

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

SHEILA SWITZER

Interviewed by: Jewell Fenzi
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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Foreign Born Spouse Issues

- “Home” assignment for her is culture shock, not re-entry
- Importance of network of foreign born spouses
- Cultural adaptation for all foreign born spouses comes during U.S. assignments
- Easier for a foreign born spouse to adapt overseas
- Must adapt to using English

Foreign Born Spouse Network

- Organization and logistics of the network
- Post article response
- Network provides counseling, information, and referral as needed
- Network refers professionals in areas of mental health
- Growth of network during SS’s tenure
- Started newsletter for network
- Organized White House tour and other special events
- Started organizing people from early age
- Social life is in helping
- Worked on two newspapers
- Helped to start Spanish speaking group in Belgrade

Choice

- Frightening experience in Yugoslavia with newborn
- So active with network that family suffered
- Resigned leadership position
- Network coordinator a full-time job

Feelings Regarding Network

- Loved doing it, but feels guilty neglecting other roles
- Helping people resolve problems
- Position of coordinator
- Importance of newsletter
- Out of pocket at least \$1000 to fulfill voluntary leadership role

Network has several male members who are becoming active

INTERVIEW

Q: This is Jewell Fenzi on September 4, 1986. I'm interviewing Sheila Switzer on foreign-born spouse concerns and issues. I'm interviewing her at my home in Washington. Sheila is currently spokeswoman for the Foreign-Born Spouse (FBS) organization in AAFSW [Association of American Foreign Service Women].

SWITZER: My English is not very good as you can hear, and I do speak very fast. I like to talk with people, but when somebody says they're going to record me, (laughing) oh gosh, I get the shakes.

Q: Everyone does. Not to worry, because the things that you can tell me this morning -- I've had 30 years' foreign experience but I have never, until I knew I was going to talk with you, thought about looking at the Foreign Service from the point of view of a foreign-born spouse. And I wonder if your vision of the Service is any different from mine.

SWITZER: Personally, I don't believe it. Because we foreign-born wives have the same bond with all the American Foreign Service wives. We do the same things. I really believe we are not much different from all the American Foreign Service wives. We also have some problems of adjustment when we come for the first time to the United States, something that we call "culture shock." And some wives have different kinds of problems. That's why our Foreign-Born Spouse group is interested in helping all the newcomers.

Q: Understandably. There must be different levels of adjustment, too. It has to be easier for someone like you coming from Mexico, which is right next door, someone who comes speaking English. It has to be an easier adjustment for them than for some of the wives from, say, Southeast Asia. It just must be.

SWITZER: Oh yes, there is no question about that. I believe that in my case, coming from Mexico, there's not too much difference between the States and my country, because we are so close and have many of the same interests. But it is not the same for the people coming from the Middle East and Asia, I was most interested in the FBS who had more problems than those from Latin America. Also, Europeans are better adjusted to the U.S. There were two other wives whose English was beautiful but they couldn't understand the American culture as well as they wanted. In many ways they didn't make an effort to reach out to people. That's why a network system is very important to foreign-born spouses. We try to put them in touch with somebody from the same country or somebody else who has served in the country and speaks the language and knows the culture. Because it's very, very important when you are talking to them to know how they're

feeling because their backgrounds and religions are different and you need to be really careful. You cannot say the same things to a Latin American or an East Asian as to a Korean girl, because it may go against her principles.

Also I found that the Foreign Born Spouse network is really fascinating because you have the opportunity to help the foreign-born spouses in many ways since each case is different.

Q: I think the most basic thing is, the Foreign Service stresses learning the language of the country you're going to. It seems that that must work in reverse with the foreign-born spouse coming here. The most basic thing for her to do is learn the language, isn't it.

SWITZER: Yes indeed.

Q: Is there anything more basic than that?

SWITZER: No. I think the first, main thing is the language. If you don't speak the language, you don't have the self-confidence to go to a neighbor and ask for something. Because you know you're going to make some kind of mistake and you will ask for something completely different than what you are looking for! And there are too many different things that you want to know but you find that it's difficult to explain and get a right answer. That's why learning English is very, very important.

