

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

ROBIN ANGELA SMITH

*Interviewed by: Mark Tauber
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INTERVIEW

Q: So, today is February 6 and we are beginning our interview with Robin Smith.

And Robin, anything you want to say before we start?

SMITH: Well first, thank you very much for having me here. This is something I've been wanting to do ever since I retired in 2017, and it's only now that I've had a chance to return to the State Department – to the Foreign Service Institute campus – to give my oral history. Over the span of my 31-year career, I occupied a front-row seat to many momentous events, and now – thanks to the Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training – I have an opportunity to share the rich experiences I've had as a Foreign Service officer. Perhaps through this interview, readers will come to understand the vital work that we do.

Q: Very good. Where and when were you born?

SMITH: I was born in Washington, D.C., in 1958. At the time, my father, William Smith, had finished law school at Georgetown University. I went to Georgetown too, as an undergraduate student. In fact, I'm trying to figure out whether we are the first father/daughter African American alumnae of the university since my father was one of the first African Americans to graduate from the Jesuit institution. I asked the university to check this out.

Q: I heard about Georgetown University's Memory Project, a way to atone for when Georgetown sold 272 slaves to plantations in Louisiana..

SMITH: Yes, it was an especially sordid moment for a university with a moral mission. Georgetown is trying its best to make amends through the Memory Project, I believe.

So, I was born in D.C. and, as I said, my father was a lawyer. So, my understanding is that as a black person it was difficult for him to get a job with a private law firm in the 1950s. Fortunately, the government was hiring people of color. He applied for a job as a lawyer with the Defense Department, or DOD, and moved the family to California. I must have been about a year old when we left D.C.

Q: Wow.

SMITH: Yes, he began working at Norton Air Force Base and then relocated to Vandenberg Air Force Base.

Q: I see.

SMITH: Vandenberg Air Force Base is near Santa Maria, which is where my family settled and where I spent most of my childhood until the age of 13.

Q: Okay. So, now, take a second; tell me a little bit more about your family, other siblings, you know, was your mother working and so on.

SMITH: Oh, sure. I have three brothers, two older, one is younger by about nine years. My mother, Gloria Smith, was a much beloved high school teacher at the high school in Santa Maria. She was head of the English department there before leaving teaching and going into counseling. Subsequently, she started working at Cal Poly University. In 1973, there was another big transition. My father got a job in St. Louis, Missouri.

Q: Oh, so you moved from Vandenberg to St. Louis?

SMITH: Yes.

Q: Wow, okay.

SMITH: Yes, my father was employed by the Defense Mapping Agency in St. Louis. And so, we picked up and moved out there. That's where I went to high school, University City High School.

Q: A question - did you live on the base when you were in Vandenberg?

SMITH: No.

Q: Okay.

SMITH: No, never on the base. We always lived off-base. As a civilian, I don't think my father had privileges to live on base.

Q: Were there any particular memories from when you were in the Vandenberg area that, you know, kind of stuck with you since it was elementary school and I guess middle school that you attended? What was that like for you, growing up in that part of California, you know, in the early '60s and so on?

SMITH: Yes. Well, it was an interesting time, I should say. It was, the '60s and the hippie culture prevailed. However, I was too young to really be a part of that.

Q: Just as a quick aside, I grew up very close to New York City and we would go in to the city periodically. Of course, there was plenty of hippie activity there, and it was, for a child, fascinating because it was colorful and crazy and circuslike, but I had no way of having any entry into because by the time I was old enough it had already ended.

SMITH: Yes. Well, what's interesting is that the decade of the 60s was a hot bed for civil rights protest and reform, but it touched us in California in different ways than in the Deep South or parts of the North. Later in our interview, I'll talk about the role of my great-aunt in the civil rights movement. But first, let me tell you that there is a photo of my great-aunt in Michelle Obama's autobiography.

Q: Oh, for heavens sakes.

SMITH: -with Barack Obama, President Obama and Michelle Obama.

Q: This picture was taken during the anniversary the Selma march?

SMITH: Yes, that's right. The 50th anniversary of the Selma to Montgomery march. Very cool, huh? I was there too. President Obama invited President Bush and former First Lady, Laura Bush. There was much unity and goodwill on all sides. The point I was trying to make is that I was in California during this turbulent period. The start of my awareness of what was going on in the South and other parts of the country was by watching television coverage of Bloody Sunday and my great-aunt.

Q: What was her name?

SMITH: Amelia Boynton Robinson. B-O-Y-N-T-O-N. She was a leader of the civil rights movement in Selma. When Bloody Sunday happened, I remember my parents calling relatives on the East Coast, trying to find out what was going. I was still very young to really comprehend a lot. When we would periodically take road trips, or an occasional flight to the East Coast, I would be in my grandmother's basement, the sister of Aunt Amelia, and see news clippings and photos of Bloody Sunday. Indeed, the photos, the news of Bloody Sunday, was spread all over the world. A photo of her on the ground overcome with tear gas and a Sheriff's deputy with his billy club standing over her is quite iconic. That was the beginning of my consciousness of race relations in the U.S. My father was also active in pursuing social justice in the Santa Maria area. My understanding was that a local club discriminated against black people; I don't think you could be a member of that club in those days.

Q: Interesting.

SMITH: So, he sued to get the club's liquor license revoked.

Q: And being an attorney, he knew how to do that.

SMITH: Yes.

Q: Well, did they settle in the end? Did the club settle-?

SMITH: I can't remember. Probably, I would think, probably.

Q: Fascinating.

SMITH: Yes.

Q: So, once again, just before we go with you to Kansas City because of course-

SMITH: St. Louis.

Q: I'm sorry, St. Louis. Since you have some famous relatives, have you also done some of your ancestry and looked back as far as you can?

SMITH: Oh, yes.

Q: Because that would be interesting to talk about before we move on with the rest of your life.

SMITH: In fact, I have talked about my family during my assignments in the Foreign Service. In my remarks I would highlight three family members, first beginning with Robert Smalls from South Carolina, whose claim to fame is when he commandeered the USS Planter and delivered the Confederate steamer to the North.

Q: Yes, I remember that story.

SMITH: Yes, Robert Smalls is my great-great uncle. Interestingly, President Trump mentioned Robert Smalls in his first Black History Month proclamation. The proclamation dovetailed very nicely with my remarks that year. Smalls was founder of the Republican Party in South Carolina, and one of the first black members of Congress. He became a very famous person at that time, a cause célèbre. One thing I should note is that he met President Lincoln and subsequently Lincoln allowed the formerly enslaved men to join the Union army.

Q: Right.

SMITH: And some historians say that Lincoln's decision was in part due to Robert Smalls and his exploits. Then in my formal remarks on my family to foreign audiences, I fast forward 100 years to the late '50s, early '60s when my cousin, who's still alive, Bruce Boynton, had his claim to fame. He was at Howard Law School, was traveling south during his school break, and decided to go to a whites-only restaurant at the train station to have a meal. He was arrested and his case went all the way to the Supreme Court, a case that was argued by Thurgood Marshall, by the way.

Q: That's amazing.

SMITH: Yes, cousin Bruce has some fascinating vignettes that he shared with me that I would share with my audiences about the court case and the discussions he had with his lawyers. Not too many people remember the case; but many remember the Freedom Rides. It was cousin Bruce's case that led to the Freedom Rides, because the Freedom Riders were testing the positive outcome from the Supreme Court case, since the Supreme Court ruled in cousin Bruce's favor.

Q: What year was that?

SMITH: This was in 1958 when he was arrested. In fact, it was shortly after I was born in Washington, D.C. And I would sometimes tease cousin Bruce - I would say - if you had only visited my parents to greet the newborn, you would never have been arrested.

Q: Right, right.

SMITH: Because he was hungry, my parents would have fed cousin Bruce, and there would have been no need for him to go to the whites-only restaurant.

Q: That's amazing. Wow.

SMITH: And then, a few short years later my Aunt Amelia Boynton, a leader, as I said, in the Selma to Montgomery March, invited Dr. King to Selma, staying in her home. In fact, I don't know if you've seen the movie, "Selma," but she has a prominent role in the film. At one point, she is in the basement of the famous Brown Chapel AME church, Dr. King turns to her and says "we will march, Mrs. Boynton, we will march." She had a very pivotal role in the civil rights movement, as you can see. Aunt Amelia was recognized for her heroic efforts by President Obama at the 2015 State of the Union address. I remember, I was in Kabul at the time when my son informed me via email that Aunt Amelia was invited to the State of the Union. As soon as I ready his message, I was jumping up and down and screaming. Colleagues couldn't figure out what was the matter. Anyway, there's a lot of intersection of the telling my family's history as a public affairs officer at my various assignments.

Q: Fascinating.

SMITH: Yes.

Q: Yes, yes. Wow. Okay, that is certainly a remarkable set of antecedents. I wish I could remember where I read about Robert Smalls. Perhaps it was in a book about Frederick Douglass.

SMITH: Yes, Robert Smalls and Frederick Douglass went to see President Lincoln together.

Q: Okay, that's where I remember it, right.

SMITH: Yes.

Q: Okay, yes.

SMITH: Next, my family moved to St. Louis. I went to high school there and became a better student, more focused, which was a good thing because then I got good grades.

Q: Well, take a moment to describe the high school because it's a big city; how many high schools were there, what was yours like?

SMITH: Sure. It was a public high school and in the suburbs of St. Louis. The high school was called University City High School or U-City High, for short. And yes, it was huge. I experienced culture shock, going from California to St. Louis.

Q: Because I imagine the schools there were smaller and-

SMITH: Smaller, yes, in Santa Maria, California, but also the demographics were different. In Santa Maria the percentage of people of color was very small. In St. Louis, the high school was 50/50.

Q: Oh, interesting.

SMITH: Yes, at least that was my impression.

Q: And the division was principally white and black, or had Latinos already begun to settle in the area?

SMITH: In California?

Q: No, in St. Louis.

SMITH: Oh, in St. Louis? The percentage was probably negligible. Lots of people of the Jewish faith lived there. But yes, it was pretty much even; I would say 50/50. I was only there, though, for three years, first year in middle school, then two years of high school. Eventually, I graduated early and was selected as an exchange student to Denmark.

Q: Wow.

SMITH: Yes, the year I spent in Denmark as an exchange student is what they call now a gap year.

Q: So, in place of your senior year in high school you went to Denmark?

SMITH: That's correct. I graduated early and spent my senior year in Denmark.

Q: And how was Denmark selected? Did you go with like American Field Institute?

SMITH: Yes, American Field Service.

Q: Service.

SMITH: Yes, I was an AFS student.

Q: Had you wanted Denmark, or Denmark was selected for you?

SMITH: It was selected for me, yes. The process was that you submitted your profile and then they would choose you and the country of best fit. And that was fine, that was great. Yes, I was there from '75 to '76. It was a full year. I lived on a farm, which was interesting. I had two host sisters; one was actually doing her study abroad in the U.S. at that time, and one host brother.

Q: Interesting.

SMITH: Yes. So, that was another culture shock, living on a farm. And yes, the school was quite a distance from the home I shared with the host family. Nowadays I don't think that the organization permits this but I was able to operate a moped. I had to drive on a little moped to the bus stop and then from the bus it would take, I don't know, maybe 40 minutes to get to the school.

Q: Wow.

SMITH: Yes.

Q: This really was rural.

SMITH: Oh, yes. Yes. It was, yes. The school I went to was called a gymnasium. According to the European tradition, you, in essence, self-select. Based on your test scores, those who are destined for university and higher go to the gymnasium; others go to vocational school. I was at a gymnasium and what was so astonishing was my classmates' level of English. They were reading books in their regular English class that I was reading in my junior year of high school back home.

Q: Wow. So, this was an English language school?

SMITH: No, it was in Danish. I had to learn Danish prior to attending the gymnasium. AFS gave us maybe eight weeks of intensive Danish.

Q: Even 12 weeks, Danish is not the easiest language to learn.

SMITH: No, it's not. But the idea was that you are immersed in a language and so would pick it up fairly quickly. And I did to some degree. But yes, my homework and classes were all in Danish. Of course, I needed help; I couldn't do it all on my own. As for my other fellow AFS students, some did very, very well. They mastered the language very quickly. To this day, I'm still in touch with my host family.

Q: Lovely.

SMITH: Yes.

Q: Had you had any other foreign language study while you were in high school?

SMITH: Oh yes. In high school I studied Russian and French.

Q: Okay, okay. So, you had-

SMITH: Yes, those were my two languages.

Q: So, you had some introduction to what it was to at least try to concentrate and express yourself in other languages?

SMITH: Oh, absolutely, yes.

Q: And so, now before you go to Denmark, were there other travel experiences that you had that also kind of opened your eyes to international opportunities or anything in that direction?

SMITH: No, we really did not travel abroad. I don't think many people did back then, except to Mexico, since we were so close to the border. I did not go, but my family had gone one time without me.

Q: Okay. Because it is-

SMITH: Oh, you raised a good point. My uncle, my mother's brother, his second wife, is first generation Italian. When they divorced my aunt and her two kids, my cousins, came to live with us.

Q: Interesting.

SMITH: Yes. After a year they went to Italy to live with her parents. I so desperately wanted to go to Italy with them. When my mother said no, disappointed, I decided at that time that I would find a career that would take me to live overseas.

Q: Wow. So, that's pretty early.

SMITH: Yes. My interest in living and working abroad someday, somehow, started early.

Q: Okay. Interesting. And the other question for high school is, had you done any extracurricular activities, I don't know, maybe Girl Scouts or public speaking or anything like that?

SMITH: Well, yes, I was a Girl Scout and a Campfire Girl. I was also on the student council. I was engaged in sports. And I had a part-time job. I was kept pretty busy.

Q: Was the part-time job anything fun or interesting? Some people actually, you know, who like horses, for example, they are fortunate enough to have horse farms or racetracks nearby and they can go and do grooming or whatever.

SMITH: No, it was purely for spending money; Baskin Robbins. I don't even like ice cream. I do now, but I didn't back then. Well, yes, all jobs are steppingstones, one way or another. I did babysitting too. I was kept pretty busy.

Q: And schoolwork and all of these things, yes.

SMITH: Exactly, yes. And fortunately, my parents kept an eye on the college admission process while I was in Denmark. They reminded me about the steps I needed to take in order to submit my application to Georgetown. That was the only school that my father was going to consider for me. Fortunately, by then I wanted to go into the Foreign Service. I think I had read something about the Foreign Service while I was still in St. Louis. By the time I was an exchange student, I had set my sights on the Foreign Service as an option. And then, as you know, Georgetown has a school of Foreign Service, so that worked out well.

Q: Yes. But you'd had no backup school when you applied?

SMITH: No, no.

Q: Okay.

SMITH: Georgetown University was the only school that I applied to.

Q: Okay, okay. Wow. I mean, not that you wouldn't have made a good student, but my parents made me have backup schools just in case.

SMITH: Yes.

Q: Okay.

SMITH: Yes.

Q: But let's go back to Denmark for one more minute, because it's not only learning the language, which is, you know, some work, but were you also part of any of the farm work? Like, I don't know, did you milk cows or tend sheep or whatever one does?

SMITH: My Danish host family did have cows and crops. No, I wasn't really asked to do any of the farm labor. I had a host brother. He had to get up early and help the father with the farming. On occasion, I'd go to the neighborhood farm and fetch eggs. Other than that, no, I was not involved with the farm work per se.

Q: Okay. But you did at least get the feeling for the cycles and what the day was like for a farmer?

SMITH: Oh yes, of course. They woke up very early, and then out to the fields or in the barn to milk the cows. Work started very early. Then, the host father would return to the house for lunch and then dinner, bone tired. Yes, it was hard work, it was very hard work. Eventually, he sold the farm. I think there was a combination of things. Maybe it was too much for the son to operate alone, but also big agribusiness took over as has happened in many places. I think the family farm was just bought out, yes.

Q: Okay. Now, so you complete your applications for Georgetown, and you get the-

SMITH: Oh, I'm sorry. One last thing. I'd like to say something about my host sisters, and what they eventually did since their career choices kind of informed me about the importance of English. In public affairs, we have varying degrees of English language programs. In Denmark, I saw up close what a difference English fluency makes in a non-English speaking country. So, for them, for example, my host sister, the eldest, she became a doctor and then did some pioneering research on Alzheimer's disease. She attended conferences and organized major gatherings for researchers in the field of Alzheimer's. What's impressive is that she operates entirely in an English medium. Obviously, her English language skills have served her well. Her sister, who was present at the time when I was there as an exchange student, worked for an international company, I think first with IBM, then with another smaller tech company. Again, English was the medium of conversation and work. She worked fully in an English environment. I remember visiting one time, she was on the phone, a conference call, in English. And the son, did a short-term exchange program in Canada on a farm, in part to burnish his English language skills. After farming became not a career option for him, he worked for a furniture company with sales abroad, and English helped him. So, I witnessed up close that English fluency is a necessity in non-native English speaking countries. As I said, it informed me when I was managing English language programs in my countries of assignment about how useful it is to have these skills.

Q: And you know, your mention of English, it also reminds me, you said you went to a gymnasium, and how would you describe the difference between their approach to education and the U.S. approach to the extent that you saw it while you were there?

SMITH: Well, I alluded to how this form of upper secondary education, with its strong academic component, is geared to those who do well academically and wish to pursue a college degree. So, you really have to be pretty motivated to be attending a gymnasium. I was there with some super smart kids. That was one difference. Another was that U.S. public schools place more emphasis on sports. However, now that I think about it, the educational system has evolved in the U.S. More emphasis on rigorous academics with the establishment of magnet schools and academies within public schools for the gifted and talented. My high school, University City High, offered honors courses in English and history, which I took. The honors classes prepared me well for college. So, we do kind of self-select, but it's more loosely defined as to how you access these higher-level courses. Whereas in Denmark, when I was there, it's more based on tests. It was interesting to experience a different system of education, but that experience served me well when I engaged with education officials abroad during my assignments.

Q: And you said you have stayed in touch with at least some of the family over all these years, because the bond was that strong that you made.

SMITH: Oh, yes, definitely. We keep in touch. My host father and one sister passed away, unfortunately. My host mother is still alive. My other host sister and her family are doing well, as is her brother and his family. All of them have been exchange students abroad.

Q: Right. Now we'll go on to college. You completed your application, you got your approval and you come back from Denmark. Now, what year do you start at Georgetown?

SMITH: So, that was summer of '76.

Q: Okay. And so, you're arriving late August or so at Georgetown for-

SMITH: Well, actually, I think it was July.

Q: Okay.

SMITH: Yes, because my father had enrolled me in an academic enhancement program for minority students called the Community Scholars Program, which just celebrated its 50th anniversary last year. I had only returned from Denmark three weeks prior, when I had to pack and leave for Georgetown for the month-long program. I remember being unhappy at the time because I had no time to rest and relax. Suddenly, I was on my own. I booked a flight to D.C. and started my transition to college life.

Q: Now, what- Describe the program.

SMITH: Well, as I said, it was for minority students. The program provided supplementary education in English and math. I didn't need the English prep – my writing and analytical skills were quite good..

Q: You were taking honors courses, yes, yes.

SMITH: Sure. The math I did need some help. Yes. But I think the most benefit was just meeting other students, getting to know the campus before the academic year started, so that I could hit the ground running. I think that was the most beneficial thing for me about the Community Scholars Program.

Q: And they already assigned you to your dorm and so on, or-?

SMITH: No, we had to switch dorms, but the summer program was a good introduction to dorm life, to student life, before actually starting the school year.

Q: Okay. Now, since you're arrived with really a unique experience, some people have the AFS experience but most of the people who go to the School of Foreign Service may have traveled a bit overseas but not generally as much as you did.

SMITH: Yes, certainly back then.

Q: Yes. What sort of, I guess, specialization were you already thinking about, or were you just going to take some courses and see where you were going to go?

SMITH: More of the latter. I really wasn't focused on any one area of specialization. I did have an interest in African studies, and so I tended to want to take more courses in that area. Yes, so the degree that I had a focus, it was more on Africa.

Q: And arriving from your experience in high school, you experience in Denmark, what was your impression of the academic climate and the kind of student climate in Georgetown? Was it much of a shock or-?

SMITH: Well, I think I was a little intimidated at first because there were many students who had gone to private schools, and certainly from much wealthier families than my middle-class family. Then, as I progressed in my academic studies, as I said I wrote well, very well, and so I think that was my saving grace because it didn't matter whether they had gone to private schools. I think I wrote better than many of my peers. Not that I got fantastic grades, my grades were mediocre, but still, as long as I could write essays, I was fine. The mandatory courses in economics gave me a bit of a challenge because I was never really, as I said, strong in math. Otherwise, it was fine. Also, I had a part-time job, so I wasn't really as involved in the extracurricular activities to the degree that I should have been, looking back. I always wanted to work and I did not want to burden my father for extra money because he was paying everything. That was good, in a way. I didn't have any student loans and Georgetown's tuition was considerable back then as it is now.

Q: Oh, yes, sure.

SMITH: In fact, I really had a part-time job practically throughout my four years at Georgetown.

Q: Were any of the part-time jobs related in any way to your future work or your future profession?

SMITH: I wish. I didn't really know how to navigate the system to find career enhancing jobs. Remember, this was pre-Internet. I didn't really have a mentor there who could advise me accordingly.

