ahead of their own professors in the field of technology and the fact that many professors weren’t even aware of the technology available...much less had seen these devices, it must have been very interesting...

ETIAN: Yes. It was indeed a very interesting time to be in Russia. I have to say, though, that well before I had been in the Russian Far East, a survey was conducted on the relationship between Russia and America, on how Russians viewed America and Americans. The friendship level measuring international collaboration and cooperation was quite low – close to 29% acceptance. Vice President Biden actually visited Russia well after we had been working there a few years. There were several Public Affairs Officers, one in each of the Consulates: St. Petersburg, Yekaterinburg, Vladivostok. When the survey was repeated several years later, it was found that the U.S.-Russia relationship was more favorable - 61%. Of course, most of that positive uptick was due to our incredible Ambassadors, diplomats, and high level negotiations. However, I do believe that we Public Affairs Officers in the regions had considerable influence on the results.

The region I lived in was six times the size of France. In the entire Russian Far East, there were fewer than 40 Americans, and ten of them were there under religious auspices. In the Consulate-General there were five Americans at most. So, it was very important that my team made a big splash! And that we did by taking our talented performers out on the road to places like Sakhalin Island and the Petropavlovsk-Kamchatka Peninsula.

I remember bringing a tantalizing jazz group Ty Stephens and his band to Kamchatka to perform for reluctant officials. Once the group did perform, however, the residents of the peninsula demanded a repeat performance the following year!!

Q: What is the population of Vladivostok?

ETIAN: It’s currently about 610,000.

Q: Is their main industry shipping and commerce?

ETIAN: Yes; Vladivostok is a seaport and administrative center of the Primorsky Territory. It was founded in 1860 as a Russian military outpost... and became a major seaport and naval base. During World War I Vladivostok was the chief Pacific entry port for military supplies and railway equipment (as part of the lend lease program) sent to Russia from the United States. During the Soviet period Vladivostok became the home of the Pacific Fleet... closed to foreign shipping and other contacts from the late 1950s to 1990!

Vladivostok is currently the chief educational and cultural center of the Russian Far East – the site of the Far Eastern Branch of the Russian Academy of Sciences, the Far Eastern State University and medical, art education, polytechnic, trade, and marine-engineering institutes. Students enrolled in institutes of higher education make up a significant proportion of the city's total population. The city has theaters as well as a philharmonic concert hall with a symphony orchestra, museums of local history and of the history of the Pacific Fleet.

I'm happy that I was able to live and work in Vladivostok between 2009 and 2011 because currently, the Consulate-General is closed due to political reasons.

Q: Isn't Vladivostok sort of near Japan?

ETIAN: Oh, it's very close to Japan. In fact, if you remember that horrendous tsunami and their nuclear accident...

Q: Oh, right, in Japan.

ETIAN: Right. We were so close to Japan that many local residents started taking special medication against radiation blooms because they were afraid that fumes from the nuclear reactor would reach the Russian Far East. We also had a lot of photographers – especially Russian journalists and photographers – who took pictures of the devastation in Japan. It was a very sad time. The Consul-General and I would be invited to the exhibits and would say a few words. Our diplomats in Vladivostok were very close to the Japanese representatives in the Russian Far East.

Also our Consulate-General was only 100 kilometers north of North Korea. Of course, we weren't allowed to enter North Korea, but we would see a number of North Korean workers hired by the Russians to do construction work in Vladivostok.

Q: Well, you managed to live with surveillance in Moscow. When you were in Vladivostok, did you feel a return to Russian surveillance?

ETIAN: Surveillance in Vladivostok was nothing compared to what I experienced in Moscow. However, anyone coming in and out of the consulate had to be checked by the Russian military officers at the door. The days that I was responsible for locking the

Consulate, the officials would watch my every move. In my townhouse, I suspected that people were listening in on the telephone conversations.

The advantage of being single was that I really didn't have anyone to talk to at home. I listened to music, watched television, played my piano, worked on my computer, read books, and enjoyed the view of the bay out my living room window.

Q: Was there evidence that someone had been there?