Also, some Americans who talk to the foreign-born spouses get the idea, like we mentioned a few minutes ago, that Asian people are more "foreign" because their mentality is different, and they are not as open as Americans. Some Asians believe that Americans are very open-minded and at the same time they think we are colder than they are, and NOT as close to our families as they. I respect their beliefs and their feelings, because we all come from different backgrounds. You can even find women with a degree and with two Ph.D.s, but nevertheless, they still have problems adjusting in the United States, even with her education & background. I thought, "how is that possible? But I think a person's beliefs are sometimes so strong, that even one tries, it is not enough if you don't have a friend by your side that is helping you and encouraging you to go out and meet people and learn about the culture. If you just stay in your home you are not going to learn about the culture and end your frustration. You need to interact with other people. That's why one of the things I was working on was to reach those who never come to our programs. I always called them if they didn't come or visited them. And once I got them to attend one activity, that was enough for them to see that they were not the only ones with a problem. There were many other people with different problems or the same problem or very similar ones.

Q: Let me ask you about the Foreign Service foreign-born spouse who learns English to cope in Washington, say she's from Latin America, then her husband comes home and says "We're going to Seoul, Korea." Then, is it difficult for her to then go to Korea as a Latin American representing the United States, and to cope with yet another, third

culture?

SWITZER: I think it's easier.

Q: Easier? That's interesting. Why?

SWITZER: Because all of us are under the protective umbrella of the Mission. And we know that if we have any kind of problems, we can go to the staff and ask for help or have somebody from the Embassy help us. And we know that we are all foreign in the host country, which puts us in the same position and at the same level. I believe it is easier to be in a third country than here, because our husbands say, "Well! we're back home" when he is reassigned to Washington. But for us, it's not home, it's another foreign post and the most difficult one for many of us.

Q: Because of the lack of support.

SWITZER: Yes, the lack of support. Here, like I said, you don't have the same kind of support from the community that helps you to get involved, and encourages you to do things. You don't get invitations like you do overseas; here, you're on your own. And that is why some of the foreign-born spouses stay in their house; it's like a shell, they go in and they don't come out. That's our biggest problem that we confront with the foreign-born spouses -- the lack of self-confidence to go out. Some are not able to call us for help. That's why it is difficult for us to reach some of the foreign-born spouses because we don't know that they are in the States; if the husbands do not get in touch with us. Their wives are not going to call us. If they don't speak the language, then they are afraid to confront others.

Q: So, basically language is the bottom line.

SWITZER: Yes.

Q: The next thing is building self-confidence. Then, say someone has learned adequate English, has developed a modicum of self-confidence, then how much is it their individual responsibility to get out into the Washington community, and how much responsibility does the Department of State have for nudging her out? I mean, you work with AAFSW, don't you?

SWITZER: Yes.

Q: Is there any other organization specifically directed to helping foreign-born spouses? Or is it just your volunteer effort?

SWITZER: No. Our volunteer office is related to the FLO office. The FLO office is our main point of communication between the people coming from overseas and ourselves. Then we get in touch first with them and later with the spouse, because some of the

husbands go directly to the FLO office and say, "My wife is a foreign-born spouse, do you know anybody in this country who can be in touch with my wife?" Then FLO calls me or one of the FBS members and we get in touch with them. Even if the husband calls, the wife still won't call. But, it depends on the country she comes from. We want to help that person and so we get in touch with her. We call at various times, and if she sees that we are truly interested in helping, she will come forward.

Q: Say a husband calls and says "My spouse is Thai and she's here?" Do you then try to find a Thai foreign-born spouse who has adapted, to approach her? Or do you call her yourself? How does it work?

SWITZER: Okay. If we have a husband who says "My wife is from Thailand. I would like to get her in touch with somebody from the same country." We have a network system that has the name of every single member organized by country and also by people who speak that language. We immediately call these people and tell them that "We have a new foreign-born spouse in the States", and we ask them to give her a call and help her as much as possible. If we have two or three people from the same country, we call everybody from that country and put them in touch with her.

After they do their contact, I get in touch with both parties to see whether the networking is successful and how the relationship is working. Sometimes it works beautifully and sometimes not. The counseling is one of the most important parts in this network, because some cases are very special and they need special attention.

When the situation is really difficult, social workers need to intervene, so we send the spouses to the Employment Consultation office at the State Department or with their agency, USIA or AID. But, oftentimes, we have another problem. Some of the foreign-born spouses are afraid to go and get the help that they need because they think that a report will go into their husband's file. However, that is not true, because it is completely private. But they still have that idea, and you cannot make one change their mind. Sometimes, when they refuse to do this, we give them information about doctors and specialists who can help them.