Q: That was going to be my next question, yes.

SMITH: I wish I had a mentor, which is one reason why I have mentored and continue to mentor students – just recently a student, who's now a freshman at Georgetown.

Q: Yes, we're only one year apart and it was the same story for me. The only way I learned about jobs was through- I mean, you could look in "The Washington Post," but that was a needle in a haystack. No, the only way I learned about it was networking, slowly but surely expanding social networks until I finally found somebody working at the Department of Commerce who said oh yes, we do take interns. But that was two-and-a-half years after I arrived. I mean, it took that long.

SMITH: Yes. Well, I didn't have that kind of network where I could have explored such beneficial opportunities.

Q: And then, the other question about you're working very hard, obviously, academically, and you've got the part-time job; did you have the opportunity to explore D.C. at all?

SMITH: Yes. I still had relatives living here and had made summer trips to D.C. at an early age

Q: Oh, I didn't realize.

SMITH: Yes.

Q: Ah, okay.

SMITH: So, I knew, to some degree, D.C. because my family would travel back east on our annual vacation and one place we would always come to would be Washington. Whenever we would come to the D.C. area on those trips, I loved going to the Smithsonian museums. My mother - back then we didn't have cellphones - would drop off me and my cousins at a designated spot on the Mall. We'd spend all day at the museums and then we'd rendezvous at the designated pickup place where she'd be waiting. Since I stayed with my great-aunt who lived near Old Soldiers Home, for two

summers, and traveled around by bus, I also got to know D.C. pretty well outside the confines of Georgetown. My junior year, though, I went to Morocco on my own.

Q: Oh, my. Wow. And that's-

SMITH: That's something of a story.

Q: -summer of '78?

SMITH: Actually '79.

Q: '79.

SMITH: '79, yes.

Q: And was that a program offered by Georgetown?

SMITH: I wish.

Q: Oh, you just chose Morocco?

SMITH: Nobody did that in those days. Here's how that trip happened. Ever since high school I had corresponded with a Moroccan. These were the days when people actually wrote letters.

Q: Right, pen pals.

SMITH: Pen pals, exactly. So, I had some money saved up, and TWA, when TWA in fact was operating, had this really attractive fare to go to Morocco. I knew some acquaintances from Georgetown were traveling abroad for the summer and I wanted to have my own adventure too. I had a contact – my pen pal; and a destination.

Q: Okay. So, your pen pal said you could stay-

SMITH: Oh, yes. Although, about a month before I was to leave, my pen pal's plans fell through, which meant that I had to make a decision – cancel or go alone. I chose the latter.

Q: Oh, dear.

SMITH: So, I went and landed in Casablanca. Yes. I was very fortunate, however, because I befriended a good group of Moroccans who were protective. For example, if I wanted to go to the store, they would send a young boy to follow me, to make sure that I didn't get into any trouble. In this regard, I believe I had a guardian angel watching over me. It was, as it turned out, a very great experience.

Q: What was it like living in a Moroccan family, even for the short time you were there? Did it, I guess, at least give you a window into Islamic life or North African life?

SMITH: Oh, yes. Oh, especially as it pertained to women, Yes, I had many conversations with women my age or slightly older, We had to communicate in French, a language I was studying at Georgetown. Luckily, my French greatly improved. One woman made a great impression on me - the sister-in-law of the person whose place I was staying in. She talked about how she was expected to marry young and have children. Yet, she also talked about wanting to take control of her own destiny. Very interesting insight about the life of a woman not much older than I was at the time, and how our paths diverged.

Q: Was it to the point where the women couldn't go out without male escort, or how did it work?

SMITH: I think that it would have been considered unusual. I think that's why my friends protected me, that's why they had the young boy follow me.

Q: It would just be, at that time, still uncommon for-

SMITH: Uncommon, put it that way - yes, uncommon.

Q: Within the home, what I often hear about in Islamic countries and Islamic homes like Morocco is there are a lot of soap operas, and over time the government or the tv groups introduced all kinds of ideas with social trends through soap operas, and they know that most of their audience is female, and so kind of over time they learned how to address these issues to women through the use of soap operas. But this is something I just read; I've never really lived in an Islamic country, so I don't know how strong that influence-

SMITH: Yes, I've heard that too. But I can't really say how that related to my experience in Morocco only because I think we have to remember that my trip there was during the late '70s. I'm not sure what kind of television shows they had. In fact, I can't recall there being a TV in the place where I stayed. I don't remember watching TV at all. Of course, later, when I started traveling as the deputy in NEA-PD (Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs-Public Diplomacy), there was an explosion of satellite dishes in these North African countries – a situation starkly different than when I was visiting in the '70s. Information was not as widely diffused as it is today.

Q: But you still liked

SMITH: Yes.

Q: It was like a little, teeny introduction to African life.

SMITH: Yes.

Q: I mean, North African.

SMITH: North African, yes.

Q: But at least a start.

SMITH: Absolutely, absolutely.

Q: So, alright, wow. That was your junior year summer?

SMITH: That's right.

Q: Okay. And you come back and now, what has become your major or your specialization in college?

SMITH: Well, it was international affairs, no real specialization except, as I said, I had several courses with a focus on Africa.

Q: Okay, that's fine. Sometimes at Georgetown you get bitten by some topic or region and suddenly your whole life changes and you just want to focus on that. But you can also remain interdisciplinary and just kind of specialize a bit in one area but not too heavily; Georgetown allowed that.

SMITH: Yes. So, that was pretty much the case, my case.

Q: Okay. So, now as you're approaching the end of college, what are you thinking about? Are you thinking about working or going to grad school or just taking the Foreign Service exam and hoping to get in immediately right after you graduate?

SMITH: Well, yes, joining the Foreign Service was high on my list of career choices, but I didn't take the exam right away because I felt like I needed to graduate first, and the exam, I think back then, was only given once a year.

Q: Yes, generally the first week of December.

SMITH: Exactly. Yes, so I had to look at other opportunities. In this regard, I really wanted to go into journalism. I wanted to try my hand. As luck would have it, in August of that year, the year after I graduated, I was selected as an intern at WETA-TV.

Q: Oh, wow. Okay.

SMITH: Yes.

Q: At that time where in the city was it located? Because of course now it has a new, bright, beautiful headquarters-

SMITH: Right. Well, I first started at NPR (National Public Radio) and so that was downtown. And then, I had a rotation at WETA-TV's office in Shirlington, Virginia.

Q: Ah. Right, right.

SMITH: It was a very structured and selective program for minority students, or I should say minority candidates. And so, there were six of us – a small group. We were taught the basics of journalism by a journalism professor who mentored and instructed us. Lots of hands-on work and practical experience. And then, we worked side by side with the professionals. Yes, that was interesting. The internship lasted a year. Pay was fine. Back then you could live off of so little; you can't now. My senior year I was living off-campus, so during the internship I just stayed off-campus. Yes, that was fine. And then, I applied to graduate school and was accepted at the Columbia School of Journalism.

Q: Wow.

SMITH: But I didn't go because after that internship year I started working as a news assistant at "The Wall Street Journal".

Q: Wow.

SMITH: Yes, I was at "The Wall Street Journal" and-

Q: And this is in Washington, D.C., in the D.C. office?

SMITH: In Washington, D.C., yes, the D.C. office. During my time at the WSJ, I did several things, including academic work. I was able to pursue graduate studies at University of Maryland in journalism paid for by the Wall Street Journal.

Q: Also, a perfectly good program.

SMITH: Oh, yes.

Q: Let me just ask one quick thing about your "Wall Street Journal" experience.

SMITH: Sure.

Q: You know, economics had been a challenge, but nevertheless you chose to work for a newspaper that's basically focusing on maybe not the economic models but at least the larger questions of economy and so on. How was that? I mean, was it a challenge, did you learn more about the mechanics, let's say, of-?

SMITH: Well, let me say it was fascinating being there and watching the big by-line journalists do their craft, like David Ignatius, Fred Kemp, Al Hunt, Walt Mossberg, Gerry Seib, Karen House. You still see them active in print or broadcast media today. So, it was good having that bird's eye view. I was there for five years, and towards the end -

Q: Oh, wow.

SMITH: -the end, during the last two years, the Wall Street Journal had me working at the Securities and Exchange Commission or SEC, reporting. When companies buy or sell stock that's over a certain percentage, they have to report the increase or decrease to the SEC. My job was to review the SEC filings and report, on deadline, any new information, although without a byline. It was straight-forward, basic fact reporting.

Q: Now, five years is a little bit of time, and again, once again, all in D.C.?

SMITH: In D.C., yes, all in D.C.

Q: Okay. During that time, during the time you were with "The Washington Post"-

SMITH: "Wall Street Journal."

Q: I'm sorry, "Wall Street Journal," did that also give you opportunities to expand your professional network? Were you able to meet other journalists and kind of begin thinking about larger things or-?

SMITH: Oh, yes. There was plenty of opportunity to expand my horizons on various topics I think pertinent to Foreign Service.

Q: Did you like it?

SMITH: I did. As I said, I was the lowly news assistant, but it was the best place, I think, for me at the time. And as I said, I was kept busy because I was also in graduate school.

Q: So, you were going part-time to graduate school and, I guess, full-time-

SMITH: And full-time, exactly, working.

Q: Was the graduate school experience a sort of training for you in journalism, did you get all the aspects of print, radio, video, TV?

SMITH: No, I didn't. In fact, that was probably an issue I had with the journalism program. It was more theoretical, but that was okay. You learn what you learn, and it was helpful. Now, I never got a degree because by the time I was about to finish my studies, I had taken the Foreign Service exam and passed. In fact, I took the Foreign Service exam three times, so it was on my third try that I was accepted and just-

Q: Very common experience.

SMITH: Yes. Now, I subsequently got my master's degree from American University or AU some years later. I took a year's leave of absence, well, less than a year, about nine

months' leave of absence to complete my degree. The credits I received from my graduate course work at the University of Maryland allowed me to finish at AU within a year.

Q: Yes. In a way, it's sort of the best of all possible worlds. I did my master's degree before I entered the Foreign Service and I almost regret it because I learned more in the master's degree, but I'm not sure I learned so much more that it was worth the time that I put in rather than going into the Foreign Service and then later doing the degree. So, I'm a little bit jealous that you did get some extra coursework and that was helpful, but then you were able to have the experience of being in the service and knowing exactly what you wanted to learn.

SMITH: Yes, exactly.

Q: And that's something I did not have because I simply took Georgetown's graduate program and they put me through- not that it wasn't a good program, but-

SMITH: So, you got your graduate degree from Georgetown. Okay. Oh, good.

Q: But I'm kind of- I always tell people who are thinking about it, I wouldn't bother getting a master's degree if you don't have to if you're going into the Foreign Service because in a way it's kind of better to have that mid-career break and then do it when it's really going to be valuable.

SMITH: And now the State Department offers the opportunity for graduate studies - yes.

Q: Okay. So, you take it three times; what year does this take us up to?

SMITH: 1986.

Q: Okay, alright.

SMITH: Yes. So, I start September of 1986.

Q: Alright. Any particular recollections of taking the exam that kind of stick in your mind? For so many people, like-

SMITH: Well, the in-basket, probably, yes. I don't know if they still do the in-basket test, but yes, that was interesting. I think I finally was able to master the in-basket the third and final time I took the exam. I don't know if that made the difference.

Q: Okay. So, now getting in summer of 1986.

SMITH: That's right.

Q: What was your A-100 like? What was your class like?

SMITH: Yes. Well, at that time, I joined the United States Information Agency, or USIA as it is commonly referred to, as a junior office trainee.

Q: Ah, okay, yes. So, it was separate.

SMITH: We were separate, yes. I think it's much better now having USIA combined with State, but back then we had our own orientation. And yes, we were a small class; I don't think we were more than 20 maybe 30 of us, and it was a mix; young, old; those who had work experience, those who did not, those who had graduate or other professional degrees. Overall, I think it was a good group. The director of our program was a seasoned public diplomacy or PD officer. He was really good at guiding new trainees. I remember when he assigned mentors. For me, he assigned someone of color. In fact, she was wonderful; I can't remember her name, but she was absolutely wonderful. But I said to Robin that I'd like also to have the opportunity to have someone as a mentor who's not of color. And so, I had two mentors.

Q: Great.

SMITH: Yes. I had the benefit of having two mentors whereas everybody else had one. So, it was great.

Q: Lovely. But now, you had- and one was a woman and one was a man?

SMITH: That's right.

Q: Okay.

SMITH: That's right, exactly. One was black, one was white, yes.

Q: Great.

SMITH: Yes. Also, I think what helped to ease my entry to State when you speak about mentorship is - The Thursday Luncheon Group or TLG as it is commonly known.

Q: Yes.

SMITH: Yes. So, I started going to those gatherings.

Q: Now, describe what the Thursday Lunch Group is.

SMITH: Yes. The TLG is a group of Foreign Service officers, primarily of color, who meet periodically to discuss issues and topics in common. Its website states that the mission is to increase the participation of African-Americans and other minorities in the formulation, articulation, and implementation of United States foreign policy. Many times, the TLG will have a speaker at luncheon gatherings to talk about whatever

appropriate topic of concern to minority employees: assignments, promotions, training. TLG also provides an opportunity to discuss challenges, to see how we can address some common problems or issues. Some colleagues have asked others within the Luncheon Group to look at their EERs (Employee Evaluation Reports) and provide advice and help. Yes, so I started going to the LTG gatherings, less consistently, as I advanced in my career, partly because I was overseas. Certainly, while I was stateside, I participated, not regularly, but as often as I could.

Q: Now, when you say that helped, the two things that, and you mentioned EERs, the two things that Foreign Service officers are most concerned about are their next assignments and their evaluations.

SMITH: Yes.

Q: So, you mentioned that they were helpful on EERs; were they helpful in next assignments?

SMITH: I'm sure the members of the TLG provided insights on assignments to their more junior colleagues. On the other hand, I probably could have been more strategic on my own assignments planning and career track. Having served in HR, I became aware that there is a pretty good structure in place to help officers throughout the ranks. One rarely has to guess as to the steps, training, and assignments one must take to be promoted to the next grade. Pretty much what I was doing early in my career was guessing what next assignment or assignments would be good for my career.

Q: Okay.

SMITH: Yes. I had a rough idea of what I needed to do, where I needed to go. Fortunately, my gut instincts served me well because I was in the Senior Foreign Service by the time I finished my career.

Q: Now, just to go back for a moment to the training, what did you find helpful and if there were things that were not helpful about the training?

SMITH: You mean as an untenured officer?

Q: Yes.

SMITH: Well, I think – we're going pretty far back – I think what was helpful was to talk, meet and mingle with other Foreign Service officers. I remember presentations that we had to do during our training period, and the tenured Foreign Service officers would be invited to critique our work. I believe having that kind of interaction was helpful. We didn't have an off-site gathering with our non-tenured State Department Foreign Service colleagues. No engagement compared to today's A-100 course. Our training was really mostly internal to USIA. It's much better now that officers-in-training from all cones are together, a positive outcome of the integration of USIA with the State Department.

Q: But now, as the training period approaches the end, you get your first assignment.

SMITH: Yes.

Q: So, what were your main choices at that time, if you recall?

SMITH: Right. So, we had a list of the top 10 countries for our first assignment. We had to prioritize our preferences. There was a mix of countries, some more desirable than others. Nigeria was on the list, Madagascar too and other large and small countries, mostly non-European. Our trainer said that the Bureau of Human Resources or HR would try its best to accommodate our preferences while balancing the needs of the Foreign Service. So, I didn't have major objections to going to a place like Nigeria, and I put that country on my prioritized list as number 10. Guess who got it? Me, because nobody else in my entering class put it on their list.

Q: Right. As soon as it's on your list, you can go there. Right, right.

SMITH: And I hadn't realized that my other colleagues were going backchannel, saying to the assignments folks that if nobody else puts Nigeria on their list, they may consider going to the country. Eventually, I was given the option of going someplace else if I had major objections, but I didn't. In fact, I signed up for worldwide service and was eager to go where needed. That's how I got my first assignment.

Q: And of course, it's English-speaking, so you didn't need to learn another language.

SMITH: Well, no, USIA still provided language training, because I wasn't language qualified yet – meaning that I was not off probation as an untenured officer until I acquired sufficient fluency in a foreign language.

Q: Oh, okay.

SMITH: Yes, so I received training in French, achieved my fluency level of 3/3, and got off the language probation before I went to Nigeria. It's an odd way of doing things, but yes.

Q: Okay, interesting. Alright. Now, you're going to Nigeria as a trainee-

SMITH: That's right.

Q: -and USIA used to have a very particular training program; how did it work again?

SMITH: Well, it was called junior officer training or JOT back then. We worked alongside our more senior colleagues in the public affairs section, working on cultural affairs or press. We also had opportunities to rotate in other sections, and for me, I think

it was, at most, a week rotation, maybe two weeks' rotation in the consular section. That was the extent of my interagency rotation.

Q: So, you never actually had to do a consular tour?

SMITH: No. Never.

Q: Because you said it was separate, yes.

SMITH: Yes. I kind of regret that not having a consular tour rotation. I think I would have loved doing something like that. It's hard work. Over the course of my career, I've had so many dealings with my consular colleagues. It would have helped a lot to have had a longer rotation in the consular section during my first tour, especially learning up-close about the challenges they faced. I would have benefited greatly by a mandatory assignment in the consular section.

Q: So, as you're rotating through these sections in Nigeria, are you focusing on things or are you given a piece of turf that is yours to research or be the main point of contact?

SMITH: Basically, my job was to assist the press officer, and later, the cultural affairs officer. The cultural affairs officer who trained and supervised me was excellent. I learned a lot from her. My time was divided between both sections, press and cultural affairs.

Q: Did you learn anything in this sort of early stage of your career where you're officially a trainee that then served you well later?

SMITH: Oh, yes. I think what I learned that most benefited me was that interpersonal relationships matter, matters a lot. I had many outside contacts, but did not pay much attention to cultivating my relationships with colleagues. My philosophy was, we're in a foreign country, we should be out and about with the host nationals. I realized later that I should also have spent sufficient time to get to know better my American colleagues. Relationships are relationships. You need to have and manage both.

Q: In Nigeria, as a woman officer, did you confront any particular challenges that your male counterparts did not?

SMITH: Well, yes. For example, I remember writing a rebuttal to an op-ed in the newspaper that got published, and I remember one person saying oh, you wrote that? The remark struck me as off-putting – as if to say that it was a remarkable feat for such a young female. Yes, in that respect, yes. But otherwise, I can't remember other instances.

Q: Yes, sure. So, then the interpersonal relationships. And your first tour is two years?

SMITH: It actually turned out to be one year.

Q: Ah, okay.

SMITH: One year.

Q: So, you basically got there, and you had to start thinking about where you were going next pretty soon after arrival.

SMITH: That's right.

Q: Or had USIA sort of told you okay, you go to Nigeria and then as a linked assignment you're going to go to somewhere else?

SMITH: No, no there wasn't any linked assignment. You had the opportunity to take a second year. I chose to not extend and accepted the offer to go to Paris, when a posting at my grade level in Paris was made available as an immediate opening. I jumped at the chance to work in a much larger embassy.

Q: And you had just gotten off of French language probation.

SMITH: Exactly. Fortunately, the person in HR who was my career counselor for non-tenured officer assignments saw my bid and registered my interest. Yes, that's how I was able to go to Paris.

Q: Now when you went there, what was the job, where was the job located in USIA? What- were you doing press work, cultural or a mix?

SMITH: In Paris?

Q: Yes.

SMITH: I was assigned to the cultural affairs office in the public diplomacy section of the embassy. My responsibilities covered academic affairs, including liaising with professors of American Studies, among other areas.

Q: Including the Fulbright exchange?

SMITH: No, not Fulbright. These were the French academics who taught American Studies at some of the most elite universities in the country.

Q: I see, okay.

SMITH: Yes. So, that was generally my main focus when I was there.

Q: And was it a two-year tour?

SMITH: It was a two-year tour.

Q: So, what was it like? You're now, this is, I guess, '88 going to Paris?

SMITH: That's right. It was 1988.

Q: What were the key issues going on in the minds of the French professors at the time? Because bilateral relations change and embassies change; do you recall what they were most interested in getting from you?

SMITH: Well, aside from supporting conferences with the professors, focusing on various aspects of American history, society or culture, I also hosted American experts on those very topics to talk to French audiences. Sometimes we held talks at the ambassador's residence. Some of our speakers were academics; others were music, arts and cultural luminaries. For example, Kirk Douglas wrote an auto-biography. I was asked by my Public Affairs officer (PAO) to organize a gathering at the ambassador's residence, at which the actor would be present on the occasion of the French edition of his book. The venue and the star power allowed us to invite and mingle with our key contacts, forging new ties and strengthening bonds. Also, there were many official VIP visits I worked on as a site officer. We were the foot soldiers, ensuring that the events went smoothly.

Q: But then, looking at the other parts, what were some of the other responsibilities?

SMITH: Well, we all had responsibility to recommend individuals for the Fulbright program, for example.

Q: And what a lot of people don't realize, I think, about the Fulbright program is the application procedure is very lengthy. And when you recommend someone, they have to really be committed to the process because it does take a long time, the application materials are voluminous, and they need to be able to tell you yes, I can take a year off next year and my institution will allow me to take that year off.

