

The Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training
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Foreign Service Spouse Series

ANN LAPORTA

Interviewed by: Margaret Sullivan
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INTERVIEW

Q: This is February 14th, 1990. This is Margaret Sullivan. I am interviewing Ann LaPorta whose is on home leave from New Zealand, and she is being interviewed in my home.

Ann, as a first question, would you just tell me briefly when you joined the Foreign Service, were you married, and what posts have you had, and what years?

LAPORTA: AI joined on April Fool's Day, 1965.

Q: Was that a sign of something?

LAPORTA: Well, we think it's going to be when retirement comes around. We started dating soon after that, and we were married in 1966 on New Year's day.

Q: So you knew you were marrying the Foreign Service.

LAPORTA: I knew exactly what I was getting into, yes. I had tried to join the Foreign Service, had taken the test, and when I was in college the recruitment agents came along for State Department, they said that they were only interested in women coming in as secretaries, and did I want to be a secretary. I said, "No, thank you." And they said, "Well, then perhaps the best way for you to get into the Foreign Service would be to marry a Foreign Service Officer." So I thought, "Well, okay," and that's what I did. So, I did not pass the written. That was the year that they had taken off some points for knowing a foreign language, which I had. I didn't pass by one point, and had they had the language ability, I would have because I was a French major in college.

Q: Just tell me quickly what posts you had, and where.

LAPORTA: AI was assigned to the State Department his first post. And then we went out to Jakarta where he was the Consul in a one man Consulate post -- or a one man consular section.

Q: You went in '63 '66?

LAPORTA: '67. We got there in April of '67. And then from there we came back to the States for two and a half years, and from there we went to Malaysia where he was number two in a three man political section. From Malaysia we came back here for nine months of Turkish language, and then we went to Turkey, and he was in the political-military section at the embassy in Ankara. And then from Ankara we went to Medan which is the consulate in North Sumatra in Indonesia. From there we came home, and we were home for six years, and we went out to Wellington in 1987.

Q: Am I correct to say that you have always had at least three strings to your bow? That you have been Al LaPorta's wife, both as a wife and as a Foreign Service wife. That you have been Katie and Andrew LaPorta's mother. And that you have been Ann LaPorta, a professional person. And you've juggled the three.

LAPORTA: I've always tried to. I've always worked at something or other when I've been overseas. When I was in Jakarta, I taught English at the University -- with you, Margaret -- and also, I edited a magazine for USIS. In Malaysia I was a law student. I did two years at the University of Malaysia in their law faculty. And in Turkey I worked for the military in their legal section for the U.S. Air Force, at the base there. In Sumatra I did a variety of legal interest jobs, on a volunteer basis. And then in Wellington I worked for about a year and a half on a large case for a New Zealand law firm.

Q: And that's just finished.

LAPORTA: That just finished in October.

Q: Can you talk a little bit about this juggling act, and whether its been a juggling act that's been hard to maintain, easy to maintain, worth maintaining?

LAPORTA: It's worth maintaining because I think you need to know that you're worth something outside of the fact that you're a spouse of somebody, and it's interesting when people come up, and they say, "Oh yes, we know you. Who is your husband? What does he do?" So that's sort of fun, and I think I've always felt the need to preserve my own identify. Sometimes it's a little hard. This last time in Wellington it's been difficult because it was a full-time job, and during the crunch parts of the case I was working full days and the weekends too. So I was working a seven-day week, and we for a large part of the time had no Ambassador so Al was Chargé, and I really felt also that I needed to liaison with the wives -- the other wives at the Embassy -- just to make sure that things were kept on an even keel, and people didn't have morale problems, and people felt welcome and at home. I think that part of my job fell down a little bit, because I was working 50-60 hours a week at one point.

Q: What is a Foreign Service wife's job?

LAPORTA: Well, I felt when I came into Jakarta, Al was the only officer, and also the junior officer at the post...

Q: The only officer at the post...

LAPORTA: The only officer in the Consular section, and the junior officer at the post, and because of different things that had happened at post, there was really nobody to show me around, or make sure that I knew where grocery stores or anything else was, except one wife who had small children so was busy in her own life. And I was really sort of lost for a while, so after that experience I thought, "I really don't want people to come to a post and feel that they're lost, and their husbands are taken care of, and they're sort of left by themselves." So I think that's part of being a Foreign Service wife. I think the sense of community that you have in the Foreign Service, because you're so far away from home, and because you have no extended family, that the people at the post really have to be each others' extended family to a certain extent.

Q: So this is something you came to simply because of your own negative experience in the beginning?

LAPORTA: I think so.

Q: You were a fairly new bride when you arrived.