Q: Outside the Department?

SWITZER: Yes, outside the State Department. And with that they seem more confident sometimes, because they know that it will be a private matter that nobody will know about.

Q: You can't convince them that they never appear in their husband's reports?

SWITZER: No, sometimes we can't. Especially the Asian spouses. And it is really sad, because the State Department, USIA and AID have wonderful people to help with this kind of problem. I know of three cases where at first they refused the help that they needed. But, in the end, it all worked out for them. However, for others, it did not. So

then I put them in touch with somebody else.

Q: Now, if they go to a private psychiatrist, psychologist, doctor, whatever, who pays for that? Do they do that?

SWITZER: They do. They need to pay in their own. When they take advantage of the Employment Consultation office, it is already covered. [overlap with some numerical reference Mrs. Fenzi cites]

Q: Now, if the husband doesn't call you and say "I have a Middle Eastern wife who's very unhappy," how do you find out about it? Or do you? Is there a possibility that a woman could sit here in her house for a whole Washington tour and not be approached?

SWITZER: Yes. That is the case.

Q: What can be done about that?

SWITZER: Unfortunately, because of all the privacy laws, we cannot always find out about when a foreign-born spouse is coming to the Washington area. We try to get as much publicity possible as we can. Last year, before I took over this group, I found that the publicity was not enough. It took me two years to find out about the group. And that's why one of the things I worked so hard on was doing more publicity for the group. The first thing that I did was, to arrange an interview for three foreign-born spouses in the Washington Post. Which was a terrific success! During the summer, when some foreign-born spouses come and sit in their hotel rooms or in their house, the first thing they do is look at the newspaper and find the "style page," which (laughing) nobody can escape.

And when they found out about our group, I needed to get an answering machine and two lines because of the calls during the day and night. Actually, that Sunday in which the article appeared, I got 51 calls in one day. It was unbelievable! This was obviously a main way of communication to them. We have a wonderful publicity person in our group, Hadia Roberts. She is from Pakistan and has done a fantastic job. She wrote an article for State magazine and one for USIA magazine, then we opened a phone line for AID. Unfortunately the Foreign Service Journal didn't want to publish any article about of our group which I regret because I know that the editor's wife is from Peru.

The updates that they send overseas every three months from the FLO office have a whole page about the group, which we send to the CLO officers overseas. And we ask the CLOs to let the foreign-born spouses in the post know about our group.

That means that once they come here, they will get in touch with us. If they don't know the number, which is already in our newsletter, we send it every other month to the CLO officers. They can then call the FLO office which puts them in touch with us. This has been great for us. Because some 30 active members were in the group when I took over.

When I left last month, there were 200 active members!

Q: How long did it take you?

SWITZER: It took me less than one year by urging them to attend our activities. I know that the levels of education in our group are quite varied. Because of that, I decided to organize at least two activities per month -- one cultural activity, and one social gathering. Since some are interested in cultural affairs, and others in social gatherings. That way, I could satisfy the different interests of foreign-born spouses.

It was really successful. Some never came, so I called them personally and I drove them to the events. From then on they came. And it was really great. Other members helped me to drive them around. We found car pools to pick them up and bring them back home. That was definitely the way to make them participate.

I remember everybody would ask me, "Why are we never invited to the White House? We are foreign-born spouses but we work as hard as the Americans who are present in the United States." So I decided to send a letter to the First Lady to ask for a meeting. Of course the answer was that they were very busy but that they would invite us for a tour at Christmas in the White House. However, it was limited to only forty people. I was then in a difficult position; I couldn't advertise in the newsletter because everybody would come. So I decided to ask those spouses who never attend. I called them that day and they all showed up, without exception. It was fantastic, because they really enjoyed a wonderful Christmas tour at the White House.

I organized a Halloween party for the children of the FBS, and also a Christmas lunch for everybody, with a little present for each one, which was really successful. We had tours to the Kennedy Center, we went to the theater, and we also had workshops.

Also, we had another workshop about education. We had directors from public, private, handicapped, and gifted and talented schools who came to explain the system. Everybody had different interests, so we had many workshops.

Q: What was your background? Did you just see a problem with the foreign-born spouse community and just jump in with both feet and do something about it? Do you have a background for this?