SMITH: Exactly, yes.

Q: And so, it's not the easiest thing to-

SMITH: Right. And the international visitors program as well. Each embassy section, including mine, was asked to make recommendations to a panel for consideration of professionals that we believed would benefit from a 3-week enhancement stay in the U.S. Naturally, I focused on my academic contacts. By the way, I had a beautiful apartment. I was fortunate for someone so junior. It was located in the 7th arrondissement with a view of the Eifel Tower.

Q: Okay.

Okay. So, today is March 12 and we are resuming our interview with Robin Smith.

And Robin, I had neglected in our first session where I was very much taken by your stories of your relatives who'd been involved in the Civil Rights and abolition even before that, to ask you if in your life you had encountered prejudice as a minority and what form it took and how you got over it?

SMITH: Thank you for asking that question. I'd have to answer this way: If I experienced discrimination throughout the course of my career, I would say it was probably subtle and not outright. But I did want to take this opportunity, because I think it's very important to share with you an incident that happened that was actually memorialized in a memo. I don't know if the file still exists, but I did keep the memo pertaining to this incident. And for obvious reasons, I will not say the name of the supervisor who was the subject of this memo. Nor will I specify which assignment it was. In fact, if you will permit me, I'd like to read from the memo because I think it's best to do so rather than summarizing. Now in reading this, I will refer to the person in question not by name but as supervisor and not by gender, I'll just say they. Okay?

Q: Yes.

SMITH: So, I'll read from a memo that I had requested that the American Foreign Service Association representative or AFSA rep write for the files, at the time of the incident.

Q: Can you say which year it was?

SMITH: No, I don't want to say; I can't really. I'm sorry.

Q: No, that's fine, that's fine.

SMITH: Okay. Let me add that the AFSA rep readily agreed to put in writing what transpired. In fact, I have in my hands the very memo to the file from the AFSA representative relating a conversation that he had, the AFSA representative, with the supervisor, my supervisor. I'll begin quoting from the memo:

They said [referencing the supervisor] several weeks ago, admin distributed embassy-wide suggestions on how to do employee evaluation reports, EERs. The supervisor called shortly thereafter in order to object to the guidelines, which the supervisor said perpetuated EER inflation, created unjustified expectations and appeared to carry embassy endorsement. They asked whether, in my capacity as acting AFSA rep, I would support their objecting and writing to the guidelines. I said that I would, and they said they would send a draft memo. The coversheet of the supervisor's draft memo noted in passing that their concern was in part promoted by questions raised by someone unidentified whom they would have to evaluate. [So, the supervisor is referring to me, basically]. I made a few additions to their memo and returned it to them. I said they could say that I had cleared the memo. They eventually sent the final memo to admin.

I [the AFSA rep] lunched with Robin Smith at her request. She said that at some point in the past she had asked her supervisor to provide their criteria for various categories on the EER, what in their opinion constitutes outstanding performance as opposed to excellent performance. She said that the supervisor had been reluctant to provide any criteria. It became clear to me that Miss Smith was the employee to whom they had referred but not identified in their earlier communication with me. Moreover, Miss Smith said that the supervisor told her that I had supported them in their view of the EER process. In my view, this was not correct. I had only supported the supervisor insofar as they wanted to complain about the issuance of the admin's suggestions.

Later, I phone the supervisor and told them that I had spoken with Miss Smith, and that she explained to me her earlier request to the supervisor was for clarification as to what various EER terms meant to the supervisor, and that she told me that the supervisor said that I had supported them on the EER issue. I told the supervisor that there were two distinct issues; their original complaint about the admin suggestions for EERs, and their dispute with Miss Smith. I said there were two separate issues and should remain so. I told the supervisor that I supported them with respect to the admin suggestions, but that I preferred not to get involved in their problem with Miss Smith, although I added that I thought it was not unreasonable for Miss Smith to ask for clarification from her supervisor as to the basis on which they would evaluate her. The supervisor agreed that two separate issues were involved, and they indicated they respected my desire not to get involved in this problem with Miss Smith. The supervisor then began to explain why he thought evaluating people by such terms as outstanding and excellent was wrong. The supervisor explained also that during the course of their Foreign Service career evaluations had become grossly inflated and terms like outstanding and satisfactory had lost their meaning. Their original complaint about the admin suggestions was based on their view of how evaluations had become meaningless, a tendency that in their view the admin suggestions were only reinforcing. The supervisor continued by noting that they had received many evaluations of outstanding during their career and they thought such evaluations had become devalued because of the loss of meaning attached to the term.

As another example how the Foreign Service has supposedly deteriorated, the supervisor turned toward a discussion of equal employment opportunities and affirmative action. The supervisor said they were glad the Supreme Court had recently limited affirmative action and asked whether I had seen reports of this. I said that I had but was not familiar with the details of the case. The supervisor noted that Justice Marshall, the only black on the Supreme Court, had dissented. The supervisor continued to explain their opposition to affirmative action. They want a system totally based on merit. The supervisor said that they sometimes look at colleagues and wonder if they got into the Foreign Service because of the color of their skin or some other quality not based on merit. The supervisor repeated that they were in favor of a service based totally on merit. The supervisor said that everyone should be evaluated "like we are."

At this point, I told the supervisor, to whom I have never been introduced face to face, that the supervisor should be careful about using the term "we" since I am a member of a minority group. Based on how the discussion had been going, it seemed obvious that the

supervisor thought I was white, or at least not a member of a minority group. The supervisor seemed uncomfortable, mumbled an apology, and said they were not implying that I had been hired because I was a member of a minority group. I told him that that was not likely since I am a Harvard graduate and lawyer, passed every cone on the Foreign Service entrance exam, and never asked for, nor to my knowledge, received any favorable consideration from the State Department because of my minority status. The supervisor told me they were not a racist and in fact, they had-

Okay, if I go into this part, I might reveal some qualifying information.

The supervisor said that they treat people as individuals. I reminded the supervisor that they had just told me that they sometimes look at certain colleagues and wondered if they were in the Foreign Service because of their skin color or other factors not based on merit. The supervisor acknowledged making this statement. The supervisor then went on to add that their disagreement with Miss Smith about EERs was based on principle, that in fact they thought she was a fine officer who deserved tenuring and who they thought would continue to serve well as an officer.

Note: Miss Smith is black.

The supervisor repeated that they were in favor of a merit-based service and evaluation system and was not a racist. I told the supervisor that they probably had said more than they intended. The supervisor agreed. I told the supervisor that I would call Miss Smith and tell her that we had spoken and that if the supervisor wanted to go forward with their complaints about the administration's EER suggestions, I would work with them. I told the supervisor again that their problem with Miss Smith was entirely separate from the problems with admin, and that I did not want to get involved in the former. The supervisor said that they too would speak to Miss Smith in the near future.

I called Miss Smith and related my conversation. She appreciated my willingness to intercede. She called me back and asked that I write a memorandum of my conversation. I said I would do so.

And then, this is what the supervisor does next. The supervisor writes to the director of the EEO office. The supervisor says I am taking the liberty of writing in an attempt to clarify my own understanding of what affirmative action the office takes regarding entry of minorities and women into the Foreign Service corps. The question arose recently in a discussion I had with an embassy colleague whom I regret I may have offended because I had believed, perhaps wrongly, that the entrance requirements were different for certain people in order to assure proper minority representation among officers. I am completely in favor of making special efforts to recruit minorities and tell them about the Foreign Service as a career. We definitely need better representation. But I am concerned if in the interest of affirmative action some junior officers or candidates are not subject to the same rigorous entry requirements as others. A double standard, if one exists, is unfair to all officers and naturally can affect personal attitudes about one's colleagues.

A couple of weeks ago I saw a newspaper article about a Supreme Court decision on affirmative action in the construction business. I do not remember the specifics but would be grateful if you could explain what happened and how the decision might affect affirmative action in other sectors, including Foreign Service. I admit that the concept of affirmative action has always given me philosophical and moral problems. Do you recall the story some years ago of the fellow in Northern Virginia – I believe he changed his name from something like Joseph Richard to Jose Martinez in order to benefit from a job quota for Spanish surnamed people? I am, if you will, an elitist when elitism is based on merit. I think you know me well enough to know I reject any other kind of elitism or racism and fully support the concept of equal opportunity.

And then the supervisor closes his comments. The director of the EEO office responded to the supervisor, very appropriately and with tact, I might add. This incident, I hope, raised the awareness of the supervisor that the State Department is an agency that, like all other agencies, benefits from diversity, and that the minority candidates go through the same rigorous process as others. Unfortunately, the supervisor had his own preconceived notions. I think by and large, what I take from this exchange, is that the supervisor was open to adjust his set of beliefs about minority candidates, although only when confronted by a fellow officer he thought was of the same ethnicity, white. Going forward, I hoped that this particular supervisor would think twice about making suggestions or making assumptions about a person.

Q: Interesting.

SMITH: Yes. I thought I would read that for the record because it's such a good story, and for some reason I had kept that memo in my forever files.

Q: Alright. Should we now resume with your career as you get ready for your first assignment?

SMITH: Oh, I'm sorry. Let me make one last point. I think most of my encounters with colleagues and supervisors were on the whole really positive. I mean, I have worked with some excellent officers, smart, sensitive to concerns, diversity concerns. I think in my 31 years in the Foreign Service, this one incident and another were the only two negative experiences I had with supervisors. The second one was not a racial issue. So, I consider myself pretty lucky.

Q: Yes, yes.

SMITH: Okay. Let's talk about my Paris assignment in more detail. I do have some notes..

Q: You arrived there what year?

SMITH: This was in '88, yes. I left Nigeria and the Department gave me brush-up French because even though I had passed my language test before going to Nigeria in order for

me to get off probation, they still thought it would be good to refresh my fluency level. I was grateful that State invested the time in me to take French before going off to Paris.

Q: Did you find the brush-up helpful?

SMITH: I did. Oh, yes. After spending a year without speaking the language, it would have been difficult to start in the new assignment without the brush-up. Remember this was pre-Internet days, no access to on-line refresher courses. I think it was a good idea.

My assignment in Paris was to assist the growth and development of the study of the United States and France through contacts with national, and regional academic associations of American Studies, as well as with and through contacts with individual professors, universities and other academic institutions. And I was also asked to heighten the profile of American authors and their works through cooperation with publishing houses and support for prizes honoring American authors. That's the broad outline of my scope of work. I also spent a lot of my time working with the French publishers of American authors, especially when these authors came to Paris to do their book tours. Another aspect of my job was to serve as site officer for various VIP visits, because as you can imagine, almost every other week, it seemed, there was an official VIP trip to Paris.

Now, getting-

Q: A quick question at the beginning. The French publishers, were they looking for particular genres or particular authors or was it more of a catch as catch can, they sort of made decisions on even whether it was fiction or non-fiction based on some criteria or calculation?

SMITH: Well, the various French publishing houses had their own specialties, or areas of focus. I can recall that there were some really famous authors that came to Paris. For example, Alex Haley, who I got to meet and spend some time with. And his visit was when he had published the French version of his last book. Kirk Douglas, whom I mentioned earlier. Elizabeth Taylor graced her presence at an embassy function for joint scholarships and to promote AIDS awareness, I believe. She was very much active and involved on the issue of AIDS. Toni Morrison came through Paris as well. And I organized a function for author Barbara Chase Riboud, who wrote a book on Sally Hemmings. My job was both fun and interesting.

On the VIP visits, I can recall working as a site officer on the economic summit that took place on the anniversary of the bicentennial of the French Revolution. I also served as the site officer for Mrs. Quayle, the then vice president's wife, who had a career as a lawyer. For her visit, I remember helping to facilitate an event at the Pasteur Institute. Organizing these VIP visits consumed a lot of time, but was very productive in strengthening the bilateral relationship.

The last thing I wanted to mention about my time in Paris was that I met a very good friend with whom I'm still in contact. I believe we met in connection with an arts or cultural event I attended. Her mother is from Morocco and her father hailed from Senegal. At that time we met, she was dating her now husband, who is Jewish. Talk about a family dynamic.

Q: Now, was she French or-?

SMITH: Yes, she's French. I'm not sure when her parents actually left their respective countries to move to France, but she's definitely French. I mention this friendship because of an interesting thing that happened many years later. My friend has a daughter several years younger than my son. Now fast forward to 2015. I think you might know what happened that year at the Stade de France in Paris when it was targeted by a terrorist attack.

Q: Yes.

SMITH: Yes. And then there were a series of deadly attacks at other locations too. It was a heart-wrenching and just a terrible time for the French and the people of Paris. Everybody was on edge, really nervous and scared. So, my friend's daughter wrote a song, and put it on YouTube, called "Let's Pray for Paris" that went viral. It was in French and English. Unfortunately, it's a sign of the times when we live in a world where such ugliness can occur.

Q: Now, over the course of your work, did you fill in for others, take on other responsibilities or, given the size of the section there, you stayed pretty much on your track?

SMITH: Well, yes. When my supervisor, the Cultural Affairs Officer, or Assistant CAO were on home leave, for example, I'd help fill in or assume portfolios as acting.

Q: And the last question, did the work require you to do much travel around France?

SMITH: I did some. I wish I could have done more, of course, but yes. The French would have these honorary ceremonies in an academic setting to confer titles or special recognition to individuals; and I, the most junior officer, would represent the embassy, which required travel.

Q: Now, as you're approaching the end of the tour, what are you thinking about as a follow-on?

SMITH: Oh. Well, I decided that I wanted to use my French more, and thought Haiti probably would be a good spot. And I knew the incumbent CAO.

Q: So, it was a two-year or a three-year tour in Paris?

SMITH: It was two years. I think I got tenure in Paris, so yes.

Q: So, you're looking at now a third foreign tour, not going back to the department.

SMITH: That's right.

Q: Okay.

SMITH: That's right. Exactly. Yes, so Haiti. I was assigned to Port-au-Prince.

Q: So, this is 1990 in Haiti?

SMITH: Yes.

Q: Or at least towards the end of 1990.

SMITH: That's right. I probably arrived during the summer transition period in Haiti. I should add that there was a lot of political turmoil during my tenure there. Jean-Bertrand Aristide, a former Haitian priest, became Haiti's first democratically-elected president. Many Haitians vested in the status-quo did not want to see Aristide remain in power. In fact, I remember having conversations with certain privileged Haitians who would say that the poor impoverished people of Haiti, mainly Aristide's base, are not ready to vote, that they don't know anything about democracy. I'd counter by saying that preventing someone's right to vote is not democracy.

There was a lot of discussion within the interagency about how to help Haiti. At some point, the political situation was so tenuous that a decision was made to send non-essential employees on ordered departure.

Q: Wow.

SMITH: Yes. And the ordered departure lasted six months.

Q: My goodness.

SMITH: Yes. Six months. My tour was three years with a period of six months of ordered departure back in the department. Early on in my assignment, I had a robust programming portfolio, however.

Q: Now, you went there in what position?

SMITH: CAO.

Q: Oh, okay.

SMITH: Yes, I was the cultural affairs officer.

Q: Alright.

SMITH: In addition to oversight of the binational library, my duties were to strengthen relationships with Haitian educational institutions; make effective use of the speaker program; do educational exchanges and book programs; oversee the Fulbright exchange program and international visitor program; reach out and expand access to various sectors of Haitian society, students, military, intellectuals, provincial elites and so on.

One highlight, and I think I was recognized with a superior honor award, was a series of events I organized in honor of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., because I thought that an observance of Dr. King would speak to issues of non-violence, inclusion, and a democratic process – topics of importance for all Haitians to hear at that time. One key cultural event I launched was attended by President Aristide, the political establishment in Haiti, including opposition members, and the U.S. ambassador. I remember that the two of them, President Aristide and the ambassador, sat next to each other. The event was so moving that they shed tears. My supervisor, the PAO, told me this had happened since I didn't notice as I was working the event. You have to understand that the event was impactful as there was a call for unity by various Haitian groups and individuals during a time of much tension. I was worried about more mundane things, for example, if we would we have power, because this event when the economic embargo was in place, and electricity was sporadic.

I remember, we had to ask the power company, please make sure that you have the power on while we're doing our event, and they agreed.

Also, during my tenure in Haiti, I visited the King Center in Atlanta, which led to its recommendation of experts trained in Kingian nonviolence as speakers. That's how I was able to organize several events in Port-au-Prince and even once in Cap Haitian with different speakers affiliated with the King Center. The United States Agency for International Development, for USAID as we called it, was also supportive, and in fact, helped defray costs of one or more of my Kingian programs. I must add that I had an excellent and cooperative relationship with USAID in Haiti and throughout my career in regard to some of my outreach, education and speaking events.

Indeed, for my efforts on organizing the several different programming efforts on Kingian nonviolence, I received a meritorious honor award. The recognition was for extraordinary devotion to duty in promoting under adverse conditions democratic efforts in Haiti through the imaginative conception of multiple programs in honor of Martin Luther King, Jr. The initiative received a degree of success unmatched by similar efforts launched by other countries in Haiti, according to some observers.

Another thing I did that was impactful was an essay contest on the topic of nonviolence. It was a six-month educational effort that I conceived to promote democratic debate and civic awareness among young adults.

Q: In French or in Creole?

SMITH: Oh, in French. It was impactful because the topic resonated during this tense period, especially among the youth. The contest stimulated interest among Haitian youth in Dr. King's philosophy. I remember the embassy security officer said that he'd drive around in the evenings and see Haitian kids sitting on street corners under streetlamps working on their nonviolence essays. They probably didn't have power at home, but were so motivated to write and be heard. We had a committee and we chose the top ten best essays, fundraised, and sent these talented kids to the King Center in Atlanta for training in nonviolence. What a wonderful experience for the young, talented selectees. After the contest ended, MLK clubs were established among secondary school students to continue scholarly pursuit. Media reporting amplified its reach. Based on my success in organizing the essay contest, I was contacted by the combined United Nations / Organization of American States civil mission in Haiti for advice on their efforts to launch a similar contest.

Another extremely successful event I organized was a cultural extravaganza involving artists using paint as a medium of expressing. Haiti is known for its artists, and so we had some really big-name artists who donated their time to do a huge mural cooperatively. I actually bought all the art supplies, and had it shipped over. With the donated supplies, the artists painted a huge mural in honor of Dr. King and his philosophy with relevance to Haiti. I don't know where it's at now; I've got to find out. Naturally, the theme they chose was peace and reconciliation.

I should add that Haiti is full of bigger than life characters, one of whom is Katherine Dunham, a famous African American dancer, educator, choreographer, and activist who made Haiti her home. Dancing is very important to Haitian culture. So when the State Department issued its call for nominations for students of dance to intern with a premier dance company in the U.S. I jumped at the chance to secure Ms. Dunham's advice and endorsement of the embassy's preferred candidate – after we weren't successful my first year. I included her very words of support in the cable response to State and her general comments that she wanted somebody from Haiti to be selected. The person in charge of the program said that was a good move on my part because who was going to go against what Katherine Dunham wants. Lesson learned – taking the extra step to do what you have to do to make sure your candidates are accepted pays off.

For all of my efforts during a difficult period in Haiti, which coincided during the time I was acting PAO, the U.S. chargé sent a note to my evaluation file saying that I was primarily responsible for the continued excellence of USIS's information, education and exchange programs. He added that "her established credibility with post contacts led to highly successful visits she organized with key representatives from the King Center and American Bar Association. She also put forward several important recommendations for post resolution activities. Largely as a result of these activities the mission is in a better position to support primary U.S. foreign policy objective of promoting democratic governance in Haiti. And, she was the sole USIS officer during a two-week period in which there was intense political activity leading to the nomination of a new prime

minister and involving U.S. official comments on Haiti from the president and secretary of state.”

Q: Now, you were there from '90 to '93.

SMITH: That's right. With a six-month gap.

Q: Right. But that six-month gap was in the earlier part of the three years?

SMITH: It was mid-October to mid-May, 1991-1992.

Q: Oh, alright. The reason I ask is because that was the change of administrations and I wondered if that transition had a significant effect on the kind of work you were doing.

SMITH: No, because I think the administrations were both in tune with what needed to be done in Haiti, which was the restoration of democracy and the return of the legitimate president of the country.

Q: Now, the other thing is, while you were there, how would you describe the overall situation as it evolved during those three years? Obviously, there was a great deal of ferment; Aristide was forced out of office. But to the extent that you could put your finger on the pulse, what did you- what were your impressions?

SMITH: Tense. It was very tense. In fact, our movements were limited towards the end of my assignment. The embassy started providing transport to and from work for mission colleagues out of an abundance of caution. The military tenaciously held onto power following the 1991 coup against Aristide, contributing to the atmosphere of political instability and aura of crisis until Aristide's return mid-1993. They were undermining, I think, their best interests and their country as well. Nonetheless, I enjoyed my tour in Haiti. It is a country that is so rich in culture. As a cultural affairs officer, it was a wonderful place to be.

Q: Speaking of which, did your job include or bring about a lot of travel for you in the country?

SMITH: Yes. I was able to visit Cap-Haitien, which is Haiti's second-largest city in the north of the country. I traveled there several times, both by road and air. Ideally, our programs should extend beyond the capital, so I was pleased that we were able to do youth outreach and bring speakers to this very historic part of Haiti. One key contact was in charge of a media outlet, so I believe we conducted some journalism training programs in Cap-Haitien too.