ETIAN: We had a group of security guards downstairs from my townhouse. Anyone that came to visit the townhouses were asked for identification. I was friendly with the guards at the entrance to our homes and occasionally took them hot chocolate during periods of freezing cold. Meeting with the guards provided an excellent opportunity to practice my Russian speaking and listening skills.

Q: Do you have any observations about working for State directly versus USAID? Anything you'd like to say about the differences of working for both?

ETIAN: I was pleasantly surprised working at the State Department. At first, I was apprehensive, not knowing how I would be accepted. But I was so warmly received, and once we began working on all our activities, I became a member of the family!! I was also happy to hear compliments from my supervisor and other staff members who remarked that I fit in so well that no one would have predicted that I wasn't a Public Affairs Officer!!

I think I was an exceptional fit for the Public Affairs office. Even on my own time, I was attending concerts, performances, art galleries, ballet and modern dance sessions, films. The State department personnel thought they were hiring a public health specialist, and even though we did participate in several activities related to HIV/AIDS, they were pleased that my background and experience matched the needs of the Public Affairs department.

Q: So, your assignment was for two years?

ETIAN: It was a two-year assignment. The American Ambassador in Moscow wrote a letter to USAID asking them to extend my stay in Vladivostok for one more year. The head of the Public Affairs Office in Moscow also wrote a similar letter. And my Consul General requested a one year extension. However, the USAID Administrator requested that all USAID personnel on loan to various U.S. Government agencies return to Washington.

I departed in fall of 2011. As I noted earlier, it was extremely difficult for me to leave. I had bonded with my staff, my colleagues, and had many Russian friends in the area and in other parts of the Russian Far East.

Q: Is USAID still in Russia? I had the impression that it wasn't anymore.

ETIAN: Oh, no. The Russian Federation requested their departure several years ago.

Q: Well, did someone replace you in the Consulate in Vladivostok? Was it a State Department official?

ETIAN: Yes. A State Department officer replaced me, and someone replaced him, as well, two years later. The State Department has two-year terms.

Q: So, what happened next? You left Vladivostok, and where did you go?

ETIAN: Well, I actually bid on a position in Washington, and I was hired as a Congressional Liaison officer in the USAID Office of Legal and Public Affairs, LPA.

Q: May I ask why you didn't bid on another overseas assignment?

ETIAN: Yes. Usually, overseas assignments at USAID are two to four year commitments, and I was very close to that magical age when you are obligated to retire.

Q: Obligated?

ETIAN: Foreign Service officers are required to retire at the age of 65. It would not have been fair to apply for an overseas posting only to depart post in the middle of an assignment.

Q: Okay.

ETIAN: I was surprised when I received the letter from HR (Human Resources) noting that I was 64 years of age and should begin to plan my retirement. I was registered for a very useful and informative two month retirement planning workshop, and retired immediately after its completion. One of the organizers of the workshop actually contacted me to ask if I'd like to be a speaker on a panel for a similar workshop in the future. Although I would have loved to participate, I decided that I needed to finally touch base with my extensive family in California. I retired in the winter of 2012, spent considerable time with my family, and decided to move back to the Washington metropolitan area to begin Chinese language studies.

Q: What office did you work for in your last post?

ETIAN: The Legal and Public Affairs Office.

Q: So, was the Washington assignment in State Department or USAID?

ETIAN: The position was a USAID posting. I became a Congressional Liaison Officer in late 2011 and left in the winter of 2012. My role was to convince Congress of the importance of foreign assistance through seminars, informational newsletters, and

receptions. When asked why the United States should increase funding for international development, I responded with a three-pronged approach. First of all, the US needs to improve the livelihoods of people in difficult situations (by assisting nations to acquire electrical, water, internet services) so that they have no need to emigrate to Europe or the United States. Secondly, our country should assist members of the developing world develop their commercial markets. In this manner we would have trading partners, and both sides would benefit economically from such an endeavor. Thirdly, the United States has a reputation of being a humanitarian country. To continue in this vein, the U.S. by all means should continue to assist those who are desperately in need. We have only to look at the miraculous results of the Marshall Plan in Europe, or the incredible strides made by South Korea with American assistance.