LAPORTA: Oh, I'd been married a year and a half.

Q: And you'd been working, or studying language?

LAPORTA: That's right. I was working at NSA, National Security Agency, which is where I met Al, and going to night school, and then when he got the assignment to Jakarta, I left the National Security Agency and went to language school with him in the morning and then worked as a staffer at State Department in the afternoon.

Q: But you were, what 23 - 24 - 26?

LAPORTA: Yes, about that, about 26.

Q: What was Jakarta like then? You arrived, and you were just dumped?

LAPORTA: I was dumped. It was sort of scary. I had the real advantage that I came in speaking the language. That was very necessary there, it really gave you a leg up. I sort of made my own way, and we made some very good friends who are still good friends. A lot of our friends were also young couples without children.

Q: Indonesians or Americans?

LAPORTA: We ended up at the end of our three years there, we ended up a third, a third, a third. I think a third were Americans, a third were Indonesians, and a third were other people from other embassies. So it was a pretty good mix.

Q: You mentioned in laying out what you've done, that you've taught English, and that you've edited. And I know that you have a baby. But, how did you get these jobs, and were you encouraged to take them?

LAPORTA: The editing job came because I had an editing job at National Security Agency.

Q: So you already had a clearance?

LAPORTA: And then I had a clearance from State Department too, because I was working at State during the afternoon. But it wasn't a job that demanded a clearance, anyway. I was doing a magazine that involved alumni Indonesian people who had been to the States to study, sort of following them around -- what are they doing now, this kind of a thing. I think the PAO (Public Affairs Officer) at the post, Jack Getchell, and Dean Koch, we knew both of them and they wanted to start up this magazine. So I said, "That sounds like something I can do." And they paid me the local wages, which were nothing as you well know. But, certainly I was working for money.

Q: That made you somewhat unusual, didn't it, in Jakarta at the time?

LAPORTA: I guess so. But they were willing to do that. We ran into a lot of trouble with the magazine because of publishing. It was very difficult to send a magazine to be published in Indonesia where nobody knew English. So you can imagine there were a lot of problems. We would correct the typesetter's mistakes and send them back, and their's would be corrected and fifteen more mistakes would be in. Eventually the magazine was sent off to be printed in Manila at USIS. The job lasted about a year or so.

Q: Did you get pressure from people not to work? Or did anybody seem to care?

LAPORTA: I didn't have a lot of other demands on me, and the job was such that when people wanted me to do other things, I could say yes. So I did a variety of things in Jakarta, and really none of them interfered with anything else. So it all worked out pretty well.

Q: And did you feel like you had a whole lot of Foreign Service obligation? Or because Al was junior, did you feel like that was also minimal, and you could sort of pick and choose.

LAPORTA: Oh, we did a lot of entertaining. In fact, we did much more entertaining than I've seen other junior officers do, and other Consular officers do. And both of us liked that. So that was something that went with the job, and something we enjoyed.

Q: Then you also worked in Turkey. Was that a paid position?

LAPORTA: No, I didn't get paid for that one.

Q: The reason I have laid this out in quite this kind of detail is, that I'm interested in what you have to say about how you've seen the working spouse, the role of the working wife who works in her own hook, change over this twenty-five years now, isn't it?

LAPORTA: Just about, yes. I've seen a lot more wives... I think the reciprocal work agreement has made it much easier for wives to work, and I think if they didn't they'd find a lot fewer wives going overseas, because the role of the wife has changed at home, too. [The Department of State has bilateral work agreements with twenty-seven countries.] Twenty-five years ago there were many wives that thought that their profession was raising their children, whether they were at home, or whether they were overseas, and whether they were Foreign Service or not. And you expected to go to college, and work until you had kids, and then those people sort of gave up their career, or went back into it after the kids were grown. So the expectations have changed, not just for Foreign Service wives, but for everybody.

Q: Do you feel like your own expectations for yourself have changed over this period of time?

LAPORTA: I think I always knew that I was the kind of gal who was not going to be satisfied with just being a wife and mother.

Q: Even when as in the Foreign Service being a Foreign Service wife is, in a way, a career?

LAPORTA: I never thought of that as a career.

Q: That was Al's.

LAPORTA: That was Al's career, and it's interesting when a lot of wives take the Foreign Service test after their husbands have been in for a while, and become a tandem couple. I certainly have never been tempted to take the Foreign Service test and become a tandem couple. I said that is Al's job, and one Foreign Service Officer in the family is quite enough, thank you very much. I have my own life to live.

Q: And you set about doing that by becoming a lawyer. Had you started law school before you were married?