Q: And the other question that occurs to me is, did your work, you had mentioned USAID, did your work interact in significant ways with USAID, Peace Corps, other development activities?

SMITH: USAID was supportive of a number of initiatives that we had on justice and democracy promotion. I believe I mentioned their support earlier. Of course, the entire mission collaborates on the International Visitors nomination process.

Q: Out of those exchange programs, the international visitors and Fulbright, are there any that really stand out in your mind who maybe moved on to greater things?

SMITH: I'm sure we touched a number of individuals who utilized their experiences in the U.S., advanced in their respective areas of expertise, and did well for their country. I'm almost positive that happened.

Q: Now, for you as an officer, as you come to the end of this tour, how did it prepare you or what skills and talents did you acquire there that would then subsequently be valuable to you later?

SMITH: Well, I think that I was really able to hone my supervisory skills since I had an entire section to manage. Also, serving as acting PAO gave me a broader perspective of our role in the entire mission and not just the contribution that my section made to fulfill U.S. goals and objectives in Haiti.

Q: How large was it?

SMITH: Well, we had one excellent cultural affairs assistant who was hired just prior to my arrival. She had a large network of contacts across the political, cultural and educational spectrum. She also was bicultural in the sense that she knew both Haitian and American culture and practices – just the type of person one would want in a locally-hired national employee. I also supervised a secretary and had indirect oversight of the binational center staff, consisting of a librarian, one library clerk and an educational counselor.

Q: Alright.

SMITH: So, yes.

Q: Okay, so with the big tour now almost in the rearview mirror, what are you thinking about for your next tour? You've been overseas now for three tours. There's beginning to be pressure, I'm sure to go back to Washington, but-

SMITH: Yes. I decided to return to the U.S. Given everything that I had done in Haiti on justice and rule of law issues, if you will, I thought this would be a good time for me to pause in my career and delve more deeply on those very topics.

Q: Ah ha. Okay.

SMITH: My next step was to ask for a leave of absence so that I could pursue a master's degree at American University in Washington D.C.

Q: Now, let me just ask quickly, were you actually on leave without pay or was this a one-year detail for education?

SMITH: No, I was actually on leave without pay, although still employed by USIA. I was not aware of the opportunities for educational excursions that State offered to all Foreign Service officers at that time. Perhaps had I been at State I would have known. Fortunately, I had enough money saved and decided to take the plunge. I had started a master's degree program at the University of Maryland in journalism before I joined the Foreign Service, but didn't finish, and I had always regretted not having completed the degree program. Therefore, one action I took during my six-month ordered departure, was to research and visit universities in the Washington area to make a decision as to what program I'd like to pursue in the next academic year. I applied to American University, or AU, for its master's program in justice and was accepted.

Q: And so, this will be fall of '94?

SMITH: This would be fall of '93.

Q: Ah, okay, okay, yes.

SMITH: Fall of '93.

Q: Yes, summer, you leave summer-

SMITH: Yes, of '93.

Q: -and fall, yes.

SMITH: Exactly. Yes. I finished my assignment, asked for, and was granted a nine-month leave of absence without pay to pursue the graduate degree. Eventually, I returned to work in July 1994. I also gave birth that same year.

Q: Oh, wow.

SMITH: Yes, I know. It was a challenging time, I must admit. My mother passed away, too, some months earlier. My father died in 1990.

Q: Well, wait. Just one thing before we finish. What was the justice program like; what did you focus on?

SMITH: Oh, okay. Well, there are three courses that made a great impression on me and my career. One was a course on victimization, specifically how practitioners and policymakers address victims of crime. My professor was a leading expert on how the justice system treats people in marginalized positions, particularly women. It was a topic touched upon in various information programs hosted by my office during various

assignments. Ironically, in Mexico, my cultural affairs assistant had actually recruited my professor for past programs. Another outstanding course was one on criminal justice and policing. Specific insights were instrumental in my being able to speak authoritatively to various audiences. In fact, I remember setting up a teleconference call with senior members of the police force in Swaziland with a former New York City superintendent of police. His intervention was excellent, but the phone connection was so horrible. However, since I knew the topic, I was able to amplify the information conveyed. In terms of a multiplier effect, I think the master's degree was very helpful.

The final course to highlight and that proved most useful was the study of research statistics. I was able to really understand and explain the statistical analysis whenever we conducted surveys, for example; I was able to apply a more rigorous standard than I otherwise would have not knowing research statistics; and I was able to better understand polling data by State's Bureau of Intelligence and Research. I'm happy I had those skills.

Q: In the criminal administration course where you dealt with policing, did you get to do any ride-alongs?

SMITH: I did. Yes and we visited a jail too. It was a good and interesting program. Foreign Service officers should be encouraged to pursue higher degrees. It will serve them well.

Q: Were you also having to consider your onward assignment during your academic year?

SMITH: While I was starting the academic program, I had to also think about my next assignment, yes. I wanted to aim for a position that would provide an all-around perspective of the agency instead of focusing on one geographic or functional area. I had a general idea that the USIA director's office would be an ideal assignment in this regard. I have to say that my then career assignments officer did not provide much encouragement, adding that the position is very competitive. So, I went directly to the special assistant who knew me from when we worked together during my ordered departure. She put in a good plug for me and that's how I believe I got the job.

Q: A little bit of lobbying.

SMITH: Yes, exactly. And she knew what I was capable of doing as well. So, yes.

Q: So, then you get this staff job in the director's office-

SMITH: Special assistant.

Q: Special assistant in the fall of '94.

SMITH: No, it was summer of '94.

Q: Summer of '94.

SMITH: Yes, summer of '94. As I said, I was pregnant at the time.

Q: Ah, so when was your baby born?

SMITH: My son was born in '94.

Q: Yes, but-

SMITH: Later, in the year. November.

Q: Ah, okay.

SMITH: Naturally, I was interested in family life-balance issues. Fortunately, I had the opportunity to help shape policy on the topic when I served on the telework family friendly team. I believe I received an award for my service. An outcome by the team was a policy on teleworking, which was just beginning to be possible in the federal service during this time.

Q: Actually, I remember.

SMITH: Yes. It grew over time to what it is today. I think the State Department adopted our best practice on teleworking when we merged with State, and, the merger meant that State could be viewed positively with the added numbers of telework employees that USIA brought to the combined organizations. It's great that the committee was a positive multiplier for the Department on family friendly issues, and I was a part of that effort.

Also, during this time as Special Assistant in the USIA director's office, I was the executive assistant for a task force on public diplomacy and the Foreign Service. The members, consisting of distinguished former and current Foreign Service officers, conducted a top to bottom review of promotions and assignments in the Foreign Service with an eye to making them as fair, balanced, open, and as free of any bias as possible.

I was charged with organizing the material and presenting the information to the committee members. I made sure that deadlines were met and kept minutes of the meeting. Of course, I offered my opinion on certain issues when asked. You must also recognize that Senator Jesse Helms, chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, was very interested in streamlining the foreign affairs agencies. He was urging a merger of USIA with State, in part as a cost saving measure. There was talk of a furlough at USIA. In fact, I helped draft a letter that the USIA director sent to all agency employees regarding a possible furlough, reassuring them of their continued importance to the conduct of foreign affairs. It was a tough time for moral, I must admit.

Q: Oh, I see.

SMITH: Yes. I really enjoyed working for the USIA director. A very nice guy, very, very smart.

Q: Now, your baby is born during this tour?

SMITH: That's right.

Q: Were you able to get any significant time off for family leave?

SMITH: Yes. I had leave and took 10 weeks off work. I probably could have and should have taken more time, but I was eager to get back to the office. I remember upon my return I said something like "thank god I'm back because now I can have a break." I should add that within a year, the U.S. Government had its first long shut-down.

Q: Correct.

SMITH: Which lasted several weeks.

Q: Right, right.

SMITH: Yes.

Q: And then-

SMITH: I wasn't happy because I wanted to be at work with pay.

Q: Yes. And then followed by the big snowstorm. It was a very bad period of time for federal employees.

SMITH: Exactly.

Q: But also, because this is a one-year job, you basically had to bid shortly after arrival. And how did that work out?

SMITH: It was a two-year assignment.

Q: Ah, okay. Because typically staff jobs are one year, but-

SMITH: True, but this staff job was two years. Nonetheless, in considering my next assignment, a primary motivating factor was where could I find the support I needed for child care. As a single mom, I realized that I wanted to go someplace where I could secure affordable help. A second factor was that I didn't want to be the number two in an office; I really wanted to be in charge of the office. I thought professionally that was where I should be at this time in my career. Serving as an assistant information officer might have made sense, however, because I really could have used the assignment to

hone my IO skills. Still, my goal was to take charge. Fortunately, Swaziland appeared on the bid list at just the perfect time for my transfer to a new assignment. I understand the country has changed its name. I think it's now called eSwatini,

Q: Yes. eSwatini.

SMITH: Eswatini. Okay. Yes. Eswatini is the country and Swazi is the name of the language, a member of the Bantu family of languages. All in all, it was an absolutely wonderful assignment for somebody at my grade because I was able to assume a lot of responsibility.

Q: Now, were you actually head of the section?

SMITH: Yes. I was the public affairs officer. I had no American assistants. I was responsible for a staff of seven Foreign Service National employees or FSNs. The educational advisor, who was an American, decided to just stay in the country after his Peace Corps term ended. It was also a transformative time for our mission. USAID, which had a big presence in the country, decided that Swaziland had graduated from its assistance and downsized to the point where the country was covered regionally from Botswana. Similarly, Peace Corps was in the process of shutting down too, although it returned years later. My office, with its small budget, could never replace the panoply of programs offered by these two agencies, but we stepped in with programming where we thought we could make a difference, such as HIV/AIDS awareness outreach.

Q: Did you actually learn any of the local language?

SMITH: I learned some simple greetings. On the other hand, my son spoke the local language more fluently because this nanny, a Swazi, spoke to him often in siSwati and he had plenty of opportunity to play with her kids and others in the neighborhood. The nanny, her name was Alice, would call my son "mZala", which means friend or young one. My son was quite content and care-free in Mbabane, where we lived, which made my job much easier as I didn't have to worry about his happiness.

It was an interesting time to be in Swaziland. The country was undergoing a constitutional review process, led by a review commission, with the aim of revising its constitution. Also, the U.S. launched the Africa Growth and Opportunity Act, or AGOA as it was commonly referred to, with stringent eligibility requirements. Congress enacted AGOA in 2000 to enhance market access to the U.S. for qualifying sub-Saharan African countries. Each country had to be designated as AGOA-eligible, meaning that they had certain practices in place. And so AGOA was another kind of programming opportunity for us.

Q: What about the politics? Anything striking?

SMITH: Swaziland has an interesting political dynamic. The country is an absolute monarchy, governed by law and custom, but also has an executive, legislative and

judicial branch. At the time I was there, it had no political parties and as is probably the case today. Labor unions filled a political void by acting, in essence, as an opposition. They raised important political and economic issues. As PAO, I engaged all sectors of the country.

Gender equality was another programming opportunity. Women lacked basic legal rights and privileges that we take for granted in the U.S. For example, women needed their husband, father or other senior male's permission to open a bank account. I used to hold informal get-togethers with the women activists in my office and learned so much about the challenges they faced in such a patriarchal society. The USIS office was separate from the embassy, which made events and gatherings much easier at USIS than had we been co-located. The minister for health, a female, very well regarded, said to the ambassador that my concern for women and children, especially the youth in Swaziland, was unequaled.

Q: When you were there, did the ambassador give you any particular instructions of how the sort of topics or the directions that the embassy or the mission was supposed to go?

SMITH: The ambassador was extremely supportive of me and my public diplomacy efforts. In fact, there were many occasions when I would be quoted in the press on political and foreign policy topics. Some ambassadors may have had issues with such frequency of coverage, but it wasn't the case with this ambassador. In fact, my reviewing officer at State wrote in my evaluation that "Robin became something of a media star in Swaziland, popular with the press and with newspaper photographers who often feature her in their coverage of noteworthy local events." She adds that I made sure that "this prominent exposure is always used to draw attention to issues that advance key mission objectives, all the while without upstaging the ambassador, a fine line that she takes consistent care not to cross."

He knew I had a good relationship with the press. Once, I remember being quoted about my opinion on the progress of the constitutional review process, which was slow-going. It could have been a very dicey situation had I misspoke in some way. My response was that a great deal of credit on progress is due to the brave women in the country. I think I got a reputation for being quite a supporter of women's equality with that quote and our public diplomacy programming. In fact, State implemented for many years a regional international visitors program on gender equality with country- and regionally-based NGOs and advocacy groups, following a request I made while as PAO Mbabane.

Q: As PAO, did you have a lot of interaction with the ministry of education there?

SMITH: All the time. And I learned a lot too in regard to my engagements with the education and higher education ministries, which carried forward to other assignments. For example, when I advised the deputy minister for education of a school building project funded by the U.S. she reminded me that such support must be coordinated not only at the local level, but also at the national level, specifically, her ministry. Building classrooms is one thing, but the ministry has to hire teachers to put in the classrooms and

provide other enhancements. The deputy minister was trying to remind me that even though we may have the best intentions, there may be unintended consequences. If the government doesn't have the resources necessary to complement whatever we've done, then the support may not be sustainable. It was a learning experience, for sure.

Q: Especially with USAID gone, your programs would be probably just about the only ones the U.S. Government was doing.

SMITH: We became an increasingly important face of the U.S. Government with our information outreach, education and exchange programs. In the absence of the other agencies, the situation in Swaziland was such that PD could be particularly effective. Indeed, after just arriving, and in light of the withdrawal of USAID and Peace Corps, I quickly moved to counter misconceptions of U.S. policy in the country, emphasizing our strong bonds in a series of interviews.

Several other highlights during this assignment are worth noting. First, my participation at the African/African-American Summit, also called the Leon Sullivan Summit after its founder, social activist Rev. Leon Sullivan. The mission was to bring together businessmen and politicians to promote the continent's economic and social development. When State's Africa Bureau for Public Diplomacy (PD) called for volunteers to help our small PD office in Accra staff the event, I stepped forward. While there, I went above and beyond the call of duty by facilitating meetings between U.S. Government and Swazi officials. I also briefed our senior officials prior to their meetings with the Swazi king, including the head of the Federal Aviation Administration and the White House special assistant for trade policy. For example, right outside the meeting hall in a secluded corner, I would say: "Sir/Mam, these are the issues that you're going to have to be aware of, of concern in Swaziland, from the U.S. Embassy perspective." I was notetaker in some of these meetings and noticed that the U.S. officials used my sidebar talking points during their interventions with the king. I may have even persuaded the White House special assistant to adopt the embassy point of view on a matter involving AGOA rather than an approach that she had been prepared to make. To her credit, she listened to the best advice that the embassy could offer.

Q: And this is the African commerce and development act?

SMITH: The Africa Growth and Opportunity Act.

Q: I'm sorry, Growth and Opportunity.

SMITH: Yes. AGOA, the trade legislation, was enacted by Congress in 2000. Swaziland's lack of progress on certain benchmarks was a growing concern. For example, Swaziland's labor relations were not up to the level that would get it AGOA-qualified. Another important action I did during the summit involved my assistance to the then foreign minister of Swaziland. She wrote about me favorably to the ambassador saying that she wanted to extend her gratitude for the assistance I gave to His Majesty's delegation, in particular to herself, meaning the foreign minister, in coordinating

meetings. Without my help, she said in the letter to the ambassador, she didn't think that she would have been able to make a single one of those appointments.

Q: I mean, that's the kind of thing that does get noticed when your evaluation is written.

SMITH: Yes, indeed. In fact, I think I got a promotion pay increase for my actions in Swaziland.

Q: Meritorious step increase.

SMITH: Yes, meritorious step increase. Yes, I think that was it.

Let me add that I was applauded by the PD bureau for leveraging my meager budget to expand PD outreach in the country, also another factor looked on favorably by the promotion board. For example, I invited trainers in Kingian nonviolence to Swaziland once I was made aware of their presence in neighboring South Africa. The Pretoria PD office had higher funding levels for its speaker programming. I often piggy-backed on their recruitment efforts by providing over-the-border ground transportation to Swaziland. The trainers and others on separate programs in South Africa were called target-of-opportunity speakers.

Q: Did you have Fulbright scholars?

SMITH: Yes, I had great success with the selection of our Fulbright candidates in Swaziland, one in particular. He hailed from a very rural part of the country, serving as a principal of a secondary school, and wished to pursue a master's degree. Young, dynamic, articulate, he demonstrated great potential for growth at higher levels within Swaziland's education system. Just the type of person we were looking for. I advised him on his U.S. college entrance essay to talk about the challenges he faced growing up – rural background, tended cattle, educated by missionaries, etc. He highlighted those facts about himself and was accepted to Columbia University in New York. I was so happy for him. He was so bright, finishing his studies in half the time it would normally take for a master's program. Indeed, the Fulbright office recognized him at an event at which he got to sit next to none other than Mrs. Fulbright, wife of J. William Fulbright, who, as you know, founded the Fulbright Program almost 75 years ago.

Q: Wow.

SMITH: Yes. So, I wouldn't be surprised if he returned and made a significant contribution to Swaziland in teaching and/or education. I have to say that the teaching profession was heavily impacted by the scourge of AIDS. Many good people were dying. In fact, I can't talk about my time in Africa without mentioning how awful it was for many different sections of the population, not just teachers. And there were many of my contacts – all good people -- who died young, although not openly acknowledged but suspected because of AIDS.

Q: I see. Any other illustrious grantees?

SMITH: Some of my IV candidates were equally impressive. There was one candidate I sent on an IV program who later became minister of agriculture. He later told me that his promotion was thanks to his IV program.

Let me also mention that my circle of contacts included those at very high levels in the government, including the attorney general and the head of the Supreme Court. I don't think that level of engagement is so unusual in a small country. That's why I loved being assigned to smaller posts because of the additional responsibilities you can assume and the potential for greater impact.

Indeed, on the margins of a discussion I had with a group of parliamentarians about their up-coming IV trip, I also engaged them on the issue of U.S.G. concerns regarding planned parliamentary moves and AGOA, reinforcing a subsequent engagement they had with the ambassador.

Q: Now, once again, that's the kind of awareness and kind of grasp of substantive issues and the ability to make informed judgments and analysis that tends to get you very good evaluations, because you're, as the public affairs officer, you're not necessarily the one responsible for giving them advice on how to-

SMITH: That's right, exactly, exactly. But I knew that we were a small mission and that we just had to pick up and do what we needed to be done because our agenda was so important.

Q: And you're right; I mean, typically ambassadors are very grateful for that.

SMITH: Yes. There's more to say about Swaziland, but I'll have to resume the topic another day.

Q: Okay, very good.

Alright, we'll pick up then again with Swaziland.

So, today is March 28, 2019. We're resuming our interview with Robin Smith as she continues her tour in Swaziland.

And Robin, just as a reminder for us, what years were you in Swaziland?

SMITH: I was there from '96 to '99. Three years.

Q: Okay.

SMITH: The ambassador was a great guy and a great individual. I learned a lot from him. He told the Africa Bureau director of PD, somewhat humorously, that Robin doesn't

work for me, I work for USIS. On a separate topic, I'm not sure if I said anything about our outreach efforts in support of a free and open press.

Q: No, you did not.

SMITH: Okay.

Q: You are the public diplomacy officer.

SMITH: That's right, PAO, yes.

Q: But you had not mentioned yet your interaction with the press.

SMITH: During my stint in Swaziland, the government and parliament were considering a bill that would have put constraints on the media. Journalists were circumscribed in some respects from reporting on certain issues as there were certain red lines that they would not cross for fear of retribution or for fear of being charged with libel. In fact, what I recall, was that one onerous provision of the proposed bill would strengthen the ability of individuals to accuse members of the press with libel. Hence, for my office, it was a question of raising awareness. One of the concerns that the government had, to be fair, was that the journalists were at times saying things that weren't true. The government seemed to think that the journalists were crossing those lines far too often. Be that as it may, I had argued – we as a mission argued – that this bill was the wrong way to go about addressing the government's concerns with the media, that it really was a question of training and raising awareness.

Q: So, what did you do?

SMITH: Under our outreach program, I invited speakers to Swaziland on freedom of the press. One, who was a Fulbrighter whom I recruited from his assignment in another African country, thereby, once again, leveraging our meager funding for speaker programs, agreed to visit. He was originally from a country with a similar media environment, very familiar with the press, and he endorsed what we were doing to raise awareness of the inherent dangers to a free press of passing the proposed bill under consideration. Another speaker is one I had known while I interned at WETA-TV, and she worked for "The Washington Week in Review." She later got jobs in broadcast media at the national level. Once I found out that she was in South Africa and tracked her down, I asked the PD press office in South Africa to assist in her travel. She came and did a workshop not only in Mbabane, but elsewhere in the country.

Finally, we discussed with the government our concerns with the draft bill. Whenever I had an opportunity, I would talk to the ministers and their deputies, mostly at formal and informal gatherings, one-on-one. And, there were many opportunities to do so. The ambassador also raised U.S.G. concerns at a higher level.

Q: What eventually happened to the bill?