SWITZER: No (laughing) -- but, perhaps partially. My father was a lawyer so I grew up very interested in law. My second interest was in art history -- I love art history -- but since I was 16 years old I was involved in many social activities. I organize, and raised money for the first festival of music in the cathedral of Morelia in Mexico. I organized programs and the programming, I have done publicity since I was 18. I love organizing all these events for different cultural and educational programs. I also have experience in journalism; I worked for two newspapers. That's how I designed the newsletter for our group, since we didn't have one.

I was educated at private schools -- I used to help the poor people in the village. And those with physical and mental problems. I grew up in a family that believed in helping the needy. And I think all these elements combined made me become interested in this group. When we were living in Yugoslavia, I started a group called the Spanish-speaking Group. We were stationed in Skopje. I would go to Belgrade once or twice a month. And I found that I didn't know the foreign community in Belgrade. I have a very nice friend from the French Embassy who speaks Spanish because she was posted in a Spanish-speaking country. And also I made a good friend of a South African lady who spoke Spanish because she was the wife of the consul general from Uruguay.

I used to get together with them every month, and one day we decided to start a group of Spanish-speaking ladies. We were only the three of us when we started, and when we came back to the States there were 74 members. Most of them spoke Spanish, Portuguese or Italian. We used to get together in the house of each member. That was exciting because that person would host the party, prepare food from her own country. It was very delightful. When we reached the point in which there were too many people, we couldn't do it at the homes any more. Instead, we asked permission from the American Embassy to hold the reunions every month in the party room of the Embassy, which was granted.

We decided to nominate the person who came from South Africa. Her name was Revette Novoa, and she became the president of the group. I wasn't in Belgrade, I was in Skopje, but I used to organize events and give my opinion of what would be nice for the group. I encouraged them to have activities showing slides from their country along with music and food -- giving an explanation about their culture, art, etc. That was excellent, and since then everybody has tried to do something from their own country.

Q: Was Yugoslavia your first post?

SWITZER: No. It was our third post. The other two were West Caracas. We were in Caracas, and my husband had the opportunity to go to Maracaibo for three months to reorganize the Institute over there. But our first was Mexico, from Mexico we went to Caracas -- we met in Mexico and got married, and later we were transferred to Caracas. From there we went to Maracaibo, from Maracaibo to the U.S., where my oldest daughter was born. Later we were transferred to Yugoslavia. After Yugoslavia we were supposed to go to another post but we asked to transfer back to the States because we had a very difficult problem with our youngest daughter, who was born in Germany. She got whooping cough and pneumonia, and the medical attention in Yugoslavia was pretty frightful. We almost lost her, and that's why we asked to be transferred here. She is okay now but still has something in her lungs because of the pneumonia and whooping cough contracted when she was three weeks old.

Q: Three weeks; oh dear. How old is she now?

SWITZER: She's four years old. And she looks very healthy and we're so proud of her,

because she was really sick -- she's a very strong girl, but that was a most frightful experience in Yugoslavia.

Q: Those are certainly my most frightful memories, when my daughter had to be rushed from the south of Morocco to a hospital. I will never forget that. That probably is the most gripping experience I had.

SWITZER: It's really the most gripping experience. Your child dying and you can't do anything, you feel so frustrated, incapable of do anything.

Q: Was she medevaced to Wiesbaden?

SWITZER: No, we took her to Greece because we were nearby. We took her to a pediatrician there. She would get better, but still we were so afraid of her health that we asked to be transferred instead of going to another post overseas. It was for her own good and our own peace of mind.

Q: Of course, of course. I think it's absolutely marvelous the way you have taken your interest and focused it in such a worth-while manner here in Washington. That's just fantastic. Now, how big a committee do you have? When you will be transferred, who will take over?

SWITZER: Well, actually, I just resigned. I was working between eight to ten hours daily. And you know it's a voluntary job that I love. But I get so concentrated in this group because of the many things to do, which makes it a full-time job, that I was neglecting my own family. And I did realize that because my 10 year old daughter started asking me all the time in tears to say, "Mommy, you don't care about us any more, you don't love us, you don't play Barbies with me anymore, you don't bring us to field trips any more, you don't go with us to any birthday parties. You're always rushing, you're always tired, and you don't want to do anything with us." And that really (*end of tape*)

I was born in Morelia, which is between Mexico and Guadalajara. Morelia is one of the most colonial cities in Mexico. I was chosen as one of the three girls to represent our State at the Centennial and go to Mexico City to do the publicity for everybody to work into our annual fair. It was great being in front of the cameras, but I get a little worried because of my pronunciation. My oldest daughter says to me, "Mommy, you are wrong, it's not like that." (Fenzi laughs) But she's so kind, she never says that to me in front of other people, only in private.