LAPORTA: I started law school before we were married. I was out of college a couple of years, as I say working in this editors job, and I was a French major in college and I figured I certainly didn't want to teach French. And what can you do in a graduate

program with a French major, and law was one of the few things. So I started going to night school in the fall of '65, and I finished in 1976.

Q: Tell me how you managed all of that, because there are some good stories in that, I should think.

LAPORTA: Yes, some good stories. At George Washington -- I can't say enough for them, they always let me back in -- I started off working full-time and going to night school. And then after we were married, until I went to Jakarta, I think I had a full year, maybe a year and a half, I forget, and then it was put on hold until we came back and I went back on a part-time basis because my daughter was just a year old when I started back. I put in a good two and a half years there then... that's '70 to '72.

Q: In Washington?

LAPORTA: In Washington. And then in Malaysia where we were from '72 to '75, I was able to complete all but a semester of my course, and again GW was very good in allowing me to transfer credits back from the University of Malaysia. And then I was able to finish up my last semester when Al was taking Turkish from '75 to '76.

Q: What sort of law did you study in Malaysia? Because certainly that's British law, and not American.

LAPORTA: No. They let me do the credits because it's all based on the common law system. So they let me transfer back. In GW you're able to take a certain amount of credits outside of your major. A lot of people take psychology courses, or accounting courses. So they said three of those credits will count as comparative law, and the others will count as your out of area, or out of the law faculty, courses. So I took Malaysian constitutional law, family law, Islamic law, and one other -- oh, customary law, and enjoyed it.

Q: Studying in English, or studying in Malay?

LAPORTA: There was one course that I took that actually they were just switching over from English to Malay at that point, and it was customary law, and that was taught by an Indonesian in Indonesian. That was a lot of fun because I was the only one in class that could understand him.

Q: How's that?

LAPORTA: Because he spoke with an Indonesian accent, and the other people in the class found it very difficult to understand the Indonesian accent. So after class they'd say, "Tell me what he said, Ann." And I'd have to go and translate for them. So that was real fun. But that was the only class that I had that was taught in Malay.

Q: What was it like to be the only ex-patriot in the law school? Is that what you were? Were you also one of a few women?

LAPORTA: There were as many women as when I started law school in the States. Ten percent of my beginning class were women, and I'd say over ten percent in Malaysia were women. It was fun because when I left they said they'd really miss me because I added color to the class.

Q: Was your being a foreigner an inhibiting factor, an enhancing factor? What sort of a factor?

LAPORTA: I'd ask more questions than the Malay student would. I felt that it was certainly not an inhibiting factor. I never thought of myself as the foreigner in the class, and I think people were always very friendly to me. It was very good. It helped my husband. He was in the Political Section at that point, so I would bring him back all of the gossip, and what students were going to be demonstrating where, and when, and against what, and wrote my memcons.

Q: Memcons?

LAPORTA: Memoranda of conversations. I know, that's for the tape. So that was sort of fun. I got a little bit of flak from the Ambassador's wife, who was a dear friend who thought maybe I should be doing more traditional type things, going to ladies meetings. Well, I went to the ladies meetings, but taking part in Malaysian charitable events, and things like that. I felt no qualms about telling her, nicely, that I was doing enough as it was to further Malaysian and American interest, though not in the traditional ways that wives do it. It wasn't a matter of friction between us.

Q: But she had one vision, and you had another. This was after 1972, and the Directive.

LAPORTA: I was there 1972 to '75. But I always did my entertaining. That's something that I've always kept up.

Q: You have seen now, I suspect, a real change over this period of time in the numbers of women who are working, and in the kinds of work that they do on their own. Or the number of spouses now male, who are the dependent. You're now the wife of one of the two top people in your post, and have had a stint recently as you've already said as being the Chargé's wife. How does this change affect both you personally and the post as you see it?

LAPORTA: If we could go back when Al was Consul in Medan. We were very lucky in Medan because the wives pulled together, and some were teachers and some weren't.

Q: This was a small post?

LAPORTA: This was a six man post. We knew there were jobs to do. There was one wife who refused to have anything to do with the entertaining part of it, and I had to pick up her end of it which frankly I did resent.

Q: What job did her husband have. We're not going to name names but ...

LAPORTA: He was in Economics.

Q: So it was a job that would normally have had a good bit of entertaining.

LAPORTA: Political-Economic, that job was combined. Right.

Q: He didn't do it. It wasn't that she opted out -- when she opted out, they both opted out.

LAPORTA: That's right.

Q: And there was no pressure put on him to go ahead and meet his obligations?

LAPORTA: No. I remember it sort of came to a head when we were about to leave and we were being packed out for a change, and a big economic group came through and I had to give a dinner party for them because she didn't, wouldn't. And I was a little angry.