SMITH: What happened in the end was an unprecedented show of independence. The parliament criticized the bill, the bill that the government had submitted, as a violation of press freedom, directed cabinet to shelve the proposed legislation, and called on media stakeholders to take the initiative to put forward alternative proposals for self-regulation of professional standards.

Q: As the political- I'm sorry, as the public affairs officer, had you brought in experts to consult with them?

SMITH: I'm sure I did with a broad section of the Swazi government and civic society. It's written in my evaluation that I invigorated Swazi groups with innovative programs on civic education, including major conferences and workshops with NGOs and relevant ministries. As testimony to her success, my supervisor wrote, cabinet ministers have hailed her civic education efforts. Interestingly, I recall hearing remarks I gave during one of our outreach programs broadcast on a radio station as I was driving in South Africa.

Q: Yes. Interesting.

SMITH: It's probably worth mentioning that my assignment overlapped with the USIA merger with State. Administrative issues consumed much time and effort. We had to crosswalk our personnel to effectuate the integration as well as other aspects of our operation. We no longer had a separate motor pool, for example. This assignment was the first instance I can remember of playing such a prominent role in ICASS and addressing the merger of USIA resources within the ICASS. ICASS as you know is the International Cooperative Administrative Support Services (ICASS) program through which the U.S. Government provides and shares the cost of common administrative support at posts overseas.

Q: That's correct.

SMITH: Also, I can't remember if I mentioned this, but I proposed to the J. Kirby Simon Foundation a literacy program for the only prison for women in Swaziland.

Q: Wow.

SMITH: And it was approved.

Q: My goodness.

SMITH: Still, one other highlight. There was an overnight visit of note to Swaziland that I must mention. The pop singer and cultural icon Michael Jackson traveled to Swaziland on a private plane accompanied by an American businessman and a rather small entourage. The king, of course, feted the delegation, and I believe there was a reception at

the queen's kraal, her lodging. Another festive occasion took place at an open-air arena, with traditional dancing. I had the impression that Michael Jackson loved it.

Q: Was he there for a performance?

SMITH: No. I believe he was there to explore business opportunities with the U.S. businessman. There's this wonderful photo of me with Michael Jackson, the king, the businessman and the ambassador. During the visit, there was a press conference, a meeting with the business community, I believe, and possibly meetings with government officials, including the king.

Q: Do you know if anything came of it?

SMITH: No, not that I'm aware of. With the economic powerhouse of South Africa on one side, and Mozambique, a much bigger and resource rich country on the other side, business opportunities tend to flow to those two behemoths.

Q: I see.

SMITH: I'd be remiss if I didn't mention another one other important event that had a huge impact on the conduct of foreign policy and my career going forward. I am referring to the bombing of our U.S. Missions in Africa, specifically in Dar-es-Salaam and Nairobi.

Q: Ah, yes.

SMITH: Yes. Most immediately, there were security concerns that had to be addressed, especially for USIS Mbabane since we were not co-located with the U.S. Embassy. The embassy had its own offices in what we called the bank building. Now public diplomacy is joined with the embassy, as is the case in many locations, and the embassy has moved to a new compound. I believe this is the beginning of what many have called "fortress America" because of how embassies are now designed with enhanced security paramount.

Now my next assignment was Mozambique.

Q: Alright. How was it determined you were going to Mozambique? Did you simply sort of call the appropriate offices and say, you know, I would love to go to Mozambique, or did they tap you or how did it work?

SMITH: Well, I indicated my interest to the Africa Bureau for Public Diplomacy. I wanted to stay in the region, mostly for personal reasons, given that my son was still young and his nanny could easily accompany us. I knew that the timing was right because the incumbent in Maputo was leaving within a year, which allowed me time to learn and study Portuguese before a possible assignment to Maputo.

Q: Now, did they teach you sort of traditional, strict Portuguese, or did they teach you the kind of Portuguese spoken in Mozambique?

SMITH: Well, that's a very good question. My teachers were mostly continental Portuguese speakers.

Q: Right, yes.

SMITH: That was fine. I think the major difference is between Portuguese as spoken in Portugal and Brazilian Portuguese. Mozambicans spoke the former.

Q: Did you have some time before your next assignment for training?

SMITH: Yes, I returned to U.S. and spent nine months in language training at State's Foreign Service Institute or FSI before leaving for Mozambique. As PAO I had a lot of interaction with the Ambassador, just as in Swaziland. She was also very supportive of PD activities, especially as it relates to the arts.

Q: Now, when you arrive in Maputo, it had recently come out of its civil war; what was the city like in terms of being able to settle in? Did it still show a great deal of the signs of civil war and destruction?

SMITH: Right. That's a very good question. In fact, I should say that even before I did the transfer, I traveled overland to Mozambique from Swaziland at least three times. Back then, there was only one main road that led from the border to Maputo, perhaps a four to five-hour drive. There's no way one can get lost on this rather direct route.

Q: So, it's not a terribly long trip.

SMITH: No, not at all.

On my first trip in 1997, I saw the hulks of burnt-out cars pushed off to the side of the road so they would not impede travel. Obviously, there were cars that were, for one reason or another, caught up in the disaster and destruction that was the civil war. In Swaziland, there was already a large presence, but decreasing number, of refugees because the conflict had just recently concluded. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) was in the process of helping to repatriate the last remaining refugees. Later, during my subsequent assignment to Maputo, I encountered Mozambicans who said they escaped to Swaziland to reside during the war because of the harsh wartime conditions at home.

Q: And to the extent you understood, it was more or less safe for them to return?

SMITH: Yes. It was definitely safe, the only exception being the embedded landmines. While traveling by road, you could still see the skull and crossbones symbol designating danger of landmines. There was still a tremendous amount of discovery that still had to

be done in the countryside to make the land safe and productive for agricultural use. Eventually, Mozambique developed an expertise in demining with the assistance of various humanitarian demining organizations. In fact, while I was in Iraq, I remember running into a team from Mozambique, contracted to the war zone to conduct landmine removal operations.

Another effect of the war was that Maputo was still overcrowded with migrants from other parts of the country, which I noted during one of my early visits from Swaziland. However, by the time I returned for my assignment, there was an energy and economic vibrancy happening in the city and elsewhere. Mozambique was experiencing increased growth rates and you could tell by the new building construction across the city.

Naturally, USAID had a large presence and big role in Mozambique. As one mission, I worked very closely with USAID and their development officers on highlighting our U.S.G. assistance in priority areas such as development, natural disaster relief and education.

Q: USAID has a huge assistance program, with separate funding by Congress, correct?

SMITH: Yes, indeed. I was able to see first-hand the resources that USAID can offer to help mitigate the destructive forces of weather-related events. Mozambique is prone to periodic droughts and floods. In 2001, the country experienced an historic flood, which looking back at press reports, affected the provinces of Zambezi and Tete. USAID pre-positioned supplies and enlisted the services of its Disaster Assistant Response Team. The fact that USAID had its own contract air service helped immensely in the assessment of the flooding challenge. I was able to travel on one of the contracted planes and the immensity of the flooding was staggering. I later learned that some 250,000 people were affected by the storm. I should highlight that as a result of the opportunity to learn about the disaster up close, I later asked the Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs, or ECA as it is called, for an international visitors' program to introduce Mozambican water resource experts to American flood control and water management practices.

Recently, Mozambique experienced another flood. In some areas, the country is so flat and when you're flying over the land, as I was in 2001, you can really understand the challenge that people face in such geographically vulnerable areas from extreme weather events. Yet, Mozambique has so much potential, a country so rich in natural resources.

Q: So, before we get too much further ahead, let's go back to when you arrived, what are the responsibilities you're given?

SMITH: Okay.

Q: So, this is sort of like setting the scene and explaining the context, which is great.

SMITH: Yes. I was there from 2000 to 2002. I supervised one American officer and eight FSNs; carrying out the mission's information exchanges, educational advising and cultural programming countrywide.

Q: Yes. Please continue.

SMITH: As PAO, my job was to implement and carry out the full panoply of our public diplomacy programing in support of mission goals and objectives.

Q: Now, what was the general timbre of the media towards the U.S. that you had to deal with at that time?

SMITH: You have to understand that the country was a socialist state with close ties to East Germany and the communist bloc. There was still a lot of residual resentment towards the former colonial power Portugal and our support for the Portuguese until the Lusaka Accords resulted in Mozambique's independence in 1975. It was in this geo-politico environment that many journalists and their editors were schooled. The younger press didn't carry as much baggage, however. Yet, at times, it was a struggle to get good credit or coverage of the significant assistance that we were able to do in the country, in part, because of this history, as I just explained.

Q: Right. Were there many Mozambicans who went to Brazil or Portugal?

SMITH: There were, of course, among those who had the means.

Q: Ah, I see.

SMITH: There was an expat community residing in Mozambique too. My son attended a private religious school run by missionaries and attended by their sons and daughters whose parents were working in Maputo, and a few Mozambicans. State was supportive of my school choice, but most other officers in the mission sent their offspring to the American International School. AIS would have been fine, but I wanted a smaller environment. I was pleased that when the educational advisor for the State Department came to visit, he made a point of going to my son's school and offered critical recommendations.

Q: Ah.

SMITH: I was starting to talk about my responsibilities there. One activity I did was to strengthen the notion of the importance of free and fair elections. In this regard, I organized an election night event. Many missions do likewise. But, as you know, this was quite an interesting election, Bush versus Gore.

Q: Ah, okay.

SMITH: Yes. Before I arrived, I knew I wanted to do something big and impactful. I also knew that organizing for an election night event takes a lot of advance planning because, first of all, you've got to order supplies and line up speakers. One thing I did that stood out from other election night events, certainly in Africa, I was told, was that I had organized simultaneous observances in two cities – the two most important ones in Mozambique – Maputo and Beira. Located in the central portion of Mozambique, Beira was especially influential with the political opposition. So, I felt it was important to have election watch events in those two locations, and was hoping that we could pull it off, which we did. I sent my assistant, my one American assistant, to oversee election night activities in Beira with the help of our Fulbrighter. We had our own event in Maputo, with a military band, mock voting, materials and an electronic dialogue with Voice of America (VOA). We invited a large gathering – press, politicians, civil society and journalists. The government sent its official representative. The entire mission was involved.

Q: Okay.

SMITH: Yes.

Q: Because there's a six-hour time difference?

SMITH: Yes, there was a time difference, which meant that the election watch was a late-night event extending into the early morning. It was wonderful. Leading up to the event I aired several of the presidential debates. We concluded one with a comedic sketch from "Saturday Night Live". Very illustrative of how we can poke fun at our politicians without dire consequences. Another example of democracy in practice was the outcome of that year's presidential election. Mozambicans, and the world for that matter, saw Gore, who won the popular vote, conceding to Bush in a highly contested election that could have turned ugly. I believe it left a lasting impression because there were two polarized groups in Mozambique which only recently had worked out their differences peacefully. At least, that's what my contacts said.

Q: Incredible.

SMITH: Yes.

Q: Did most people who were watching understand what the issues were? Had you had time to sort of brief them on what the two candidates were talking about?

SMITH: Yes, we had our information outreach efforts – WorldNet interactives, VOA programs, speakers, debate watch events, press engagements. We may have even sent a participant to Washington under the auspices of the International Visitors exchange program focused on U.S. elections.

Q: While you were there did 9/11 happen?

SMITH: Yes, 9/11 occurred while I was assigned to Mozambique. When the towers were hit, I was out looking at possible venues for an up-coming Jazz Ambassadors program. Just as I was leaving this one venue – a café with a large outdoor entertainment area – the owner came to me in my car and said I must come back inside. He said something terrible has happened. And then, on the television, I saw the tower, the smoke and the pandemonium below. That's when I knew I had to get back immediately to the embassy for an emergency action committee meeting.

Q: What was the reaction among the Mozambicans?

SMITH: Not long afterwards, senior contacts called me to express condolences. In fact, there was a great outpouring of support from the public. Mozambicans set up a spontaneous memorial to the fallen in front of the embassy with lots of flowers. I lived right on the same street as the embassy. The embassy took up probably a whole city block and I lived on the parallel street adjacent to the embassy. It was easy for me to walk outside my house and look at all the flowers and messages that people had left right at the corner of the entrance to the embassy. We – the mission – also had a condolence book. I remember vividly the visit to the embassy of the Mozambican firefighters, because they had heard that there were many U.S. firefighters who had gotten killed in the collapse of the towers. They came to honor the fallen heroes, stood at attention, read a statement of solidarity, and presented the statement to the defense attaché before signing the condolence book.

Nine-eleven marked the beginning worldwide, I might add, of our counter-terrorism programming and a more strategic public diplomacy outreach to the Islamic world.

Q: And take a moment to describe the culture of Mozambique; is it all Muslim or is it partially Muslim, partially other? How does that break down?

SMITH: Current estimates vary from as low as 17% to as high as 45%. Certainly, percentages are higher, depending on the geography. For example, one can say that there were higher percentages in places like Nampula in northeastern Mozambique where there was an historic trade link with the Arab world.

Q: And how did this demographic affect programming?

SMITH: We enhanced our efforts to reach this important segment of the populace. I remember vividly one Worldnet interactive on HIV to raise awareness particularly among certain communities since the southern part of Africa was ravaged by a scourge that doesn't discern between religions. We made a concerted effort to invite influencers including those in the Muslim community, youth and grassroots organizations. It was eye-opening to learn of the misperceptions that people held about transmission of the virus. I must say that the speakers were excellent, able to handle difficult and culturally-sensitive questions with tact and respect. We also started the first American Corners library in an area of Mozambique with a large Muslim population.

Q: Did you have only one American corner in the country?

SMITH: No, we had at least two, one in Maputo and the other major Mozambican city with the large Muslim population in the northern part of the country.

Q: So, subsequent to this, did you provide a lot of assistance in terms of public affairs to USAID and was there a relatively large USAID presence to help fight AIDS?

SMITH: The USAID mission was huge. Its large-scale assistance support was channeled through a strategic partnership with very large foundations or NGOs with proven records of accomplishment in the country, or in partnership with the government through its own strategic planning process.

Q: I see, okay.

SMITH: Yes. We worked closely with USAID's development and communications officers or DOCs to highlight U.S.G. assistance. Branding was important, in part to generate goodwill, but also to note that such assistance was given through the generosity of the American people and not just USAID. I believe polling revealed that people were making distinctions between the two. The front office, Ambassador and the Deputy Chief of Mission, wanted to make sure that donations were reflective of the work of the mission as a whole.

Q: As PAO, did you travel much, and if so, what were the occasions for your travel?

SMITH: Yes, I was fortunate to be able to travel to some of the most culturally rich and beautiful areas of the country. My official travel was done in pursuit of public diplomacy programs, other times in support of the separate agencies at the mission. For example, I worked closely with the defense attaché's office and its senior defense official or DATT whenever the office wanted to highlight a community project. These were often day trips involving press support. My office provided the travel logistics for the press to ensure adequate coverage. The DATT was excellent in our press opportunities because he could best explain how the donation helped the community in fluent Portuguese, thereby strengthening our bilateral relationship.

I have to say that aside from the major north south highway connecting a few major cities, roads were not so good. However, traveling was much easier going east and west to South Africa. The year I arrived, a major toll highway had just opened, a beautiful road that led to Nelspruit, a major shopping destination for embassy colleagues and Kruger Park, a game reserve.

Q: And who built that?

SMITH: Oh, I'm not sure. It could have been a public-private partnership.

Q: Were there ship visits like The Comfort, a hospital ship?

SMITH: There were two ship visits that I recall. One was a ship dedicated to the distribution of books which was not under U.S.G. auspices. The other was a humanitarian ship under a USAID contract. I helped with press coverage of the handover donation of large containers of food supplies to help mitigate against food insecurity following the flood disaster, I believe.

Q: Now, you had mentioned, of course, 9/11. Were there immediate changes in the way you worked, to your security, as a result of 9/11?

SMITH: In the immediate aftermath, the Emergency Action Committee held meetings, as I mentioned earlier, and there was much discussion about our PD public events, including whether or not to continue with our previously scheduled Jazz Ambassadors program. We decided to move forward, but at a smaller venue.

Q: Given the remoteness and how difficult it was to get visitors in, did you work in a regional way with other countries that allowed you more opportunity?

SMITH: No. There was not as much opportunity to leverage regional resources such as speakers as there was when I was assigned to Swaziland. One issue was cost as translation had to be provided in most cases for our speakers since none were fluent in Portuguese. We did fewer speaker programs.

Q: Yes, sure. While you were there did your public diplomacy efforts lend any support to the foreign commercial service or commercial activity?

SMITH: Yes, in regard to commercial activity. We recruited two officials from the Securities and Exchange Commission for separate visits to discuss regulatory frameworks and protection of foreign investments, I believe that was the case since Mozambique was updating its rules for the conduct of business to help improve its investment climate. I worked closely with USAID, which helped defray some expenses.

Q: Oh, okay.

SMITH: I also recruited an expert to provide guidance to a select audience of officials and trade industry experts as Mozambique was preparing its initial submission on textile benefits under AGOA. I think this was an instance where the expert was recruited by neighboring posts and I leveraged our limited funds to persuade these posts to add a day onto the Speaker's agenda to travel to Maputo. The ambassador wrote in my evaluation that "Robin accomplished the unthinkable; she persuaded both Washington and the follow-on post to agree to a visit to help with the writing of the textile legislation."

Q: Now, in the two years you were there, what sticks out in your mind as your major accomplishments?

SMITH: There were many firsts that I consider as major accomplishments, including support for Mozambique's principle Islamic university prior to the events of September 11, facilitating the production of "Carmen" in Africa with the participation of American performers, to our HIV/AIDS outreach programming outside of Maputo and university linkages.

Q: Any famous people visit like the trip to Swaziland by Michael Jackson during your assignment?

SMITH: Funny you should ask. In fact, actor Will Smith came to Mozambique for the production of the film "Ali." I dare say that nothing like this had happened in Maputo before. Parts of the city were transformed into a movie set. After receiving the requisite guidance from State's legal office, staff from the embassy were able to serve as extras. My office helped with the gala screening, providing the production company a list of VIPs and our key contacts to invite, a year later, once the film was set for distribution. I have to say that Will Smith was most gracious. The actor came to the embassy for photos with the U.S. Marines who guard our embassy, and was generous with his time.

Q: That's great.

SMITH: I must mention two low points, however. One was that I fractured my Achilles tendon playing basketball with a group of guys, including the Marines. I was medevac'd to Johannesburg for the operation. The second, and more consequential, was the accidental drowning of two young Marines while on a trip with a group of embassy colleagues, including me and my son. We did not witness the drowning itself, but were in close proximity. The bodies were recovered and we went to the airport for a proper goodbye.

Q: So, now you're had about four years in southern Africa; were you bitten, did you want to stay in Africa?

SMITH: At this point in my career, I thought it would be better for me to work stateside for a while. When I expressed my interest in returning, the then-director of the Africa Bureau for Public Diplomacy (AF-PD) tapped me to be the planning and coordination officer, or PACO. That was my next assignment.

Q: Then perhaps this is a good moment to break, to pause?

SMITH: Oh, sure.

Q: Okay, so you're now preparing to leave for the U.S.; are there any particular things that stand out in your recollection now after four years in southern Africa?

SMITH: After four years in Africa, I realized how important it is to support the most vulnerable in society – women, children, the oppressed; that certain ideals – democracy,

human rights, freedom of the press – are worth valuing; and that project development involves a dialogue that is not a one-way street. All stakeholders must be consulted.

Q: And you begin in the Africa Bureau in 2002?

SMITH: 2002, exactly, as PACO, which was their ranking non-senior position in AF-PD. My job involved implementing policies, products and research for sub-Saharan Africa. Basically, it was a field-oriented job, looking at how I could support our posts with various informational products and programs to advance U.S.G. policy. The assignment also entailed coordinating the PD efforts on U.S. Iraq policy; democracy and governance; and religious affairs for sub-Saharan Africa. From my perch in AF-PD, I became involved, in a significant way, in the global war on terrorism, and it became a very integral part of my roles and responsibilities.

Q: And then-

SMITH: Not to long after I started in AF-PD, it was Iraq, Iraq, Iraq. We had these interagency and senior level meetings on Iraq and counterterrorism, with a subset focused on public diplomacy. The various geographic bureaus participated. We assessed, debated, discussed media outreach efforts to deliver the U.S. Government's message on Iraq. The deputy director for AF-PD said I was a forceful advocate for U.S. messaging in Africa regarding the U.S.G.'s public diplomacy strategy. Why did we need a strategy? For one, the administration wanted to convince our allies to join us in a coalition of the willing and build support at the United Nations or UN. The Africa Bureau's PD posts needed to know what kind of messages to convey from a public diplomacy point of view, and likewise, I needed to provide feedback at the interagency committee level on the best messages that would resonate with an African audience, for example.

Q: What else did you do?

SMITH: Well, I laid the groundwork for interviews by Secretary Powell and other senior officials and prepared briefing materials – obviously for engagement with African audiences. Also, I arranged an important interview with a U.S.G. official traveling in Paris, focusing on why the U.S. still cares about Africa. And the deputy spokesperson made a special point of noting the excellent work by our posts with information I gave them, setting up media opportunities to reach audiences in Angola, Cameroon, Guinea, and South Africa, all of which were important in U.N. votes. These countries may have been serving on the U.N. Security Council, at the time.