Q: So now you're going to devote some time to your family. Are you going to be transferred soon?

SWITZER: We are leaving next year. We're going to be here one more year but I decided that I needed to stick with my priorities. I put a whole year of full-time work into this committee. I am really delighted to have been doing that for the past months. It has been

one of the most rewarding experiences of my life. And I really want to still keep doing this but my family comes first. And I think that one year of neglecting my daughters has not been good for my family. Because children, as you know, grow so fast, and mine are at the age where they really need me now. One is four, and the other is ten, and I need to spend more time with them. I think I am a person who gets too involved in things, but I like to do things right or not at all. And I knew that this foreign-born spouse group was in need of a full-time person to do the job. I designed, published the newsletter for our group; I did the programming for the whole year; I did have the wonderful help of this Pakistani lady, Hadia Roberts, who did the publicity for us. I put together the newsletter too; I collected all the information that I needed, and she used to correct my spelling, grammar, and everything. After she corrected it, I gave it to another lady to put it into the computer. Then she gave it to me again so I could print the newsletter and do the envelopes. I bought the stamps, I did the mailing. I did the counseling, which is the most interesting part, and I really liked it, because I got in touch with each one of the members on a very personal basis. And I was so proud of myself when I was able to resolve their problems. Some of them were more difficult than others, but each one was so interesting, and gave me the personal satisfaction of helping somebody surely when they really needed it.

Q: The basis of your counseling, really, was to build up their self-confidence, is that it?

SWITZER: Yes. That was one of the things. The second was, for example, in one special case: her husband was divorcing her, and she arrived here without any money. I helped her to find a house for under \$500. First, it took me two months to find an adequate place for her and her two children; also I worked to get her a scholarship from the AAFSW, which gave her a loan to go back to school. It was really nice that she already graduates, she already is working and doing great. But this lady needed a lot of help in every single way -- morally, economically, you name it, she needed it. I drove with her everywhere, in cooperation with Phyllis Habib -- who is the support services officer at FLO. She's fantastic. And, between the two of us, I can say that we got her on her feet. That was really one of the most exciting things, because when I met her, she was the kind of person that people want to shake her to make her to wake up. She spoke slowly, and depressingly, and was naive in many aspects that I truly thought she needed a good shake. She didn't take care of herself, apparently because of the serious problems she was confronting.

Actually you should see her now. There is a total change. She got a job with Hecht's Company, and she got somebody to help her to choose her clothes. She bought all her clothes according to the advice received. She even lost a lot of weight. She began to wear make up and she cut her hair. She got the scholarship, earned a degree, and is working now and doing great. You wouldn't recognize her at all. This lady didn't even own any furniture because her husband took the furniture from the warehouse. She slept in a sleeping bag for months. For Christmas, I went to her house to bring some presents for her children. It really depressed me!

She is completely another person. Her morale is built up; her personal self-esteem is unbelievable. She is really the kind of person that should be interviewed, because it gives you a wonderful idea of how a person, beaten into the ground, can get up, regain her footing and become someone successful for society, herself, and her family.

In another case, I was so frustrated because I couldn't do anything. One lady was in need of psychological help. I contacted her and tried to help, but it was a very serious case. We couldn't give the help that she and her husband needed, but I did my best.

Q: Did you run into drugs?

SWITZER: No, I didn't get into that kind of problem. I encountered many other kinds of problems like spouse abuse and many other things that are very depressing. But every single person came through it well. Except for one case. But that's why, when somebody told me they had a person from some country, the first thing I did was to read about her country, because I didn't want to make any mistakes about the advice I was supposed to give to her. I knew her background would be different. I also realized that a person's religion is one of the most important things with a foreign-born spouse. But, obviously, we had no right to mention anything concerning her beliefs, or about her religion.

Q: And if you don't know what it is!

SWITZER: If you don't know, you are in trouble. That's why the best thing you can do is read about the country, the customs, and the background of the person related to the country. I think that this process is marvelous. Really and truly, you derive so much satisfaction from this learning process.