Q: Who did you express that anger to, and in what way?

LAPORTA: To Al.

Q: And Al, as the Principal Officer, I'm probing now, Al as the Principal Officer never leaned on this guy to do it, and say, "Look, if your wife doesn't want to do that, that's your problem."

LAPORTA: No, I guess he didn't. But this woman, to her credit, did other things for the community. She loved her horses, and she brought in ponies for the children so they could have horseback riding lessons. This was her contribution, and so she certainly didn't opt out completely. She really was a credit to the community.

Q: And not just to the community in the western sense, but to making friends with Indonesians and so on.

LAPORTA: Yes. I think basically that family was not very social and outgoing, but, in her way, with what she was interested in, she certainly did make a contribution.

Q: But I think then the question I'm asking, the underlying question, is that a good many Foreign Service Officers simply didn't ever make the distinction between... if a wife opted out from doing entertaining, that obviating the man's role, the employee's role to see that it was done anyway. In other words, pressure, in your observation, pressure has not been

put on the male employee to do it. It was sort of assumed that the wife did.

LAPORTA: Well, this is true. I know of a situation in Jakarta after we were there, where the Ambassador's post was vacant for a long time, and the DCM's wife rarely came to post, and all the entertaining had to be done by the Political Counselor's wife. She felt very resentful, and I would certainly have to agree with her that the number three at post had all the entertaining to do. Those kinds of things do happen when wives aren't there for one reason or another. I think the other time that it happened, is when the officers are women, and we have three of those at our post right now, and their husbands certainly are not interested in doing anything for the Foreign Service.

Q: The husbands really don't see themselves as adjuncts.

LAPORTA: Not at all.

Q: And the post doesn't perceive them as adjuncts?

LAPORTA: Well, it's a little difficult situation. It's a little different because our new Ambassador is a woman, and has brought her husband along. Yes, he does see himself as an adjunct.

Q: Let's leave that case aside. I suspect that's not a wise one to talk about. Let's talk about professional women Foreign Service Officers and their men who travel along with them, which would be a reversed parallel of what you've been all these years.

LAPORTA: I think you see the husbands as helpmates, at least in one sense, because they may share the care of the children ...

Q: And the internal family obligations.

LAPORTA: ... internal family obligations, cleaning the house, and things like that. Just like two working parents would here, but as for going out and meeting people and doing the entertaining, or helping with that, they're present, I'm sure, but they don't feel there's any obligation to the Foreign Service.

Q: In your observation do New Zealanders look on them as an extension of the embassy in the same way they would look on you as an extension of the embassy?

LAPORTA: That's hard to generalize. I really can't say because the one couple I'm thinking of, she is a junior officer and she's doing her job nicely and her husband is working for a business publication there, a New Zealand business publication, so they both have contacts within the New Zealand community.

Q: And they each have their own identity.

LAPORTA: They have their own identity.

Q: And New Zealand is a country that isn't going to make some of the sort of fish bowl wife of generalizations in the same way that it might have in Indonesia.

LAPORTA: You don't stand out in New Zealand.

Q: What effect does it have on the embassy to have this large number of people who are in very different relationships from the earlier rather more traditional pattern? What I sometimes want to call the Dick and Jane pattern.

LAPORTA: It's interesting. I think that if properly handled, it can't help but be more fulfilling. For instance, the junior officer whose husband works for a publication, both that couple are promoting the United States in different ways, and I think it could probably only be good for our relationship. The same way I feel with myself working. I was doing my thing, but I was representing what the United States was. And though it's not traditional, it is very useful and I look at it as a positive contribution, though in a non-traditional way.

Q: And in that sense in some ways it's representative of the new tradition in this country for educated couples. I don't mean it in a pejorative sense, but for couples where both people have a high level of education, the expectation now is two careers, and therefore when you have a large number of these in an embassy, what you are projecting is a pattern which is very typical of what's happening in the United States.

LAPORTA: That's right, you said that very well. And I would agree with it. As I said, I think the wives that are working out in the community are really reflecting United States in a positive way.

Q: Is the pattern of entertaining and the role of entertaining changing in the Foreign Service? Have you seen that change over twenty-five years?

LAPORTA: I think the expectations for entertaining are the same that they were twenty-five years ago. I think it certainly adds a lot more to my plate, and to people in my position's plate, to have to do both jobs. I think it could be taken care of in other ways. I know my colleague in the British High Commission is paid for the work that she puts into a party by the hour, which means that she has the option to perhaps get it catered, which she does. So I think some of that is financial. It could be handled, especially in a country like New Zealand, you could go out and get a party catered. You could take everybody out to a very nice restaurant, and entertain very nicely. But we're constrained by our budget.