I also gave a well-received presentation on U.S. policy on Iraq and how it plays in Africa before an interagency committee. Other agencies asked for my briefing notes, which I had not seen happen before in one of those meetings.

Q: Were there new tools you were using, such as social media or comic books or certain kinds of TV programs?

SMITH: It was less a question of using social media since it was not as widespread or widely used as it is today. In fact, Facebook and Twitter were not yet founded at the time of 9/11, I believe. It was more likely that we used a rapid reaction set of talking points that we sent to the field daily to use in their own outreach efforts.

I have to add that at one of these meetings, there was a call for volunteers to go to Iraq. Guess who raised her hand?

Q: And this would be for a tour there, not just a trip?

SMITH: Yes, there was a call for volunteers to staff the coalition provisional authority, or CPA. At the time, it was for a three-month tour. The department was having difficulty finding volunteers during this phase of active conflict. It was not a permissive environment at that point. But I volunteered and was sent first to Kuwait, working in a press support role while issuing reports of press coverage for our superiors, waiting for the green light to enter Iraqi territory. After the initial combat operations ended with the defeat of the Iraqi military and Saddam Hussein on the run, the U.S. military logistics' arm quickly set up basic facilities for us civilians to work in Baghdad. I arrived shortly thereafter. Unbeknownst to me at the time, I was the first State Department Foreign Service officer to return to Iraq after its defeat by the Coalition.

Q: Wow.

SMITH: Yes. The first.

Q: That's remarkable.

SMITH: Yes. Ambassador Margaret Tutwiler, a politically-appointed ambassador, was already in country for State.

Q: Right.

SMITH: When we got the green light, she arrived in advance with General Garner, who was head of the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA). The CPA was established in 2003 by the multi-national force to oversee governance of the country until a democratically-elected government could be established.

Q: Yes, right.

SMITH: Yes. Then the rest of us were given permission to enter the country. There was only a small group from the State Department at that time. Perhaps no more than a handful of officers. When we were allowed to travel, mostly everyone, including my State colleagues, development officers and other civilians, went by land from Kuwait to Baghdad. However, I flew into Baghdad aboard a military aircraft at the behest of Dan Senor, a senior government advisor who later became the CPA's chief spokesman.

Q: Okay.

SMITH: So, that's how I became the first State Department person to land in Baghdad. Our first attempt to get there by plane was aborted due to a sandstorm. So we returned to Kuwait, waited for a while, then we were able to go back in.

Q: Alright.

SMITH: We stayed at Saddam Hussein's palace, which the military had set up for us to live and work, in what became known as the green zone. Very basic conditions. The female civilians had one huge room to share as living quarters. Ambassador Tutwiler's living space was off to the side, a small, private bedroom; and then I and another officer, a civilian lawyer from the State Department, shared another room.

Q: What were you asked to do there?

SMITH: I was part of the planning process for the establishment of Baghdad's coalition information press operation. Only two of us – Foreign Service officers from State – were detailed to Baghdad to help staff the press center. Our job was to highlight CPA and the administration's overall mission. We were set up in a huge cavernous room with a staff of 40-plus civilian and military personnel, including representatives from coalition countries. I felt thoroughly integrated with the team, working side by side with colonels and junior members who often sought my advice on work-related issues.

Q: And, what was the mission?

SMITH: Helping the Iraqi people build an Iraq that is democratic, unified and multiethnic.

Q: What were your roles and responsibilities?

SMITH: I was part of the press support effort from the outset of our operations in Baghdad. We started with limited equipment and material resources, but had to service over 200 press outlets operating in Iraq just weeks after combat operations ended. Our job was to get out positive messages about our efforts in the country. As our telecoms improved, we were able to better service the large U.S., international and Iraqi press contingent.

I also served as the public affairs point person for one of the Office of Reconstruction and Humanitarian Affairs or ORHA, which had a major pillar focusing on humanitarian assistance. Much of my time was spent organizing press interviews and media opportunities for members of the humanitarian assistance team to make known to the Iraqi people and foreign audiences about our positive record on humanitarian demining, human rights and food delivery. That's when I encountered the Mozambican demining team on a press opportunity organized highlighting ORHA efforts. I also assisted other press officers with media events related to ORHA's other two pillars, reconstruction and

civil administration. The press work often took place in a high threat level environment where shootings and firefights took place daily.

Shortly after I arrived, I was also tasked with the important job of providing a daily media report to the senior leadership. It was basically a compilation of media reports, which had me working late evening hours after securing a computer that wasn't in use since I didn't have my own dedicated laptop. Another difficulty was slow internet in the first weeks of operation. I remember moving from room to room seeking different computers and better service. Meanwhile, we were using satellite phones to communicate with our offices at State and the White House until the military was able to install a dedicated line in our office.

Q: And how was travel? Or did you travel?

SMITH: Yes, but I have to add that movement was difficult in a high threat environment. We had to request force protection and faced high demand for the limited number of vehicles. My rank and job afforded me opportunities to go outside the green zone for official purposes, however.

Q: Whew.

SMITH: Let me share with you an experience I had which I never wish to have repeated. Once I and three colleagues were able to secure vehicles to drive to a mass grave site. Saddam Hussein's regime was responsible for gross human rights abuses, including indiscriminate killings and dumping of bodies in unmarked locations under his rule. Shortly after the toppling of Baghdad, mass graves were beginning to be discovered, identified and excavated. It was surreal. Even before we arrived to the site, we saw from a distance mounds of airborne dust because volunteers were using backhoes to dig up the graves. And then, as we inched closer, we heard the wailing of mostly women, but men too, searching for their loved ones. There appeared to be an organized effort to provide assistance to families of the victims and to identify the remains as best they could.

We also had a chance to talk to ordinary Iraqis on this trip on a stop that we had made along the way to the grave site. I remember one guy thanked President Bush for the overthrow of Saddam. Now, I don't know what that same person would have said some years down the road, but initially there seemed to me a lot of goodwill toward us and the coalition. This was a decisive time in our relationship with Iraq. Decisions we made shortly after the toppling of Baghdad had long-term repercussions, as many critics have noted. It was painful to witness the looting of the museums and other places of culture that went unprotected because the coalition forces could not be everywhere. And, naturally, the U.S. military, coalition and civilian deaths; and untold suffering saddens me. All I can say is that we did our best, on a course we thought was right, and hope that the great country that Iraq is will emerge strong and resilient.

Q: How long did you stay?

SMITH: My time in-country was short. After Ambassador Tutwiler departed about a month after arrival, I soon followed.

Q: Okay. Alright, this sounds like a good place to end, given our time.

Q: Today is April 16. We are resuming our interview with Robin Smith as she departs Iraq and returns to AF-PD in Washington. And just as a quick reminder, what year is this, Robin?

SMITH: May of 2003.

Q: Okay.

SMITH: I returned to my job at State in the Africa Bureau. About a month later, I was asked to go to Africa to support the visit of President Bush. I always loved these official visits – what we call POTUS trips – POTUS for President of the United States – because you have plenty of opportunities to meet and get know your colleagues – both Foreign Service and foreign nationals. It's a very fast pace environment. We play a supportive role to the political appointees, who invariably are on loan from his or her own agency to the White House advance team, and advise them accordingly.

Q: Where did you go?

SMITH: Gorée Island, which was central to the trans-Atlantic slave trade.

Q: In Senegal, right?

SMITH: Yes, Senegal. Aside from staffing a press operation, part of our job as public diplomacy officers during these official VIP visits are to propose, develop, create, and support what can best be described as the deliverables and visuals. On this trip, a key visual was having POTUS look out of the Door of No Return in the House of Slaves, a memorial dedicated to the untold numbers of Africans kidnapped by slave traders and kept under horrific conditions before shipped across the Atlantic. I was the control officer in charge of that event, which included President Bush making remarks in a village with the bay and fishing boats in the background. I don't think many people realize what it takes – all the planning, coordination with the White House and host governments, and the physical and material support – to make things happen. In this case, the White House was pleased, so I considered the event and my participation a success.

Q: So, here just a quick question.

SMITH: Yes.

Q: Through the early 2000s, Senegal had begun working toward Millennium Challenge Corporation possibilities.

SMITH: Yes.

Q: Was that perhaps one of the deliverables, the discussion of their movement forward on it, on an MCC project?

SMITH: It could have been. I don't remember because I wasn't really involved in that particular aspect of the POTUS visit.

Q: Okay.

SMITH: After my trip to Senegal to support POTUS, and now leading into my second year in AF-PD, there were other foreign policy priorities I worked on regarding our engagement with Africa. For example, on Liberia, I was asked by the bureau's Deputy Assistant Secretary, or DAS, to accompany her to the U.N. meeting on Liberia, which I believe focused on how best to support the country's disarmament, peacekeeping and transition to democracy. A big focus was to get donor support for its reconstruction and rehabilitation after years of civil war.

Subsequently, the DAS asked that I travel with her to Liberia, also in the position of a staff aide. It's quite unusual for a DAS to reach down to the public diplomacy office for such support. Usually one would ask the special assistants or the desk officers, but I was only too pleased to assist. Both travel opportunities were good experiences for me to gain knowledge of how to support a senior official as that person engages at the multilateral and bilateral level.

Otherwise, on Liberia, I drafted an action plan to raise awareness about Liberia's urgent reconstruction and security needs; arranged press briefings, media roundtables, interviews with senior officials; wrote talking points; and also identified a foundation to provide 40,000 textbooks for higher education.

Q: And what about your work on Iraq. Did that continue?

SMITH: Yes. My work on Iraq continued as I organized electronic interactives with various officials to talk to African audiences in support of U.S.G. policy.

Q: So, these interactives were basically a video link?

SMITH: Yes. Video and telephonic links. Some of our African posts had difficulty connecting via video due to low bandwidth, at that time. There was no Skye. Our interlocutors had to go to the Bureau of International Information Programs or IIP in the former USIA offices located in Southwest Washington for these electronic interactives.

Q: Any other major initiatives you worked on?

SMITH: Yes, indeed. Let me talk about the Trans-Sahara Counterterrorism Partnership (TSCTP), a regional interagency plan combining both civil and military efforts to combat

violent terrorism, which I believe is still on-going. I participated in its first iteration. Later, the initiative was expanded to parts of North Africa and East Africa. I worked on all those regional plans spanning multiple bureaus and offices. Specifically, I was the bureau's PD representative, meeting with the interagency leading up to the design of the strategy. Since I played a major role in developing the PD component of the strategy, I organized a conference in Ethiopia for public affairs and information officers in East Africa on counterterrorism with our DOD colleagues.

Q: What was the thrust of the meeting? Was it more to just sort of bringing together African officers who dealt with it or were there other goals for the conference?

SMITH: The main goal was to focus on the challenge of terrorism from an interagency and regional perspective rather than addressing the issue bilaterally. As we know, terrorism does not respect borders. To address the root cause, there must be an integrated, regional approach. Discussions at the conference and the months and years that followed centered on bringing all our resources to the table. The respective strategies reflected my colleagues input from the selected posts on how best to promote moderation and tolerance; and how to engage key leaders to encourage peace and security as a counter-weight to violent extremism.

Q: Oh, were there follow-ups from the office that you were involved in?

SMITH: From the conference? Yes. We made recommendations on the best use of \$1.2 million in economic support funds for counterterrorism. We also shared knowledge of public diplomacy best practices in promoting opportunity, moderation and tolerance through the offering of English language learning programs, information materials in local languages, and American corners – all these measures fell in the category of winning hearts and minds.

Q: Alright. You had a really great variety of visits, of areas of interest, so in essence, you're beginning to develop a lot of areas of expertise; so, as you're thinking about a next assignment, how does all this play together in what you're looking for next?

SMITH: Well-

Q: I guess what I'm driving at is, did any of these new areas that you were looking at kind of attract you and make you want to follow it more, so perhaps counterterrorism, post-conflict reconstruction, you know, these different opportunities that you saw in Africa?

SMITH: Well, my work on PD programs for our posts in Africa must have work caught the attention of the Undersecretary's office for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs or R as we call it. All the geographic PD offices report directly to R as well as to the Assistant Secretaries. During my AF-PD assignment, there were many opportunities I had to physically be in the R front office, attending meetings on various initiatives that R wished to launch, especially on countering violent extremism.

Q: And. . .?

SMITH: And, it was the then chief of staff who persuaded me to bid on the special assistant position in R. I was reluctant at first since I had done similar work at USIA, but I was eventually persuaded that the job would be a good career move.

Q: Okay. So that will be 2004?

SMITH: That's right.

Q: Okay.

SMITH: Another reason why I accepted the special assistant position was that I would be working with Ambassador Tutwiler, whom I knew from my stint in Iraq. Ambassador Tutwiler had left Morocco to head R that year. Her stay was brief, however, as she was replaced by Patricia Harrison as the new undersecretary shortly after I started in R.

Q: What were your responsibilities in R?

SMITH: It was pretty broad based. Essentially, I was asked to represent the undersecretary in coordinated public diplomacy activities with regional and geographic bureaus as well as at interagency meetings. I also participated in the policy coordinating committee on outreach to the Muslim world, which was launched in part to develop a strategy to counter the rising threat of radicalism. One specific task – working through the interagency working group – was to improve understanding of American society and values; and encourage moderate voices.

I also took the lead to develop public diplomacy strategies on the treatment of enemy combatants, a complicated and sensitive area, to address what the administration felt were public misperceptions that were damaging to our counterterrorism efforts. Our PAOs were on the front lines of having to explain our policy daily and I believed that they needed strong talking points. In order to help our PAOs, I created a virtual working group to manage the interagency process on the issue.

About this time, there were rapidly developing events related to the alleged desecration of the Koran and other abuse allegations. I liaised with State Department's office on war crimes issues, the Defense Department, and the National Security Council to strengthen our response to address these critical events.

Q: Any other highlights from your assignment in R?

SMITH: Yes, one more worth noting. Secretary Rice asked for a program to commemorate Black History Month. She tasked both the Office of Civil Rights, or OCR, and R to organize this event. The R undersecretary in turn tapped me to support OCR. I leveraged my contacts in the Kingian nonviolence field and recruited Dr. Bernard

Lafayette, civil rights activist, and co-founder of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, among other great things he accomplished on social change. OCR was able to secure the participation of a leading African American sports coach and Ambassador Ruth Davis to make remarks. Dorothy Height was a keynote speaker too. It came out in Dr. Lafayette's remarks that he had quit college early to be among the Freedom Riders, and was only able to complete his college education because of the scholarship offered by Dorothy Height and the organization which she led, the National College of Negro Women. It came as a pleasant surprise to Dorothy Height. She had no idea. All in all, it was a great event; the entire auditorium was packed.

Q: Just out of curiosity for this particular African American history month presentation, was John Lewis there?

SMITH: No.

Q: Okay.

SMITH: No, he wasn't there.

Q: He's also a fantastic, extemporaneous speaker.

SMITH: Oh, yes. I'm sure. Hearing firsthand from people who have actually lived and participated in the civil rights movement really makes the history come alive. It's very effective and it's what I attempt to convey when I give presentations on my family and their involvement in the civil rights struggles.

Okay, so that's R. Then I go on to my next assignment.

Q: And in the summer of 2004?

SMITH: Yes.

Q: Okay.

SMITH: Yes. My next job was as deputy director in Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs or NEA-PD. I think I was asked to be deputy because of all the work I was doing with the interagency. I had two great public diplomacy directors of that office during my time in NEA-PD.

Q: Okay, yes.

SMITH: I supervised a staff of 12, including the policy and coordination officer, which is the job I had in AF-PD, three country affairs officers, a program analyst, two Office Management Specialists, and I worked closely with the person in charge of the press office. My job was to assist the office director, to ensure that the office ran smoothly and to implement our public diplomacy strategies in the Near Eastern Affairs region. That's a

huge area encompassing the Middle East and North Africa including Egypt, the Arabian Peninsula, Lebanon, Israel, Iran and Iraq.

As deputy, I had a lot of responsibility in terms of the staffing our posts. On certain positions, R had to be consulted. I worked directly with the R front office on staffing and personnel issues on some of our most challenging assignments, including Iraq. Qualified officers were hard to find and were not stepping forward at the levels we wanted. I worked the phones to convince and cajole folks, and we – State – also considered third country nationals. State had warned officers that it might have to resort to forced assignments, but to its credit, started to offer incentive packages for those bidding on high threat posts in order to get people to volunteer for assignments at the levels needed in difficult places, like Iraq. In subsequent years, officers started to realize that a tour in a high threat post is a good career move.

Q: I see.

SMITH: Other highlights during this tour included organizing the annual Iftar event with State's Public Affairs office. Hosted by the Secretary, it's a huge event where we invite distinct groups within the Muslim community, youth for example, who have distinguished themselves in some way, or other individuals focused on promoting peace and understanding in the Muslim world writ large.

Q: Did you do any traveling?

SMITH: Yes. I went to Bahrain for the Forum for the Future, an endeavor to promote partnerships with the Muslim community, to support our press operations. I also went to Amman, Jordan, because there was a conference of PD officers who were part of the Iraq provincial reconstruction teams. They wanted somebody senior to give remarks. I remember a rather heated panel discussion with Jordanian university students. The students were spouting a lot of negative stereotypes about Americans. Finally, as the senior person present, I said time out and wrapped up nicely the discussion by saying that we should really focus on what we have in common, our shared desires, rather than our differences. That intervention calmed the assembled group.

I also went to Morocco, Algeria and Tunisia to visit with our staff in our Public Affairs offices, meet key contacts, and observe some of our programs. It's very beneficial to engage in visits of this type to the field because you get a better sense of the challenges and accomplishments first-hand.

My travels also included one domestic trip – to the U.N. Within weeks of assuming my portfolio in NEA-PD, I was pulled back by R to help staff Undersecretary Karen Hughes's trip to the U.N. General Assembly. It was an experience I'll never forget. The pre-planning itself was exhausting. I would start early in the morning in NEA-PD, spend the entire day in R, and then rush back to NEA-PD until the late evening hours. There was one schedule mix-up, entirely my fault, but otherwise, it was a great learning opportunity.

Q: Yes.

SMITH: It was also on my watch in NEA-PD that R created its very first regional media hub to ensure accurate coverage of U.S. foreign policy priorities by major international media. The first hub was placed in Dubai, but now there are other major regions – Africa, Europe, Asia, and Latin America, which operates out of Miami. The media hub concept was a way to take America's story directly to audiences in distant places in real time, especially in the Middle East given its importance in U.S. foreign policy. Al Arabiya, Al Jazeera and other outlets craved to have U.S.G. officials on-air who could give credible, authoritative interviews; and they said they didn't care if they had to do the translation. Fortunately, State was able to find really good officers who were language capable.

Q: Great. What else happened while you were in NEA-PD?

SMITH: Well, my first day on the job in NEA-PD something tragic happened. One of our colleagues committed suicide.

Q: Oh, dear.

SMITH: Oh, yes.

Q: Oh, dear.

SMITH: Oh, yes. It was awful. I was the one who received the phone call from the family member telling me about the tragedy. The person in question was on leave at the time. I knew her somewhat, and was really looking forward to working with her. She was brilliant, excellent with languages. I think it was hard for the staff who had really worked more closely with her than I had. What do you do in a circumstance like that? Fortunately, I reached out to the department's family liaison office and arranged for counseling. They have a protocol for what should be done. Really grateful for their guidance and support.

Q: Yes.

SMITH: I think that does it for NEA-PD.

Q: Alright. Okay, so as the tour in NEA comes to an end, we're now in summer of 2008?

SMITH: Well, not quite.

Q: Okay.

SMITH: Yes. When an assignment to a language designated post is involved, our career development counselors tell us that we should look far in advance to make sure there's sufficient time to take language training prior to deployment. Early 2008, the Cultural

Affairs Officer position, or CAO, to Mexico City was on the bid list as a language designated position. I don't recall it being advertised in advance, however. I applied, was assigned, but had to curtail from my position as Deputy in NEA-PD a few months early so that I could take the necessary training to be language qualified. Since I had studied Spanish on my own since early January through the Foreign Service Institute's, excellent on-line resources, I was put on the fast track to achieve my proficiency level in time for the start of the assignment in summer of 2008. The CAO job was also a senior level assignment, which I found attractive. At this juncture, I might have considered Deputy Chief of Mission positions, which would have made me more competitive for Ambassadorial selections, but I was not so eager to go that route.

Q: When did you arrive in Mexico City?

SMITH: I got there in August. The timing – departure from NEA-PD, followed by language training – worked out.

One thing I wanted to mention before we move on was area studies. I really give FSI kudos for offering opportunities to learn more than just the language of the assigned country through its regional area studies course. It's important not only to learn the language but also the culture and history of a particular country or region. Students are often asked to do presentations, and I was determined to exercise my language skills by creating a video of interviews I conducted on a particular topic. I earned high marks from the course director for my presentation. It was educational and fun.

Now let's talk about Mexico City and what my job entailed.

Q: Okay. And you arrived there in 2006?

SMITH: No, '08.

Q: '08.

SMITH: Yes. As CAO, I supervised three American officers; thirteen LES or Locally Employed Staff; had a budget of \$4 million for my section alone, which was huge; and I coordinated all the cultural, educational and grant programs across Mexico. From 2008 to 2009, our total exchange, cultural exchange grants exceeded 450. Afghanistan, Iraq, maybe China all manage more grants, but I venture to say that Mexico's grants program was larger than most other public affairs sections. I believe that this is so because of the importance of our close relationship with our neighbor across the border. By the end of this assignment, I was really able to hone my skills as a grants officer representative, or GOR, as we were called.