Q: Well, I hope all of this is going to be carried on.

SWITZER: That's my worry. I put so much effort and so many hours in this group and it really worries me whether this group can keep going. I need to find an active member for the group, because nobody wants to take my place. I sure hope that the new Chairperson brings knowledge, experience, and good awareness to the group. Unfortunately, all is not going the way it should for this group. I just come back from Mexico, and the same day that I got back I received a call from every single member of the committee -- "Sheila, the newsletter is not done, we didn't get information, nobody is doing the program." Before I left, I talk to Nancy Asencio about whether she should give a presentation to foreign-born spouses -- this was way back in April. She said that she would do it at the beginning of this new year. I told this to the new chairman. And yes indeed, she was in touch with her about a program for September. But still I didn't hear anything, and 2nd the newsletter didn't go out. That's the only problem. Because you know that everybody depends on the newsletter which is the only way we have any communication with foreign-born spouses. And this newsletter is based on how we can communicate.

Q: Has there ever been any discussion of funding a position in FLO just to do exactly

what you're doing? Because you have been doing a full-time job that really should be financially rewarded. And it's a shame to have what you have done fall by the wayside because there's no one willing to pick up and devote themselves to it like you have. Has there been any talk at all ?

SWITZER: You know that last year when I took over, the secretary at the FLO office was a foreign-born spouse. She put everybody that came to the FLO office in touch with us. And it was marvelous because we had a direct relation between the FLO and us. She was always sure that we got the message. But now, unfortunately, the FLO office is getting one secretary or receptionist after another. And this succession has not been very helpful to our group because the person in there doesn't have time to give us a call. I'm still getting calls from the wives which I do appreciate, because I do really want to know what is going on, and I want to still get involved in the group. But at the same time, I don't want to have the responsibility that I had, because somebody else must carry on that responsibility. And it was so frustrating when I saw that the newsletter was not out, the programming was not advertised and not published in the AAFSW newsletter. I used to personally send the program for the following month. The foreign-born spouse received the AAFSW newsletter and read about our activities.

Q: No, of course not. What about Nancy Asencio as a possibility to follow up? Because her husband is in charge of dispensing the funds from the Una Chapman Cox Foundation.

SWITZER: Exactly. I asked her if she would be interested in taking over because she will be the best bet for this group. Actually she was involved in this group at the beginning, when this group got formed, and helped Doris to design a logo, which I found in one of the envelopes when I took over. That's when I decided to use the logo for a newsletter. It was a beautiful design, and I used it.

Q: I wasn't thinking so much of her taking over. Can you get any help from OBC (Overseas Briefing Center)?

SWITZER: I'm glad you mentioned this now. The Overseas Briefing Center is the ideal place to get information to the foreign-born spouses, because many of them they know about the reentry workshop, and so they come. I attended to those workshops and [she taps table in emphasis] I never heard anything about the Foreign-born Spouse. That's why I always asked the chairman if she could mention it at the beginning of the workshop, and they did, sometimes, they are good about that. And they used to post on the bulletin board our newsletter, which is no longer there. This was lovely, because many people arrived in during the summer. And so it would be ideal to have a person in the Overseas Briefing Center or in the FLO; those are the ideal places to have somebody.

Q: Because it comes to me that what you have been doing should be funded.

SWITZER: (laughing) Oh yes -- it's really true.

Q: What -- you had to Xerox, you had postage, did you finance all that yourself?

SWITZER: No. The AAFSW paid for the printing of the newsletter and the mailing which was really nice. I need to admit, I fought for that, you can imagine (Fenzi laughs) against the whole Board. But Pamela Moffat is a fantastic person and I had her support. That was very useful, because the idea was for us to have a page in the AAFSW News for our activities. But I had more in mind than that. We published in the newsletter all the activities that we had, plus information like where one could find a place to take driving lessons, the Latin markets, the European markets -- all the simple things. We have an article each month about different offices of the State Department, like the FLO, the Overseas Briefing Center, the Employment Consultation office, and the Housing office. Every single month, I tried to get all the members involved. And I asked the members in our meetings, "Please, I want one of you to be in charge and make an interview at the FLO office and write an article to be published in the newsletter. Everybody responded and every month I had an article for the newsletter for the foreign-born spouse, talking about the service you can get and the benefits at the State Department, USIA and AID. Which is what we need, we need information because we are lacking information. That's one of the most difficult things for us; when you don't know where to go, or where to find the information that you need.