Q: When you say entertaining as expected, where do you think that that expectation is generated from? Is it self-generated, is it generated by the post, is it generated by custom, or some combination of that?

LAPORTA: Personally, its always been my personal opinion that it's a very necessary part of the Foreign Service, and it's in those kinds of situations where really a lot of your information comes from. People are more relaxed. They get to know you better. They get to trust you more. They talk. And a lot of information comes out of, not let's say in a cocktail party, but especially the dinner parties.

Q: Then they become friends and if you need to go to them for something else, they know who you are.

LAPORTA: That's right. That's another part of it. I don't think if we were reduced to forging our relationships between 9:00 and 5:00, that we would be nearly so successful.

Q: So that what you're saying then is that the Foreign Service exists for people to know people, both in a general sense and to get specific information. And that this is an effective way to do it.

LAPORTA: Yes. I think it always has been, and I can't see that changing.

Q: What about the lady bountiful roles that used to be foisted on wives?

LAPORTA: I never did any of that. I got away from all of that. I was so excited. They said come to this charity ball, that charity ball, and I said, "No, no. No balls for me." I think charity, or charitable endeavors, are the same at home as they are here. I think there are very necessary volunteer organizations, all those kinds of things. People come to me and they say, "Well, what can I do? What should I do?" And I said, "What are you interested in?" Wives come in and say, "They've asked me to do this volunteer job, and I don't want to." And I said, "Don't then, but look around and see what you're interested in, and then do that work as a charity." It's just common sense, it's the same as it is at home. Also, I said, "Look at things that are going to promote your own career as a volunteer and do those kinds of jobs rather than things you're not interested in." And that's just common sense. It's what I've been doing for twenty-five years.

Q: From what you hear from your friends do you think that people are forcing Foreign Service wives to do charity in the way that it was... forced isn't quite the word generally. It was just assumed and there was a lot of social pressure twenty-five years ago, twenty years ago. And social pressure to conform.

LAPORTA: Well, and of course, as you remember when you go to a large Fourth of July reception you each had your post, and after fifteen minutes you move to another section of the yard or the building, and you sat there, you took your turn signing flowers in, you wrote thank-you notes. You did all kinds of things like that, and I think that's changed, and I think that's a change for the better. Now they can employ social secretaries to do those kinds of things.

Q: Do you feel like you have had a part in forcing the change? Or do you think the change has happened unforced?

LAPORTA: I think its been women like us that have made the changes. I certainly was never out on anybody else's bandwagon but my own for that. I have done things for AAFSW, and for the Foreign Service, other things that I've been interested in but that change, I think, occurred perhaps because there were lots of women like me in the Foreign Service. But I was overseas when that was done. Basically, I was not interested in what was going on at that point because I was in law school and I had a baby.

Q: I want to talk to you about raising children in the Foreign Service, but I don't want to do that today because I think that that's a long and complex subject, and I think you've spent a lot of time doing it and thinking about it, and that you've thought about it in family law terms as well, and I think that's something for us to come back to.

But I would like to talk to you a little bit about the changed environment of terrorism and this sort of stuff because I know from what you've said, that you've been involved at least twice in what could be called terroristic activities -- one certainly was. And I know that when you lived in Jakarta they had just gotten over a revolution. And yet, do you remember in those periods when you lived there, and when there were demonstrations in the streets, do you ever remember feeling threatened?

LAPORTA: We came in, you and I, Margaret, to Jakarta really after the bad times were over, and even though there were still curfews, and things like that, it was not a scary time. I do remember though once before demobilization when everybody was carrying their weapons around, going up an escalator of a new department store with a friend, and suddenly leaving that floor when it became evident that the young soldier couldn't figure out how to put down his machine gun properly without it going off. And at that point I said, "Well, Martha, let's go to another floor." And she said, "Good thing, Ann, let's do that." The soldiers were allowed to carry their weapons around in the street whether they were on or off duty. That's what I mean by demobilization.

Q: But Al was really involved in one of the early embassy hostage takings. Would you tell me about that please. And also tell me about your involvement and reactions to it.

LAPORTA: There was a Japanese red terrorist group, and that was just as we were leaving Malaysia, the week before we left in '75. And a group of Japanese red terrorists came up the elevator to our embassy which was in an office building, and took over the ninth floor which housed the Consular Section, and took everybody hostage there. And it was a Monday morning so it included a lot of people in for their visas -- I think there may have been about thirty in the whole group. Also, the Swedish embassy was there, so they were taken too. That was the ninth floor, the tenth, eleventh and twelfth floor were regular embassy personnel and they were all sort of in the building too because of this. They couldn't get down the building. So that continued on for about three days.