Q: Now, what were some of the goals of the grants?

SMITH: Foster greater ties between the U.S. and Mexico and mutual understanding. Lots of grants were awarded in the areas of museum partnerships, arts, culture and youth

outreach in Mexico City and other cities managed by our PD offices in the separate consulates.

Q: What about educational exchanges, was there a Fulbright Commission?

SMITH: Yes. Another duty as CAO was to serve as the board member of the U.S.-Mexico Commission for Educational Exchanges, also called the Fulbright-Garcia Robles Commission or COMEXUS. We met often to evaluate the applications for academic study and programs by candidates in both the U.S. and Mexico. Commission board members included distinguished former Fulbrighters, senior Mexican Government officials and, of course, the PAO and myself, as CAO. I learned a lot about managing a large educational exchange program such that I applied best practices from my time on COMEXUS to the very large Fulbright program I oversaw in Kabul.

In fact, my stint in Mexico prepared me well for Kabul. My portfolio included the entire gamut of PD programs – academic professional exchanges, performing and visual arts, U.S. speakers, English teaching, student advising, and university linkages, among other areas.

Q: Were there any special projects?

SMITH: Yes, the ambassador called my team into his office and said we need to have a program with a big impact on youth outreach. Many developing countries like Mexico face the challenge of a large youth bulge, basically ages 15 to 24, poor employment outcomes and sustainable development. Youth outreach efforts dovetailed nicely with multiple mission goals in those areas and advanced our interest in reducing displacement, conflict and migration out of Mexico toward the U.S.

Q: I see. What was the ambassador's reaction?

SMITH: Positive. I presented to the ambassador an exchange program that we could do to the tune of half-a-million dollars. He discussed the program while he was at State for consultations, including a meeting in R. R bought into the program, and then it was a matter of securing the funds. We worked extremely hard to get buy-in and support from a number of places. R provided a large chunk of change under a new pilot country project initiative, which they had just rolled out. We were the first post to capture the dedicated funding. The private sector supported our program too, through a public-private partnership approved by the appropriate offices at State. We had several U.S. companies based in Mexico pitch in funds. They were very much on board. Last but not least, the government of Mexico offered much needed organizational support and funds. It was invested in its success too. Their education ministry helped us identify and interview the students. In sum, I believe the program I started and conceived with my assistant CAO is still going strong today because of the painstaking groundwork we set at the start. At the time, I told my assistant that the program will be a success because all the stars were aligned in our favor. This was the right time, and the right climate because of its focus on youth, and both governments wanted the initiative to happen. What's even more

remarkable is the amount of time it took from conception to initiation – about 6 months – an unbelievably short period given how slow bureaucracies work.

Q: Oh.

Yes. Moreover, the White House and the National Security Council or NSC, recommended that the program be announced during the May state visit of President Calderón to the U.S.; and the NSC requested R to fund an increase in the number of participants.

Q: Well, if it's 2008, you have national elections and then-

SMITH: Yes. Yes, it was the year that Obama ran for the presidency. I was all hands-on in our efforts to mount another successful election watch event. As the CAO, I recruited a high-profile U.S. speaker for the mission's election watch, a nationally-recognized pollster, to sit for a panel discussion; and helped plan many other aspects of the night-long programming event. The occasion was marred, however, by the tragic jet plane crash in which a Mexican cabinet member was killed.

Q: Oh, no.

SMITH: Yes. So unfortunate. Most of the reporters present were reporting about the awful plane crash that happened that very night.

Q: Any other major events during your time in Mexico City?

SMITH: Yes, I was at ground zero during the H1N1 flu pandemic, which just happened to be Mexico City. I remember hearing about the deadly virus on the radio as I was getting ready for work. The announcers said all schools were closed as well as other public places; and the person at the front desk of my apartment building confirmed the shocking news. Since I was leaving for a conference in Philadelphia, with a stop in D.C. in the following days, I decided to take my son with me instead of having him stay in-country with a classmate's family. Unfortunately, I didn't realize the depths of paranoia in the U.S. over H1N1. My son would usually visit his former school, a private institution, upon our return trips to D.C. This time, it was different. The school administrators got wind that he was returning and sent an email to me to say that he would be barred from entering school premises. When we travelled back to Mexico City, everyone was on high alert. There were extra measures that the public had to take, you know, the washing or sanitizing of hands before entering a public place, for example. These steps to mitigate the transmission lasted a very long time, but in the end, proved successful in stemming the spread of the virus.

Q: Oh, boy. Wow.

SMITH: Yes. In 2009, another initiative I worked on was the Alliance of Youth Movement Summit, which was held in Mexico City. Present were activists,

representatives from the most well-known social media companies, and members of the private sector to facilitate collaboration on socially responsive projects. One area explored was how to counter the narcoviolence in the country through use of these mobile apps. The initiative was supported by R and the geographic bureau. My office, the CAO's office, already had a relationship with Google, so I took the lead in working with State's point person on all the preparation required to organize for the summit.

Q: You were quite busy.

SMITH: Yes, very true. And, I haven't yet mentioned the official VIP visits that require effort and time to make the trips a success. There was a POTUS and FLOTUS trip, a SECSTATE visit, and a second trip by FLOTUS, or First Lady of The United States, on her own. On those occasions, my office was involved either because of site visits or deliverables focused on youth and/or education. A school visit for FLOTUS, a gathering of indigenous students for Secretary Hillary Clinton, for example. I must add that PD has a valuable role because we provide a side of the bilateral relationship that is important in many ways. It's not just the hard policy that deserve focus, such as migration, trade, or drug interdiction, but also other aspects that demonstrate a commitment to our enduring ties and broader relationship.

Q: Yes, I agree.

SMITH: Meanwhile, I managed post's robust International Visitors or IV exchange program. Indeed, the Office of State's Inspector General, on one of its post inspection visits, highlighted our IV exchange program as a model of how one should be run. Our success with the IV program was largely thanks to the excellent work by our long-serving, locally-employed staff. Our speaker programming was equally challenging. We must have programmed almost 100 speakers, including the Kennedy Center president and King Center contacts on nonviolence. What's more, we collaborated on a youth education music exchange program with Carnegie Hall, that had Carnegie Hall reps in Mexico City hosting a video-teleconference event.

On the arts, I submitted an application for the preservation of an 18th-century Roman-style aqueduct in Querétaro under State's Ambassador's Fund for Cultural Preservation, which got resubmitted and funded the following year. We also collaborated with the National Endowment for the Arts and First Lady Laura Bush at the White House for an event. It was called the Coming Up Taller awards, another youth-focused program.

And, of course, I travelled throughout the country for our programs, initiatives and projects. Those are just some of my highlights from Mexico.

Q: Wow.

SMITH: Yes. I think that probably covers my stint in Mexico City.

Q: And what year does that take you to?

SMITH: 2010.

Q: Ah.

SMITH: Yes. Then I return to the U.S. as a career development officer, senior level, in the Office of Human Resources, my first out-of-cone assignment.

Q: Alright. And this is summer of 2010?

SMITH: Yes. September of 2010. I had a client list of 450 senior-ranked officers.

Q: Just a quick question. Seniors mean what rank or grade?

SMITH: Oh, level one or higher.

Q: Oh, okay.

SMITH: Yes. My job was to provide individualized counseling to all my clients regarding career goals and the bidding process. In addition, I was the executive secretary, for all intents and purposes, of the chiefs of mission selection process. It was interesting to learn how career candidates are vetted and recommended for the Secretary's approval by his or her most senior officials within the Department. It's a multi-step process that involves an announcement cable, numerous briefings to assistant secretaries or their senior staff, executive office staff, and outside agencies, preparing materials, and follow-up actions. Sometimes, ambassadorial posts can become vacant throughout the year, which means holding additional meetings. It's a continual cycle.

Q: What kind of impact did you have?

SMITH: As executive secretary, I had an opportunity to enhance the process due to the roll-out of the first Quadrennial Diplomacy and Development Review, better known as the QDDR. Secretary Clinton's office asked that we develop criteria for candidate selection that reflected elements of transformational diplomacy.

Q: I didn't know that.

SMITH: Right. And, as you know, QDDR was developed as a blueprint to put us – America – in the best possible position to advance our interests in a rapidly changing world. It was a joint State-USAID effort to inform, among other things, management and leadership practices. Hence, I developed guidelines to help candidates incorporate those transformational priorities in the QDDR – one was innovation, for example – that would make them best qualified to head an embassy.

Q: Ah.

SMITH: Another action I took that stood out during this time is that I drafted an SOP or Standard Operating Procedure on over-complement. It was a way to productively employ the handful of Foreign Service officers who remained unassigned after the bidding process has ended or, for various reasons, are hard-to-place and at risk of a directed assignment. The new guidance allowed us to better inform and manage these officers. Our goal was to help the unassigned officers in their career choices by having them secure regular assignments as quickly as possible.

So, that completes my assignment in HR.

Q: Cool.

SMITH: Yes. Then-

Q: And wait, that takes you from 2010 to just one year, 2011?

SMITH: 2012.

Q: To 2012.

SMITH: 2012, yes.

Q: Right.

Today is May 13, 2019. We're resuming our interview with Robin Smith in Afghanistan.

SMITH: Right. Well, actually, I spent 2012 to 2013 studying Dari at FSI, one of two official languages in Afghanistan and the one most widely spoken, before I started my assignment. The other official language is Pashto.

Q: Right. A quick question about Dari; does Dari use English lettering or Arabic lettering?

SMITH: It's a written version of the Persian-Arabic script.

Q: I see.

SMITH: It was not easy to learn. I had no idea how difficult it would be. What I usually do before I take any formal language training is try to study on my own. FSI's distant learning course, which I took months prior to starting Dari, really helped in this regard. Formal training was nine months, from September to early June. Fortunately, I tested at the level I needed to pass, which was a 2/2. Unfortunately, however, I believe I was the last CAO allowed to take Dari language training. I say unfortunately because it was useful for me during my assignment. I did have plenty of opportunities to use it.

Q: Okay.

SMITH: Afghanistan. I guess the best way I could describe-

Q: I'm sorry. So, what date did you arrive there?

SMITH: Oh, July 2013. The best way I can describe the job itself is a CAO office on steroids.

Q: Okay.

SMITH: Because we had everything in the toolbox and then some. I managed more money than many other PAO jobs in the world, if not most, just because of the nature of the job – operating in a war zone, high interest, high visibility – and having the sorts of funding at our disposal to fulfill the administration's highest level priorities.

Q: What sort of projects did you do that's unusual for a public affairs section?

SMITH: We were doing programs not typically done at other posts. A dormitory project for female university students is one example. Public Affairs Sections or PAS is not typically engaged in construction. We had two under my portfolio, in partnership with the Army Corps of Engineers, which were very challenging. The Army Corps built the dorms and PAS furnished the living space. Although the dorm project in Herat and Mazar el-Sharif was a huge effort, it was done for the purpose of helping young women succeed in their educational pursuits in Afghanistan. The female dormitories provided a safe and secure place for female students to lodge at universities because if the young girl students don't have a safe place to shelter, they forgo higher education.

We also established media operations centers, we call them MOCs, and they were really radio, tv, print studios and equipment in five separate locations throughout Afghanistan, primarily at universities to be operated by their journalism departments. Both of these projects were started prior to my arrival, but two were under the aegis of a public university's journalism department, hence my office's continued engagement.

At the macro level, my mission was to support the bilateral ties, but also to promote sustainability, ensure that our programs were Afghan-led, and assist in a 2014 transition to a country that is able to fully assume its security and political demands and challenges once the international coalition forces drawdown and eventually withdraw. We wanted to see an elected-government of Afghanistan succeed by demonstrating to its people their effectiveness. Continuing progress on issues affecting women was another key mission goal.

Q: Your office itself – what was that like?

SMITH: I led an office of 27 persons, including educational and cultural programs, an information resource center, and separate sections on English teaching, exchanges, cultural preservation, and women in civil society. The PAS was also huge by State

Department standards, with offices focused on grants and coordination with the field PAOs, among other areas.

Q: Were any of the people that you supervised at this point other Foreign Service officers or were these-

SMITH: Yes. We had a mix – Foreign Service officers, Civil Service, Eligible Family members. Of course, I had local engaged staff as well, although I faced challenges unlike anywhere else I served because of the constant churn of personnel among this segment of my staff. After one year of service, many of the Afghan staff were able to apply for and were granted immigrant visa status in the U.S.

Q: What impact might this have with frequent departures of the LES staff?

SMITH: Although I pride myself on having excellent contacts, you can't minimize the strength that the local staff brings with their long-standing trust, knowledge and relationships with key segments of Afghan society, especially in an environment where the American officers' movements are severely restricted. It was a constant challenge, not only for my office, but for the mission as a whole.

Q: What would be a typical activity that would take you outside of the embassy compound?

SMITH: There were many opportunities to engage with Afghans, which I believed was a necessary part of my job. Fortunately, my engagement with different ministries or universities would allow me to travel outside the wall. I really enjoyed the opportunities to interact with the deputy minister for higher education on his turf, for example. We forged a great partnership on many of our joint English teaching, university linkages and other special projects.

There were many trips I took to the American University of Afghanistan or AUAF, which was launched by the First Lady Laura Bush. I was there often to meet with our scholarship recipients and for other programs we supported with PAS funds. National security advisor, Susan Rice, paid a visit to AUAF, and I was asked to organize and moderate a panel discussion for her with Afghan female leaders. I recall pulling Dr. Rice aside in the women's bathroom, the only place during her tightly-packed schedule during that segment of the visit, for a one-on-one quick brief.

Also, our role as grants officers made it possible for us to travel to places like Kabul University to monitor funds for the Lincoln Learning Center at Kabul University and other projects we had with various departments. And, the National Institute of Afghanistan, another grantee, was a place we visited too. It had a wonderful program with young talented kids who shined through music. I was able to see them perform at the Kennedy Center, partly through our sponsorship, months before I departed for Afghanistan, by the way. The French Institute offered its venue for concerts that we co-sponsored, another place I visited on occasion.

Q: Interesting. And how secure was it to travel?

SMITH: That first year, such requests for travel were fairly routine and often approved. Following several bombing incidents in Kabul, however, we faced increased restrictions on our movements and eventually had to kindly ask even our most senior contacts to make the trek to the embassy for meetings.

Q: Wow.

SMITH: Right. And, I must give kudos to the PAS grants office and the grants officers in my section. We took pride in being good stewards of the taxpayers' dollars. Naturally, it takes a lot of time and effort to monitor these grants, especially if your freedom of movement is restricted. Moreover, since we had projects that required delivery of heavy material and equipment, we increasingly relied on our local staff to assist with the monitoring efforts as well as other third parties. There were various challenges involved at every step, however.

Q: Right, right.

SMITH: Yes.

Q: About how large were the grants, roughly? I mean, in terms of monetary amounts.

SMITH: It ranged. Grants were awarded in amounts from half-a-million dollars to over a million dollars. We managed a \$50 million dollar portfolio of grants and cooperative agreements. Fifty million dollars; let that sink in. Obviously, the larger grant awards had to be approved by grants officers in our geographic office for Afghanistan at State.

Q: Yes.

SMITH: That's kind of unheard of in the PAO world.

Q: Did you fall under the special OIG or Office of the Inspector General? Did the special OIG have to look over your shoulder?

SMITH: Well, the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction or SIGAR, the U.S. Government's leading oversight authority on Afghanistan reconstruction, was a constant presence, not just over us, but USAID too, and other mission offices. There were times when I took the lead in discussing with SIGAR inspectors our joint USAID and Public Affairs educational programs, especially in the area of scholarships. We had a State OIG inspection too during my tenure at mission Kabul.

Q: That's quite a lot.

SMITH: Oh, yes. In fact, I received a performance pay increase for superior performance in Kabul.

Q. Please tell me about other traditional PAS programs?

SMITH: Okay. I tell you, the programs we had in our PD wheelhouse were quite large too by traditional standards. We managed the largest IV program in the world. The largest by far. The numbers fluctuated, but could be as high as 90 international visitors.

Q: Was the IV program also specialized exclusively for Afghanistan? In other words, was it longer or did it have other special elements to it that most other programs did not?

SMITH: They were mostly single country-specific programs.

Q: I see.

SMITH: Yes. Moreover, we had a really unique exchange program involving three countries – Afghanistan, U.S., China. It was a joint U.S.-China training program for about a dozen young Afghan diplomats to help raise their diplomatic and leadership skills early in their careers. Launched the year before my arrival, in 2012, I extended the program to train Afghanistan's agricultural and medical care personnel in my last year at the behest of the Obama administration. Under the program, the Afghan diplomats, selected in a competitive process, visited both the U.S. and China, for an orientation program and professional learning experience.

Q: Now, the diplomats, I imagine most of them spoke English.

SMITH: Yes. That was a key criterion; they had to speak English.

Q: But with the farmers, was everything with interpretation?

SMITH: Well, we're not talking about farmers. Participants were involved in the agricultural sector, most likely working on agricultural policy and connected with a ministry, institution, think tank, or an organization linked to gender equity and ag. Yes, we might well have provided interpretation for these candidates. Fortunately, we were able to fold in the administration-requested special projects into our IV allotment for the fiscal year and did not have to put out a request for proposals for organizations to compete for a grant to administer the program.

Q: And what about post's Fulbright program? I imagine that it was also fairly large.

SMITH: Yes. Mission Kabul had the largest, non-commissioned Fulbright program in the world. As was the case with the International Visitors Program, the Obama administration asked us to increase the number of Fulbright candidates, which we did to as many as 78 scholarships in various categories. The challenge in Afghanistan was that the female applicants were at a competitive disadvantage as girls' education was absent

for many years under the Taliban rule and for other gender-related reasons. There was much catching up to do in the years after the overthrow of the Taliban. We also wanted candidates, male and female, representative of the country as a whole, not just Kabul. We tried to address the systemic challenges through what I can best describe as scaffolding. In order words, we had programs to help youth, especially girls, enhance their English and academic skills in order to be successful and competitive for university level work. The Access Microscholarships, an English-language enhancement program, was one such initiative targeting a younger cohort; and our undergraduate scholarships, primarily for women, to attend the American University in Kabul and Bishkek was another. In the latter stages of our multi-year scholarship program with the American University of Kabul, USAID provided some grant money. It proved to be a productive, if somewhat challenging partnership, given the bureaucracy involved in the crosswalk of funds between the two agencies.

Q: What were some of the other programs you did specifically directed to Afghan women?

SMITH: Yes, I mentioned that the Cultural Affairs Section also had a unit for programs and activities related to the advancement of women. That unit was overseen by a very dedicated public servant, Leslie Cunningham, the Ambassador's spouse. She was recognized for her work by the Afghan Government for her work in this area before her departure. Among the many programs she did was one called "16 days of activism against gender violence." Action efforts included roundtables, information outreach, billboards, and various events and special programs. In all, a huge undertaking and commitment on the part of the U.S. Government to help Afghan women succeed.

Q: That's wonderful. Now, going back to the Fulbright program – one last question, once they had completed their time in the U.S. and they came back, did you have an alumni program for them?

SMITH: Oh, yes. In fact, my section had an entire two-person office to oversee alumni engagement. We helped the alumni hold gatherings, connected them through LinkedIn, issued an on-line magazine, and much more. In fact, Mrs. Ghani, the Afghan president's spouse, was interested in leveraging this talent and offered the government's help to alumni to find jobs. The objective was to incentivize the alumni to return to Afghanistan with jobs waiting for them. We helped Mrs. Ghani's office familiarize the business community with our U.S.G.-funded students, and vice versa, so that these highly-educated Afghans would know about the potential for good jobs upon their return. Yes, we did have a very robust alumnae program.

Q: Sounds like you had lots of programs to oversee.

SMITH: True. I should mention that I dramatically simplified the way we selected our candidates for both the International Visitors and Fulbright programs. In prior years, the process was unnecessarily lengthy and time-consuming and required much effort by officers throughout the mission, not just within PAS. The measures I put in place,

including less reliance on paper and greater use of technology, dramatically streamlined the selection process and produced optimum results. Everybody was happy.

Q: Interesting.

SMITH: Yes. So when you look at the scale and scope of what we did day-to-day at PD Kabul, I don't know of any other country public affairs office with an operation as large as ours.

Q: With all of these programs that you were working on, to what extent were you using social media? Because the department was emphasizing more use of it, but then again, Afghanistan has all kinds of challenges in terms of technology-

SMITH: No, you'd be surprised.

Q: Oh.

SMITH: Oh, yes. A certain segment of society was very active on social media. Our information office was savvy in this regard. Social media was employed extensively, mostly by the information office, but also, strategically, by my office, for various activities and/or programs, such as mission Kabul's Fulbright program. However, we did not rely on social media alone for broad outreach throughout Afghanistan. We had our Lincoln Learning Centers, some twenty total by the time I departed.

Q: So, take a second and describe what a Lincoln Learning Center is.