The other thing I used to do was to have the publicity person write for me an article about the holidays in the U.S. I think everybody needs to know how special Thanksgiving is, the meaning of Washington's Birthday, and Memorial Day. So, every month we have out an article about this, which I consider very informative for everybody.

Q: Tremendously! If I had had something like that in Brazil, for instance, where there were so many holidays, or in Trinidad. Helps you more -- that's an excellent idea, really, to twist around the other way and inform spouses who are going out into the field about the holidays and things in the country. Invaluable.

SWITZER: Exactly. And I think all of that is necessary for everybody to know. I had a personal point of view about what I wanted to be in the newsletter. I was not content with only having one page in the AAFSW News; I wanted to have our own. Plus I told you that we sent to the CLO officers every other month our newsletter via pouch, so we didn't pay mailing but we had to pay for printing. AAFSW also paid me for my babysitter when I went to the meetings; not all of them, only \$14 a month. One time they paid me \$18, or less than that, but I never charged them more than that amount because I didn't want to give the impression that I was taking advantage. I was out of pocket \$1,000 at the end of the year and my husband complained about that.

Q: Of course he would. I was going to ask if you would tell me how much you were out of pocket.

SWITZER: I think I ended up out of pocket about \$1,000.

Q: That's too much.

SWITZER: And it is too much, especially when it comes from your family budget. Naturally, my husband started complaining. I had to make many calls, some were long distance. I also had to use two tanks of gas per week in my car, driving foreign-borns very long distances. I once had a flat tire. One day I had an accident coming from one of the foreign-born spouse at the corner of her house; a car without any brakes struck me. Fortunately, I wasn't hurt, but my car, it was badly damaged. And of course it was paid by our insurance because the other party didn't have insurance. But all these little things done for the foreign-born spouses, tested my husband's patience to the limit (she laughs).

Q: Well, yes. And I can imagine that people called you at 5:30 or 6 just when he came home. (she laughs)

SWITZER: Yes, often he came late. FBS feel they can call all the time. But on the weekends, that bothered him because he wants a little peace on the weekend. I must admit I loved doing the job, but it was taxing on me and my family.

Q: It was infringing on your...

SWITZER: ...family needs? Yes. Also, the thing is, I was doing the job of four other members except for the person doing the publicity. She was my right hand -- without her help, I couldn't put together the newsletter. She was the one to check my accuracy and edit my work because my English is not yet at native level, of course.

Q: I'll tell you right now, you're much too modest about your English, it's excellent. And if you have an accent, you have a charming accent, I love it. (both laugh)

SWITZER: That's one of my goals right now. I want to sit down this coming year and start working on my pronunciation, because I really want to be completely fluent and have correct pronunciation in English. Hopefully I will do it because my gosh, how is it possible that I can speak another language without an accent, and in English I have it? (laughing)

Q: Don't work too hard because it's lovely as it is. I really appreciate everything that you have told me. I, of course, did this tape for the Overseas Briefing Center, for Lee Lacey, because she was interested in the foreign-born spouse aspect of her "Human Side of Crisis Management." I'm not at all familiar with that, I would like to find out more about her program. I would like to give a copy of this tape to the FLO office too. May I? You've been very laudatory and you have mentioned all of the help and all the support that you have gotten from them. And I think somebody should know all that you have put in this, because although throughout the past year I'm sure you've spoken to people at one time or another about your program, you've sort of capsulized it for us here, to show exactly how much time, how much effort, how much funding you personally have put into this.

And it should be carried on, don't you agree?

SWITZER: I really agree with that. This group is very important because I think that one third of the Foreign Service wives, are foreign-born and I think we have to have more information about this group. Because as you know all human relations are very fragile. That's why it's very important to have a friendly relationship among us foreign-born spouses. In fact, all we Foreign Service wives are in the same boat. We should take care of one another and let each other know that we are not alone and that we can help.

Q: I think I would like to give a copy of the tape to Nancy Asencio, too. May I?

SWITZER: Sure.

Q: I believe the spouses from Brazil get together every month and I've been unable to go to the lunches and she does attend those. If she's at the next one, I will talk to her about it, if she's not at the next one I'll just drop by. I know she lives not far here, and will talk to her about it and give her your tape. Because I really feel that you would feel better if you thought something were being done to really continue the work that you have started, wouldn't you?