These were the vital messages that I tried repeatedly to transmit to Congressmen and Congresswomen. Yet, given Congress' continued desire to reduce federal spending, my task was near impossible.

Q: That would be during the Obama administration I believe. Did you spend a lot of time on Capitol Hill?

ETIAN: Well, I would actually use reception areas in the Capitol building to hold workshops, seminars, and receptions. My team would welcome Congressmen and women to meet our USAID Administrator and talk about the successes of working with nationals of developing nations. USAID staff would hold meetings on the need to incorporate women in less industrialized nations into the governing bodies of these nations. We would also hold advocacy sessions by inviting all the USAID Mission Directors to Washington in order to meet the congressional members of their home states and speak of their development programs in their respective countries.

It was an interesting position, but what I found to be even more exciting was working with young intelligent interns that were assigned to our offices. These individuals had so much energy, were full of enthusiasm and curiosity...it made my job to incorporate them into my projects sheer joy. Plus, the interns were equally excited to work with me because I was giving them specific responsibilities that they could record in their resumes as part of their internships.

I did have a few hiccups along the way; it never occurred to me that some of the interns were assigned to our neighboring Public Affairs office. I had inadvertently recruited these young professionals into our Legislative section. When I discovered that they were being used for repetitive, administrative work, I defended my "employment" of the interns in order to afford them actual skills that they could learn and apply towards future job opportunities. The interns, in turn, were extremely grateful to me and held one of the most heart-warming farewell parties for my departure from USAID. After my retirement, I learned that several of the interns had joined the ranks of USAID employees!

Q: So, when you had to leave at age 65 due to the regulations at State Department and USAID, did you ever contemplate continuing your work by either becoming a contractor

or working with another government agency? How did you feel about finally leaving government service?

ETIAN: Well, I did contemplate my future, trying to decide what to pursue. And colleagues in the health arena did contact me proposing work in HIV/AIDs both domestically and overseas. I decided that I needed time off, so I rejected offers that were presented to me.

I had purchased a home back in 2001, but didn't know my neighborhood, much less my neighbors. I got my house in order, started meeting my neighbors, and began looking into community functions. I joined the local community center, signed up for Zumba, line dancing, Tai Chi, and yoga classes. In the evenings, I attended Russian language courses to refresh my language skills, and began Chinese language classes at the USDA Graduate school in Washington DC. After a few semesters, I switched to the Chinese language program offered by the Confucius Center through George Washington University. My Beijing University Professors encouraged me to accept the Chinese Government's expenses-paid study tour to Nanjing University, with side trips to Xian and Chengdu. Although I was three times the age of the other eight students, I felt like I was given a second lease on life. I have always wanted to expand my horizons by learning foreign languages and meeting people from various parts of the world. To expand my knowledge of Chinese and China, and at the same time, participate in all sorts of fun activities with a friendly young and active group of individuals fulfilled my wildest dreams!

Two major events, however, hindered my roller coaster retirement. I underwent a second full knee replacement operation which was followed by months of physical therapy, and then, the covid-19 pandemic required me to remain in place! Luckily, the computer application ZOOM was introduced to the American public. I immediately seized upon the opportunities zoom provided and moved my exercise classes and language courses onto the computer platform. I even hired a personal trainer online to facilitate my recovery from the knee surgery.

The possibilities in life are truly endless. I think my message to everybody today is to follow one's dreams and aspirations, take chances. The world is a beautiful place. And if you are as fortunate as I was to be able to see the world through your employment, you would be surprised at the opportunities that present themselves.

At one point, I attended a bluegrass concert and noted that the musicians were having so much fun on stage that I procured a banjo and began taking lessons. Although I am still a beginner, I jammed for weeks with a very tolerant group of musicians who were thrilled to invite me to join them, as I was the only banjo player in the band!

Q: You were interested in learning to play the balalaika for a while, weren't you?