Q: Where was Al?

LAPORTA: Al was up in the Political Section, so he was one floor up -- one or two floors up.

Q: And what happened?

LAPORTA: Well, it was a scary time. They were able to get food up and down the freight elevator.

Q: But they couldn't get people out.

LAPORTA: They did not get people out. They did send some people out. They sent the secretaries out, so Al was designated secretary because he was the only one left who could type. They set up a temporary embassy, a working force, in the Canadian embassy which was close by and also a Task Force at the Ambassador's residence.

Q: Was the Ambassador caught in there?

LAPORTA: The Ambassador was on home leave, and the Chargé d'Affaires was just great. I think he handled ...

Q: Was he in, or was he out?

LAPORTA: He was outside.

Q: That was just luck.

LAPORTA: It was just luck, or maybe he went down the freight elevator because he figured he could handle things better. Another lucky thing was Al's replacement had just arrived that day and he couldn't get across town because the whole town was blocked off. But he had come from an assignment in Washington where he had been working closely with management and he knew exactly the people in Washington that could make things happen. So he knew which buttons to push, and so that was a lucky thing.

Q: Now, there was your husband in the embassy, there were you with two small children. How were you treated in all of this? How did you play into it?

LAPORTA: It was Al, for some reason could get out to me by the telephone. So I sort of became the family liaison person. The Consular Officer, for instance, at one time was threatened that if they didn't release so many people from prison in Japan, they were going to shoot him. His wife was Mexican. They had just arrived. There was another wife that was Spanish, so she stayed with her because her English was not all that good.

Q: The Mexican?

LAPORTA: The Mexican. But in a situation [like this] you needed somebody you could speak to in your own language. So I went out and sat with Olga during this time, and Olga didn't know anything about it. Maybe that was a mistake, I don't know.

Q: Olga being?

LAPORTA: The Mexican wife. Then after it was all over, and everything was fine, Al called me and I said, "Bye, Olga, I'm going home."

Q: Three days later.

LAPORTA: The crisis occurred over about a six hour time. I was able to get clothes up, to get soap up, to get Kentucky fried chicken upstairs to them up and down this freight elevator, and Al was able to call out to me with messages, which I would then relay to the people.

Q: Did you have a formal tree -- a communications tree.

LAPORTA: It was a telephone tree.

Q: It was just an informal thing that developed to meet the need.

LAPORTA: That's right. It worked well.

Q: Was there some sort of embassy organization in place anyway that facilitated this?

LAPORTA: No.

Q: Not among the wives.

LAPORTA: No. We belong to AAFSW, and it was a smallish embassy so people were good friends, and I think nobody was left out. I think this is the one thing about the Foreign Service, that it works very well when everybody takes care of everybody else. And it worked well in that kind of a situation.

Q: It might not have worked so well in a larger post.

LAPORTA: You're right. You may have had to have the structure in place in a larger post, and I think they have found that out in larger posts too. Children in school weren't ...
(end of Tape 1, side A)

Q: In this case the terrorists were from outside the country, so it wasn't that you were caught up in a revolutionary sense in which somebody in Malaysia might look at children, or somebody else, as hostages.

LAPORTA: That's right. There was never any of that. It was all self-contained within the embassy.

Q: That was really one of the very first of that sort of thing that happened, and that sort of marks the beginning of it, doesn't it?

LAPORTA: Yes. I don't know all the dates. That was '75, I don't know. Some things have happened in Stockholm, I don't know whether that was before or after, but it was certainly before a lot of these things happened.

Q: Now, Al was also held at gun point in Medan, and that's a very different story.

LAPORTA: That was a deranged Army Colonel who thought that communists were coming out of the woodwork at him, and that he needed to take asylum in the States -- to be granted asylum -- and so he appeared with his corporal who he'd talked into doing this, at our front door, machine gun in hand on a Sunday evening to ask for asylum.

Q: And you were all in the house, all four of you.

LAPORTA: Yes.

Q: And what did you do?

LAPORTA: Well, I saw this fellow at the door with a submachine gun, and he said he wanted to talk to Twan.

Q: Twan being?

LAPORTA: Twan being Mr. LaPorta, that's sort of "sir" -- to the sir of the house. And I said, "That's all right. You can come in and talk to Twan but you're not going to bring any gun into my house. And if you're going to come in ..." It was funny afterwards, it was exactly the same tone of voice that I'd say, "Take that basketball outside if you're going to bounce it." So he had his corporal unload the weapon, and take the bullets out, and then he came on into the house. They proceeded to talk for a long time. Then we sort of bedded him down.

Q: Were you in the conversation, or was it just?