SWITZER: I will be so proud, really, if somebody can keep going with the group, because it really is very important. And I have been so concerned that despite all our effort it might collapse. It took me too much effort to bring this group up. I mentioned to you that Nancy Asencio was one of the spouses who helped initiate this group, and I know how much interest she can bring to it. Also, without the help of the FLO office we couldn't have had this many people coming to our group -- our support FLO officer is Phyllis Habib -- she really is very essential for our group. The Foreign Service Institute is also important as it is our main point of information.

Q: Because they channel the people to you. And you have to have those two organizations to channel, because as you said the privacy of Freedom of Information, or whatever, there isn't any way otherwise that you can target these women?

SWITZER: No, we cannot do it. During the years one of the most rewarding aspects of this work were the many letters from foreign-born spouses from overseas, including some of the ambassadors' wives overseas who told me how pleased they were of the job that we were doing in the Foreign-Born Spouse group. And it was so priceless for me to know that our work was appreciated. Even a foreign-born male spouse living in Italy wrote me a letter and I met him last May. He came to see me because his wife was having health problems and she came to have therapy in Washington.

Q: He was Italian?

SWITZER: No, he is Indian but they came from Italy because they were stationed there.

Q: So, he is an East Indian male dependent foreign-born spouse. Wow! (laughing)

SWITZER: And he wrote me one of the most touching letters. I even got a call from him saying he was in the States. He asked to meet me and I agreed. I had a wonderful time talking to him because he talked from the point of view of male dependents which was really interesting. I even asked him if he would be willing to write for our group which needed to know that they are not all alone as male dependents. His name is Toras Modee, and he is a nice person. He's in Washington. I don't know if they already went to Italy this month -- they were planning to go back since she recuperated from her illness.

Everybody comes and tells me about their family histories and all the things they have achieved overseas. This is beautiful, because I believe that we foreign-born spouses are true partners with our spouses. We are not merely dependents. We share 50% of our husbands' work overseas. That's why I wish for some kind of compensation and recognition for all the work that we do (she laughs) overseas.

Q: That's a whole other story, isn't it. (both laugh) Oh, I really appreciate you.

SWITZER: Thank you so much. And I apologize for my terrible English! I thought twice when you asked me about the interview because I said "my goodness, who's going to understand me!"

BIOGRAPHIC DATA

Spouse: Thomas W. Switzer

Spouse Entered Service: 2/29/69

You entered Service: 12/21/74

Your status: Spouse of FSO (USIA)

Spouse's position: FSO-1, USIA, Chief of Books/Publication, Latin America, Spain, Portugal

Posts:

| | |
|-----------|----------------------------------|
| 1974 | Mexico City, Federal District |
| 1974-75 | Caracas and Maracaibo, Venezuela |
| 1975-78 | Washington, DC |
| 1979-82 | Skopje, Yugoslavia |
| 1982-1989 | Washington, DC |
| 1989-1993 | Madrid, Spain |
| 1993- | Washington, DC |

Place/date of birth: Uruapan, Michocan Mexico

Maiden name: Sheila Maria Rodriguez

Parents:

Miguel Rodriguez Ortiz, Lawyer
Esther Soils Galan, Housewife

Education: University of San Nicolas de Hidalgo Morelia, Michocan Mexico

Profession: Journalist

Date/place of marriage: Mexico City 12/21/74

Children:

Christine, 18
Jacqueline, 11

Volunteer and paid positions held:

A. At Post - President and coordinator of the Association of Volunteer Women of the International Community of Madrid; 1st vice president of the Association of Diplomatic Women; vice-president of the Mission Club; board member of the Chapter 100 Club; Instructor of protocol, "A Touch of Class;" head room mother at the American School.

B. In Washington, DC - Chairman, Foreign Born Spouse Network (AAFSW); Girl Scout leader; model and promotional assistant for Chanel and Guerlain; coordinator and organizer of the cultural and social activities at Winter Forest neighborhood; instructor of "A Touch of Class" for children.

Honors:

1991 AAFSW/Secretary of State pin
1992 Special Recognition, Association of the Diplomatic World, Madrid, Spain
1993 Avis Bohlen Award (\$2,500)

End of interview