SMITH: Also called LLCs, these were partnerships between the Public Affairs section of the U.S. Embassy and host institutions, making available current and reliable information about the U.S., via the Internet and book collections, for targeted audiences and the general public. In other places, they are also called American Corners. The LLCs also served as a platform for local programming and speakers. I spoke in Dari at several LLCs, sometimes three or more simultaneously, via Skype for various programming opportunities.

Q: Wow.

SMITH: Yes, LLCs were a wonderful addition to what we had in our PD toolkit. These platforms for public outreach gave us great access to youth in far flung parts of the country where we could not visit.

We also had a robust program to support the preservation of cultural heritage in Afghanistan, partly as a way to help unify a divided country. One such stand-out program was with the National Museum of Afghanistan and its partnership with the Oriental Institute at the University of Chicago. A plaque installed at the museum dedication sums up nicely why we made such a huge investment in the museum partnership and other

cultural heritage projects. That plaque says: “A nation stays alive when its culture stays alive.”

Q: Please tell me more about this program.

SMITH:

Q: Was the project completed while you were there?

SMITH: There was an official launch. I believe the partnership with the Oriental Institute is still on-going.

Q: Wonderful.

SMITH: Yes. We were fortunate to have the services of a cultural heritage program manager at State, who was well-respected in Afghanistan, to help manage the cultural preservation grants.

Q: Great. What about advising students of educational opportunities in the U.S.? Did you do that to in Kabul? I imagine it must have been a challenge given the security concerns.

SMITH: Yes indeed. Under my watch, we completed the establishment of education advising centers in three key cities – Kabul, Mazar-e Sharif and Herat. These centers did much more than advising students about U.S. higher ed opportunities, however. They also offered clients the ability to take standardized tests and professional development and capacity-building training. I visited the Kabul Education Advising Center and was pleased to see it at full capacity with students taking full advantage of the resources it had to offer. I was especially proud to see that the center directors were working hard to increase the participation of women at the facilities.

Q: Ah. I have to ask, during your assignment, were you under attack at any point?

SMITH: Actually, yes. There were more than a handful of in-coming rockets fired at or in the vicinity of the embassy. In those instances, we put on our Kevlar vests and helmets, took the necessary precautions, and ran to the safety of our bomb shelters. Once, I was on a road trip to visit the site of one of our cultural preservation projects in Herat. There was a bombing incident that happened nearby as I was touring the site. The U.S. security person pushed me to the ground to shield me from any harm, and then quickly escorted me to our waiting vehicles for the return to the consulate. I don't think I was in imminent danger of losing my life, but it was a scary moment.

Q: Wow. So how did you deal with issues of resiliency, of getting over the difficulties of living in a war zone.

SMITH: Frankly, the mission tried to make life as normal as possible within the confines of the compound. We lived cheek by jowl, hutch by hutch, but I found our lodging comfy. A shower, sink, bed, hutch, desk, TV, frig – that was fine by me. Our CLOs, or

community liaison officers, were always offering various activities to make life away from our families bearable. Their goal was to help improve the quality of life in an austere environment, and they did a very fine job. I also exercised twice daily. Once in the morning and then again before bedtime. It helped to relieve the stress. I also did not over-indulge with alcohol.

Q: I see. And what was the total period of time you were there?

SMITH: I was there for two years. It's traditionally a one year posting, but I made the decision before I departed that I wanted to serve for two years, which was granted. It was a good strategy because our personnel office, back then, allowed officers to end an assignment from Afghanistan without any consequence. It was called no-fault curtailment.

Q: So, from 2013 to '15.

SMITH: '15, that's correct.

Q: During that time, obviously you did your job, but what were your impressions about the development of Afghanistan as the two years went by?

SMITH: First, I had many more rewarding experiences in Afghanistan than bad ones. The two years were filled with multiple projects and programs in support of our U.S. foreign policy goals and objectives, that were forward-leaning, positive and impactful. The twelve- to fourteen-hour days, often six days a week, were definitely worth the time and effort. I – the U.S. – was invested in the success and future of the Afghan people, which I believe was greatly appreciated and recognized by a large swath of the populace. You should have seen the thank you letters by Afghan female students who we sponsored for scholarships about how transformative it was to have the opportunity to pursue a better education. At the end of a long day, I would sometimes read these letters. It was really heartwarming.

Q: I see. Any other thoughts about your time spent there or the current situation?

SMITH: Well, what I hope I did was to contribute in some small way to a better future for the resilient people of Afghanistan, especially women and girls. The country has so much potential, and such a great culture and history. Only when the security and political climate improves, will we see more progress than promise. Although I have not been following events in Afghanistan closely these past few years, my guess is that much work remains on political reconciliation. Let's hope that the current administration's talks with the political stakeholders are successful.

Q: Now, as a result of this, were you thinking about retirement or were you thinking about your next step in the service?

SMITH: Well, I knew that I was subject to mandatory retirement due to the expiration of my time-in-class, but I was granted an extension on my TIC, as it is commonly referred to, because of my tour in Afghanistan and hard language training.

Q: Please explain what TIC means.

SMITH: Sure. Just like my military counterparts, career members of the Foreign Service have a limited number of years at grade before facing mandatory retirement if not promoted within a specific "time in class". The intent is to maintain a system that allows for the progressive advancement of talent through the ranks balanced by the need to retain the expertise and experience of its most capable officers. By the time I finished my assignment to Afghanistan, I was granted a few more years before being mandatorily retired, as I mentioned. I saw on the bid list a position at U.S. Army Africa. The advertised job piqued my interest because of my prior assignments working in Africa and on issues related to Africa.

Q: The political advisor?

SMITH: That's right. The political or policy advisor job. General Darryl Williams, then head of U.S. Army Africa, selected me for the policy advisor spot after vetting by my home office, and a phone interview with the general. My core responsibilities included. . .

Q: Sorry. What home office was that at State?

SMITH: The Bureau of Military-Political Affairs, which became my home office. My job was to advise the commander of the State Department's view on political issues within a country, any impact on U.S. foreign policy and military assistance, and to serve as a liaison with the ambassadors and the embassy country teams. I also supported the commander's engagement strategy with the host country's militaries.

Q: Oh and where were you based?

SMITH: U.S. Army Africa, also known as USARAF, is located in Vicenza, about forty-five minutes from Venice, in the Veneto region of northeast Italy. Very quaint, nice town, known for classical buildings designed by 16th-century architect Andrea Palladio. An interesting history arcana is that President Jefferson was greatly influenced by Palladio as he built Monticello. I lived in the historical center of the city and just absolutely loved the area.

Q: I assume that from your perch in Vicenza you would travel to the African continent?

SMITH: Yes, as needed. I would often accompany the commanding general, and, less frequently, the deputy commander, on what we called senior leader engagement trips to Africa. I travelled with the commander and the USARAF team all over the continent – Cameroon, Nigeria, Niger, Liberia, Tunisia, Burkina Faso, Tanzania, Malawi, Ethiopia, Ghana, and South Africa.

Q: And what were your basic mission goals during the time you were there?

SMITH: Overall, our mission was to help build partner capacity amongst the respective host country militaries to address global threats. I worked directly with USARAF action officers – some of the smartest individuals I've had the pleasure to work with – to develop and advance engagement strategies in coordination with ambassadors and country teams. My job was also to develop policy options for the commander's consideration to strengthen U.S. Army Africa's priorities in peace and stabilization operations through partnerships with various institutions like the Wilson Center.

Q: Any special events that took place on the continent that required your help?

SMITH: Yes. Each year, the command executes an African land forces summit with the participation of the army chiefs from the various African countries. There's a lot of planning that goes on in mounting a successful summit with the host African country in particular. I provided value added on speakers, topics, civilian participants, as well as a myriad of other aspects. I also was asked to comment on goals, objectives, scenarios and press plans. A huge endeavor, but the benefits to both the U.S. and partner countries was significant. The forums provide the militaries from these respective countries an opportunity to get to know each other, and have a level of familiarity and comfort that proves helpful in times of crisis.

Q: What was it like to leave the State Department milieu and go into the military culture?

SMITH: Good question. The military is a very hierarchical organization. Not to say that the Foreign Service isn't, but the difference is so obvious and apparent in that environment. At State, everyone calls me by my first name. When working with the military, it was always Ma'am or Ms. Smith. It made me feel – well – old. Rank is truly respected. Also greatly respected is honor – honoring those who've served and sacrificed, and honoring the rich history of the armed services. I really liked that, and attending the formal ceremonies like a change in command or the army ball.

Q: And the other question, and this is probably restricted, but did you actually become involved in any of the planning for some of the security operations without going into classified methods?

SMITH: Right. What I can say is that I advised the USARAF team on any issues related to security cooperation and assistance agreements. There are various legislative authorities that regulate these agreements. My communication with the security cooperation office at State and country teams helped advance the opportunities made available, whether it was joint training, joint exercises, or peacekeeping, for example.

Q: I see. And how else did you contribute to the USARAF mission?

SMITH: I gave several graduation speeches, including in French, to the graduating classes at the Center for Police Stabilization. The center, which was established by the Italian Government, trains police units from many countries, not just from Africa, for stabilization and peacekeeping missions worldwide.

Q: Where was that located?

SMITH: In Vicenza, the town itself.

Q: Oh, I see.

SMITH: Yes. Also called COESPU, it's supported in part with State Department funding assistance in order to promote international peace and security in post-conflict environments. When I was there, the deputy director was a U.S. army colonel.

Q: Interesting. What else did you do with your time while assigned as the POLAD?

SMITH: I volunteered to share my family's story on race relations during African American history month, both at U.S. army facilities in Italy and Africa. My talks on the continent were organized by the Public Affairs offices on the margins of my official travel with the USARAF team. That was the first year of the Trump administration and I was delighted that the president chose to highlight my ancestor Robert Smalls for the official White House proclamation.

Q: Now, I'm less interested in what you told them-

SMITH: Yes.

Q: -than in what they said to you or the kinds of questions that they had.

SMITH: The African audiences?

Q: Yes.

SMITH: Well, it ran the gamut from laudatory to critical. I was prepared for the tough questions, however. As a PD officer, we always have to be. I highlighted the role of our system of checks and balances; the role of a free press; more of a willingness now to dialogue amongst diverse populations, in part necessitated by changing demographics; more police accountability; and, the use of social media to document abuse that may have gone unnoticed or unrecognized in the past. In one instance, the Ethiopia Broadcast System and their English language dailies interviewed me; and they said that my presentation was powerfully impactful.

Q: What was the most surprising thing about this job for you?

SMITH: Surprising? Well, I've worked with the military in previous assignments, so nothing really surprised me. But I also realized how important it is to emphasize ethical conduct and anti-harassment training. An unfortunate incident happened by a high-ranking officer and his questionable ethical judgment, right after I departed. Quite disappointing to hear, which I learned about from the press. Nonetheless, I think USARAF did an excellent job of mandatory ethics training of all its members, leaders and subordinates, particularly during my first year under General Williams. I also believe that our emphasis on gender equality influenced those African military leaders who held skeptical views of women in the military.

Q: So, now you are approaching the end of your career, correct?

SMITH: Indeed, and because of the TIC I had to leave after two years of what normally would have been a three-year assignment.

Q: I see. So, by now, you depart summer of 2017?

SMITH: That's right, 2017, for the two-month State Department job transition program.

Q: I see, okay. So, now, as you're looking at retirement and you've had this long career in a variety of places, as you look back, how would you advise the department now in, say, recruitment and retention, in training, in all of the areas that helped you rise to the senior Foreign Service? You know, now that you're retired and not terribly long ago, you've seen how the service has changed. With that, with all that in mind, what advice would you give?

SMITH: Well, having a continuous mentorship program throughout the stages of one's career is very important. Mentoring should be formalized because some officers are more proactive than others in seeking the advice of their seniors, for example. In my case, I had mentors, but I also relied on my informal network of cohorts to guide me on my career path. Training is important. The State Department does a very good job of making professional and language training mandatory. At post, I view the consular cone's mandatory training program for their non-tenured officers as a model. They gather their junior officers for brown bag lunches, invite speakers, offer sessions on writing evaluations during the rating season, and encourage their officers to participate in PD programs, which is reflected in their evaluation reports. Other than that, a stint in Human Resources is also quite valuable for insights into personnel policies and practices as well as serving on the promotion boards.

Q: Now, you joined USIA and obviously it was eliminated as a separate organization, its functions integrated into the State Department.

SMITH: That's correct.

Q: How would you recommend the function of public diplomacy be improved or do you have any general advice on that?

SMITH: Well, I think the establishment of a public diplomacy professional cone at the State Department after the 1999 integration greatly enhanced the conduct of traditional diplomacy. It's great that members of the Foreign Service are evaluated on their use of public diplomacy, including candidates for career ambassador. To make PD so central in one's evaluation, highlights the importance of public diplomacy as an instrument in the conduct of foreign affairs. The implications of the Arab Spring and today's anti-government protests demonstrates that publics matter. Hence, whatever you call it – transformational diplomacy, person-to-person diplomacy, smart power – U.S. diplomats are better off using effective and targeted public diplomacy engagement strategies to advance U.S. national interests.

Q: Okay. And the last question is, looking at somebody who would be considering the Foreign Service as a career, what advice would you give them now?

SMITH: Well, I would recommend that the potential candidates obtain a well-rounded education, with a broad knowledge of U.S. and world history, culture, politics, economics, and management. It was true when I started and is still relevant today. I would also add that a good candidate should possess good language and leadership skills. Qualities that make a good leader include honesty and integrity. I've seen some highly skilled officers, but horrible leaders, who nonetheless rose in the ranks with negative effects to morale. I would also tell a prospective candidate that one's background need not make you think that you're not qualified to be a Foreign Service officer. I've worked with officers who came to the service with a background in law; and others from the arts. Both sets of officers did extremely well.

Q: Great, great. Alright. Before we end, are there any parting thoughts you'd like to share?

SMITH: Thank you Mark. You've been a great facilitator and a good listener. It's been fun. Let me also add that there are many outstanding colleagues, superiors and subordinates, who've I've not mentioned by name, and want them to know that I mean no disrespect in not doing so.

In conclusion, I hope that the oral interview will be meaningful to students who wish to pursue a profession in foreign affairs; individuals curious to learn about my career over the span of thirty-one years; and certainly, to my progeny.

Q: Well, we want to thank you. And we will close at this point.

End of Interview

PHOTOS



Robin with Haitian artist in front of Public Affairs sponsored mural of Martin Luther King, Jr.



Robin Smith in Baghdad, Iraq (May 2003)



Robin Smith with King Mswati III, Ambassador Alan R. McKee, an American businessman, and Michael Jackson

ADDENDUM

African-American History Month Remarks *Honoring the Past, Educating the Present, and Inspiring the Future*

Distinguished Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen, Good Afternoon

It's a pleasure and an honor to be here today on the occasion of African American History Month. I am excited to have the opportunity to share with you the amazing story of my family's struggle for civil rights – spanning one hundred years. It's a story of grit, perseverance, heroism, and extreme bravery in the face of brute force. It's also about their unshaken faith in the "moral goodness" of an America that ultimately "bends" toward justice. And here I echo the words of the great civil rights leader, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

In the telling of my family's story, I will focus on three individuals – Robert Smalls, Bruce Boynton and Amelia Boynton Robinson. These three – my kin – not only had a front row seat to history – they made history.

ROBERT SMALLS

[*Cue Photo of Robert Smalls*]

We begin my family's amazing story with Robert Smalls, my maternal great great great uncle. He was born in 1839, in Beaufort, South Carolina, enslaved, with no rights and privileges as a U.S. citizen.

When he died in 1915, Robert Smalls achieved the rank of Major General in the South Carolina militia, served in the State Legislative Assembly, was elected five times as a U.S. Congressman and enjoyed his last years as a Customs Agent. He accomplished much during his 76 years. But, it was his actions at the age of 23 that made him a hero.

And, here's what he did.

One year into the Civil War, Robert Smalls captured a Confederate warship the Planter, steered it out of the harbor in Charleston, South Carolina, passed five armed enemy checkpoints without being fired upon; and delivered the Planter to the North. This bold act made Smalls a hero to the Union, a powerful symbol of hope and freedom to the enslaved people of the South, and an outlaw throughout the Confederacy.

He was famous. And, as his fame grew, stoked by the popular press, he was given an audience with President Lincoln. Many historians believe that Smalls' exploits convinced the President to accept black soldiers into the U.S. Army and the U.S. Navy. His actions are even more remarkable given that during the era of slavery education was made illegal – for those held in bondage. After the Civil War, Smalls learned to read and write; and believed that others should be offered the same opportunity.

Toward that end, as an elected official, Smalls authored legislation providing South Carolinians the first free and compulsory public school system in the U.S. – a model other states followed. For that act – and his wartime service – *South Carolina* set aside today -- Feb. 22nd -- as *Robert Smalls Day*.

BRUCE BOYNTON

[*Cue photo of burned Greyhound Bus*]

Let's fast forward one hundred years. Segregation of the races was pervasive and unrelenting – in schools, in employment and on public transportation. The “Jim Crow” system of separation was enforced through laws, custom, intimidation and fear. Many in the black community began to mount a direct attack on Jim Crow, following Dr. King's philosophy of non-violent protest. My cousin, Bruce Boynton, provided a legal basis to do so.

So, I'll begin this chapter of my family's story with the Freedom Rides – an audacious act of defiance to protest segregation – and specifically in interstate travel – across the South. {Photo: The photo you see before you is the bus used by one group of Freedom Riders, which was attacked by a vigilante mob}.

Beginning in 1961, the Freedom Riders rode on long-distance carriers to test the 1960 Supreme Court ruling in *Boynton v. Virginia*. The Boynton named in the case – and the inspiration behind the Freedom Rides –as well as the lunch counter sit-ins – is my cousin, now an attorney – semi-retired – practicing in Selma, Alabama.

His arrest formed the basis for the case. Here's how it happened: Cousin Bruce refused to leave a Whites only lunch counter at a rest stop on his way home by bus on school break from Washington D.C. to Alabama. Found guilty of trespassing, he was fined and then released. Cousin Bruce appealed the decision, contending that his conviction violated his rights as a U.S. citizen. The argument he used was that the arrest was counter to **the Interstate Commerce Act and the Equal Protection, Due Process and Commerce Clauses of the Federal Constitution**. That was the legal basis behind the Freedom Rides and sit-ins.

Representing him before the Supreme Court was none other than Thurgood Marshall, the first black associate justice on the nation's highest court. Marshall said it was his most rewarding case. The ruling effectively served a broader societal purpose – eradicating barriers to the equal treatment of all citizens.

AMELIA BOYNTON ROBINSON

[Cue photos of Ms. Robinson during Bloody Sunday]

My third and final relative, whose story I wish to share, is Cousin Bruce's mother, my great-aunt, sister to my grandmother, Amelia Boynton Robinson. Friends and family fondly call her Mother Boynton or Queen Mother. Described as the matriarch of the Selma Movement, she led a nonviolent protest effort for voting rights. The image of my great-aunt, beaten and tear-gassed by white troopers on the Edmund Pettus Bridge, during what has become known as Bloody Sunday, is one of the most enduring images of the civil rights movement.

Bloody Sunday was the first of three attempts by demonstrators in March 1965 to walk the 54 miles from Selma, Alabama to the capitol in Montgomery. Their goal was to demand the right to vote – a right long denied to all but two percent of African Americans living in and around Selma. The New York Times hailed the final and successful March, led by Dr. King, as the greatest demonstration in the history of the civil rights movement. Not so widely known is Mother Boynton's role in persuading Dr. King to come to Selma to mobilize the local community. In fact, Dr. King stayed in her home, often holding strategy sessions there.

Bloody Sunday led to the Voting Rights Act of 1965. The Act, signed by President Johnson in her presence, guaranteed what had been promised in the 15th Amendment: that no one would be denied the right to vote based on race.

There were other firsts for my great-aunt. Mother Boynton was the first woman of African American descent in Alabama to run for the U.S. Congress. She also inspired a program to address hunger in America. The 1968 Federal Food Program for Low Income Children was launched after a visit to Selma schools, at her invitation, by a high-ranking official of the U.S. Department of Agriculture. To the Federal Government, Mother

Boynton said: “Feed a hungry stomach, feed a hungry mind.” The program became a nationwide initiative.

Mother Boynton died August 2015 at the age of 111. President Obama issued a statement upon her death calling her “an American hero.”

Press coverage of her passing was extensive:

- **The New York Times** called her – a Pivotal Figure at the Selma March;
- **The Los Angeles Times** – Trailblazer who inspired future generations;
- **The Washington Post** – Champion of voting rights in the South;
- The United Kingdom’s **The Mail** – Veteran Foot Soldier; and
- Italy’s **La Stampa** – Una leader coraggiosa e dedicata alla battaglia per i diritti civili.

CONCLUSION

When I reflect on what these three did – my kin – I’m amazed. The United States of America would look a lot different today were it not for their bravery.

In the last speech he gave before he was assassinated, Dr. King said: “The ultimate measure of a man is not where he stands in moments of comfort and convenience, but where he stands at times of challenge and controversy.”

Amelia Boynton Robinson, Bruce Boynton and Robert Smalls stood up when the country needed them – sacrificing comfort and convenience – just like many of you do – proud members of the military, civilian colleagues and family members – each and every day – to ensure freedom and democracy – for all.

Thank you very much. I conclude my remarks with a photo of the family.

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