LAPORTA: I sort of forget whether I was in or out. I tried to get in touch with the people who were living across the street -- yes I did, I snuck out through the back servants quarters, and went across the street to tell the Foreign Service Officer who lived across the street what was going on. And then he came on in at some point.

Q: And your children were in the house?

LAPORTA: We put the children to bed. It was about 8:00 at night and they were almost ready for bed anyway. Then they bedded him down in the den of the house which shared a bathroom with my son's bedroom. And at some point when we were almost all asleep, Andrew must have heard this man go into the bathroom, and he wanted to know what was, up.

Q: Andrew was how old?

LAPORTA: Seven. And he opened the bathroom door, and the man panicked and grabbed him hostage, and locked both doors to the bathroom at that point. So we couldn't get to him.

Q: Either the man or Andrew.

LAPORTA: The man or Andrew, and he thought that we were going to betray him, and send in a SWAT team, so he was really scared, and he was going to hold this little boy.

Q: But he didn't have his gun at that point?

LAPORTA: No, he didn't have his gun, or any other weapons. He had broken a glass shelf in the bathroom, so he had that. Al had gone into the bathroom before, and had taken out any razor blades, or anything we thought he might use as weapons, but we didn't think of the glass shelf.

Q: How long did that last?

LAPORTA: Oh, about a half an hour but it was a long time.

Q: How did you deal with that?

LAPORTA: Al was at one door, and I was at the other door, and Andrew was in the middle, and luckily all three of us spoke Indonesian and so we pleaded with him and told him, of course, no harm would come to him. We were doing our best, and would take him to see his friend the general who was the military commander of the district. And Andrew, I think, really talked himself out of it because he said, "You're a daddy, and you have little boys, and you wouldn't do this to your own little boy and you shouldn't do this to me." And finally between the three of us, but I think mostly Andrew, we talked him out of it. He opened the door and Andrew took a flying leap into my arms, and at that point I told Al that I was really sorry but I was going to have to take the children and leave and go across the street and spend the night across the street, which I did. Then we moved to a friend's house and we were back and forth between the friend's house until the whole incident was over.

Q: What finally happened to the man?

LAPORTA: He thought he saw some people, which he did. He finally realized that the house had been surrounded by plainclothesmen for three days, and he grabbed a wooden statue off the wall, and snuck up behind Al and hit Al over the head with the statue as Al was eating his bacon.

Q: Knocked him out?

LAPORTA: No, no, he's got a real tough head. So they struggled down the hallway, and he locked himself in the bathroom.

Q: The same bathroom?

LAPORTA: The same bathroom, had taken my sewing scissors out of the den and tried to kill himself with the sewing scissors. At that point Al did not want the SWAT team to come in because there had been some human rights incidents in Russia at that point where people were taking asylum in the embassy, and there was a great human cry, "Don't throw these people out and back to the Russians." So he didn't want anything like that to happen in his district. So they could look in the bathroom window and determined that he was out cold on the floor.

Q: Bleeding.

LAPORTA: Bleeding, yes. So they went in and got him, and he survived I understand.

Q: But as far as you were concerned, yes, it was very frightening, I'm sure, and troublesome in many other ways. But what you were dealing with there was a deranged individual, and not a political.

LAPORTA: We kept it from being a political incident. I mean it wasn't a revolution going on, no, not at all.

Q: And you were obviously having to deal both with what was going on in the house, and again, outside with answering people's questions and being a point of contact.

LAPORTA: The thing of it is we didn't want anybody to know what was going on in the house, so the children were under great stress because they were told they could not tell this to anybody at school. And finally they did. They were in such a state that the teachers asked, "What's going on?" And both Katie and Andrew told their teachers what was going on. Funny things. It was Christmas time, and they always had somebody with him in the house, and at one point I was one of the minders and so I was glueing.

Q: Was Al coming and going?

LAPORTA: He was coming and going. He was trying to liaison between the Indonesian

military.

Q: So the problem wasn't that Al was held hostage. The problem was that the man wouldn't leave the house.

LAPORTA: Well, the man wanted political asylum. And Al wanted to get him in a hospital. And luckily the military commander realized the fellow was crazy, and that he wasn't a danger, and that he should be gotten into the hospital. So Al was arranging to bring the family up from the post where he was stationed in southern Sumatra, and this kind of thing.

Q: And you helped mind, and other people helped mind.

LAPORTA: Yes, he was never left alone.

Q: And boy, you must have been relieved when that was done.

LAPORTA: Yes, that's right. I think the most frightening part was at one point, after the fellow had hit Al in the head with the statue, the cook jumped on a bicycle and went over to our house.

Q: Over to which house?