ETIAN: I was actually interested in joining the Balalaika Society in Washington. I even contemplated awarding them a grant to perform in Vladivostok. My Russian colleagues

preferred American rock and roll music, as they had numerous gifted balalaika performers!

Q: Yes. I've seen the Balalaika group perform. They're not performing now, though, because of the pandemic, but maybe when all that starts again, we'll get you over here for a balalaika concert.

ETIAN: I would love to attend their performances, and maybe, in the future, will look at joining that group, and learning to play the balalaika.

Q: We've come to the end of your career. Is there any other place or program you'd like to talk about? You mentioned Armenia.... Anything you'd like to talk more about regarding any of your other postings?

ETIAN: It's interesting about overseas assignments. Everyone asks me what my favorite place was, and I guess I'm one of the lucky ones, because even when I go to a place that many career officers might not select due to the weather or difficulties in the region, I end up loving my posting after an initial period. My first six months in Armenia were difficult due to the lack of electricity, heat, running water, gas for my car, and discovering a general sense of sadness among the residents of Yerevan. Many of these problems were due to the recent break-up of the Soviet Union and their centralized system of government. When I was offered a diesel-powered burner to heat my home, I accidentally set the curtains on fire. I didn't know how to turn the burner off, much less regulate it. I lived in a stone house that maintained the cold within my walls. Putting up with the lack of creature comforts in mind-blowing winter conditions was very difficult at the beginning, but once I learned the ropes, and got to know my neighbors and colleagues, and was made aware of basic survival skills needed, I was fine.

When people tell me they've traveled all over the world, and all they've done is visit a country for a week or two, they don't have a full understanding of what it is to live and function smoothly in a new environment. Many of the countries I worked in did not necessarily embrace foreigners. People I worked with in the Sahel were so proud; they resented Americans wanting to influence their lives. Conditions of life were extremely harsh in the Sahara Desert. My first experience being suddenly awakened by a sand storm while sleeping outside due to intense heat was an alarming experience. Yet I left Niger (after a total of five years) with a very heavy heart, having made life-long friends, and experiencing such powerful, emotional moments in my life.

I went to Rwanda six years after their horrific 1994 genocide. Never in my life had I experienced an entire population of sad, grim, down-trodden people. When I asked my young waiter in the hotel about his family, he sadly related to me that he had lost all ten members of his family during the genocide. How do people survive and surmount such disastrous situations? I really don't know. Yet with time, I bonded with my Rwandan colleagues in the office as they introduced me to the medical facilities in the countryside, accompanied me in their colorful markets, assisted me in having billowing boubous sewn for special occasions out of the locally-purchased cloth.

The Congolese on the other hand found joy through their pulsating big-band performing music! Despite the plethora of problems faced by persons in central Congo, people seemed to be so vivacious, active, welcoming, fun-loving. Where else but in the Congo could someone like me become a “Disco Queen?”

Living in a culture so very different from your own, especially on the level of the people you are there to serve, expands your mind and tests you as a person. I firmly believe that every American should seek an opportunity if it is possible to live and work overseas – whether as a Peace Corps Volunteer, with a non-government organization, or an overseas secular mission. Many a Peace Corps Volunteer have declared that their overseas experience has changed them as a person.

We talk about diversity a lot, here in America. When I was recruiting African American students at major universities for Peace Corps Volunteer positions, the common response I received was: “How can I possibly live on 100 dollars a month in Peace Corps? I have to hurry up and work so that I can help support my family.” I did struggle to live on a very low stipend while I was a volunteer. However, the volunteer experience opened up many doors that were unimaginable prior to my becoming a member of the Peace Corps! I would not have had so many opportunities with various non-governmental organizations to work in challenging environments. I probably would not have thought of joining the State Department or USAID, believing that their entry requirements would be prohibitive.

When I look back at my life, I marvel that I actually achieved the American Dream. Coming to America unable to express myself in English, and ending my professional career representing the American government as a Foreign Service Officer with USAID and the State Department in countries such as Russia, India and francophone African nations.

Q: Well, Sylva, this has been wonderful. Thank you.

ETIAN: Thank you.

End of Interview