LAPORTA: The house where I was staying, and said, "Oh, they've killed Twan, he's killed Twan." He's murdered Twan, was the verb that she used. Luckily the BPAO's (USIS Branch Public Affairs Officer) house I was staying at, and I were the only ones who understood the verb "murder". So he went on over to see what was going on, and I said, "Frank, I cannot go over because if he's got weapons there, I can't be shot too. If he's really murdered Twan, I've got to stay and watch after these kids." But Frank went over, and he said, "No, they haven't murdered Twan. His skull is much too tough. He's walking around giving orders like he always was with a headache." "Oh, good."

Q: This is not your normal ordinary Foreign Service story.

LAPORTA: No. Unfortunately it is becoming more normal, and less exceptional.

Q: You have done a fair amount about setting up systems for dealing with terrorism, haven't you? Didn't you get involved in some of that?

LAPORTA: Yes, I did.

Q: Let's finish off this talk about terrorism with just a brief description of what you did, and why.

LAPORTA: The AAFSW had a study on Foreign Service families during times of

terrorism, and that was shortly after we came back. It began about '82 or so. And I worked with that, gathering information. Jean German was the chairman of that. I worked just any way I could basically, but we gathered a lot of information, what happens if the children are isolated at schools, what about insurance. A lot of insurance stops if somebody is hurt in a terrorist act, they interpret that as an unofficial declaration of war. So one of my jobs was to work with the insurance agencies to get.

Q: Which means if its an unofficial declaration of war, all insurance bets are off.

LAPORTA: That's right, yes. So we worked with that, and we worked with MED. There was one thing that, mental anguish, delayed reactions. I don't know whether it's still true that in order for medical benefits to kick in from MED at State, you have to be hospitalized for mental, rather just come in and talk to your psychologist, and maybe get some anti-depressants, or whatever you need. So we worked with MED to get those regulations changed. I just haven't followed it. I doubt very much if they're changed, but we did work hard to do that.

Q: To try to lay some groundwork.

LAPORTA: Try to lay some ground rules into how mental illness is dealt with now. And it pertained to families too, and to mental stress that families might be under which may not manifest itself until after they come back, and after they've been through the incident.

Q: Was there a report written, or some ..?.

LAPORTA: Yes, there was a report written.

Q: Or a handbook, or anything of that sort?

LAPORTA: Yes, there's a handbook.

Q: What sort of circulation did that get, do you know?

LAPORTA: I have no idea. I think it's on my shelf somewhere. I think it was used, perhaps, we hope as input to some new policies. I think it may have been used as input to the terrorism course that everybody is supposed to take. I myself have never taken the course, figured I'd been through it, why do I need to take it. But hopefully the report has some input into that. There have been quite a lot of video tapes that have been made. I know FLO made a lot of video tapes at one point dealing with children under stress, and these kinds of things. Those kinds of things have been done, and we worked with it initially.

Q: Thank you.

LAPORTA: Okay.

BIOGRAPHIC DATA

Spouse:
Alphonse LaPorta

Spouse Entered Service: 1965
You Entered Service: 1966

Left Service: Active Duty
Left Service:

Status: Spouse

Posts:
1965-67 Washington, DC
1967-70 Jakarta, Indonesia
1970-72 Washington, DC
1972-75 Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
1975-76 Washington, DC
1976-78 Ankara, Turkey
1978-81 Medan, Sumatra, Indonesia
1981-87 Washington, DC
1987-pres Wellington, New Zealand

Spouse's Position: DCM

Place and Date (optional) of birth: Middletown, Ohio; 1941

Maiden Name: Anne Winget

Parents (Name, Profession):
John Winget, Retired Marketing Executive
Helen Winget

Schools (Prep, University):
BA, French, Denison University
LLD, George Washington University Law School

Date and Place of Marriage: January 1, 1966

Profession: Lawyer

Children:
Katie - 20
Andrew - 16

Volunteer and Paid Positions held:

A. At Post

Volunteer: Organized conferences; ESL Teacher; Workshops for judges; University Lecturer; Wrote/edited "Living In Sumatra" books; AWA/WIC; Taught/coached swimming; Military lawyer; Substituted elementary school; Taught Sunday school

Paid: Editor USIS magazine; lawyer for private law firm; family lawyer on a case by case basis

B. In Washington, DC

Volunteer: AAFSW Projects; PTA officer; DCACLD (children with learning disabilities), Co-President for three years; Taught Sunday school

Paid: Analyst for National Security Agency; Lawyer, child abuse and neglect; Swimming teacher

Honors (Scholastic, FS related):

Honor Societies - French, German, Journalism Phi Beta Kappa
DC Bar and Supreme Court Bar
New Zealand Bar Association

End of interview