

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

AMBASSADOR HARRIET L. ELAM-THOMAS

Interviewed by: James T.L. Dandridge, II

Initial interview date: June 2, 2006

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Birthplace: Boston, Massachusetts

College Preparation: Interviews

Simmons College & Boston University

Experiment in International Living: Study Abroad – Lyon, France - Summer 1962

Paris, France

1965-1968

Secretary at the American Embassy

Civil Rights Movement in America

Assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

Activism in United States and Left Bank, France

Washington, DC

1968-1971

Sen. Edward Brooke and White House Assignment Opportunity

West Wing White House Position

Work with President Richard Nixon's Special Assistant for Appointments

White House Departure - February 1971

U.S. Department of State

Foreign Service Reserve Appointment

Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs

Program Officer in the Office of Youth, Students and Special Programs

Responsible for High School Exchange Programs and Young Leaders Exchanges

Member of the U.S. delegation to the 25th United Nations General Assembly
(UNGA)

American Council of Young Political Leaders

U.S. Youth Council

Foreign Service Oral Exam to become career FSO

U.S. Department of State

1971-1974

Assisted return U.S. Exchange students during Turkish invasion of Cyprus

Commissioned as Foreign Service Officer

Career FSO Overseas Assignments:

Assistant Cultural Affairs officer in Dakar, Senegal	
Mali	1976
Temporary Duty Assignment (TDY) - Acting Public Affairs Officer	
Abidjan, Ivory Coast (Now Cote d'Ivoire)	1977-1979
Cultural Affairs Officer	
United States Information Agency (USIA)	1979-1980
Received the Jefferson Fellowship Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy at Tufts University Master's Degree in Public Diplomacy	
USIA Personnel	1980-1982
Career Counselor Greek Language Training	
Athens, Greece	1983-1987
Cultural Affairs Officer at the American Embassy	
USIA Washington, DC, Assignment	1989-1990
Desk Officer for Greece, Turkey & Cyprus Nelson Mandela speech at joint session in Congress Turkish Language Training	
Istanbul, Turkey	1990-1994
Director of the American Press and Cultural Center Countered Allegation of USG re PKK Terrorists	
USIA	1994
Member of the 37 th Senior Seminar	
Brussels, Belgium	1995-1997
Public Affairs Counselor – U.S. Embassy	
USIA	1997-1999
Counselor of the USIA Acting Deputy Director	
Orlando, Florida	2003-Present
Diplomat in Residence at the University of Central Florida Course on Diplomacy – UCF Burnett Honors College Director of the UCF's Diplomacy Program	

INTERVIEW

Q: Today is June 2, 2006. This is an interview with Ambassador Harriet Elam Thomas and I am Jim Dandridge. Ambassador Thomas, thank you very much for coming in for the interview today. What I would like to do is to start with something on a brief background on your parents. Can you tell me a little bit about where your parents were born and a little bit about their background?

ELAM-THOMAS: It will be a pleasure. My parents were from the South. My father was born in Chase City, Virginia; my mother was from Aiken, South Carolina. When they passed away in 1974, they had been married for 54 years. They migrated north shortly after their marriage.

An automobile mechanic, my father worked on large transport military vehicles at The Boston Army Base. Prior to that, he had opened an automobile repair shop in Cambridge, Massachusetts. It must have been significant for an African American man in those days to have his own automobile repair shop. I was told the business did not survive due to The Depression.

My mother was a domestic; cleaned homes of doctors and other professionals in the Boston suburbs. On several occasions, I went to work with her using the well-known Boston MTA. I enjoyed the bus and trolley ride as I viewed the elegant homes along the way. I remember reminding my mother: "Mama, you didn't do that corner." She would say, "I have four houses to do today; I didn't ask you to be my inspector. Just do what I asked that you do." One of the ladies would leave tea, crumpets and/or scones for us. I looked forward to going to that residence because this was one of the few ladies who demonstrated some humanity towards us.

When I reflect on that experience, I am amazed that my parents raised five children who made them proud. With my Dad's annual salary never more than 3,500, he was adamantly against welfare. It didn't matter what he did but he was going to make an honest living and that commitment is evident in all of his children.

Q: Do you know how your parents met?

ELAM-THOMAS: No, I do not. However, the connection must have been very strong for mother did not wait for her only sister to finish teaching at a school in North Carolina, The Palmer Memorial Institute, in North Carolina. June was just too long to wait so they married on March 10, 1920.

Q: Well. And how many siblings are there, how many children did they have?

ELAM-THOMAS: There were five of us. I was referred to "the surprise," since I arrived almost 17 years after my sister. She was the youngest and she was the only girl. My brothers are 18, 19 and 20 years older. My sister who has had Alzheimer's disease for 28 years is my only remaining sibling. My parents passed away when I was 33. Until August

16, 2012, I was blessed to have an incredible surrogate father in my brother, Judge Harry Justin Elam. While he had five children of his own, my brother was the father figure in my life. He offered wise counsel throughout my career, gave me away when I married and swore me in when I became an Ambassador in the elegant Benjamin Franklin Room at the State Department.

Q: Now were you all born- Where were you born?

ELAM-THOMAS: I was born in Boston, but all of my siblings were born in Cambridge, Massachusetts.

Q: And as far- You mentioned that your older brother is a Superior Court judge; tell me a little bit about the rest of your siblings and their professional lives.

ELAM-THOMAS: My sister, Annetta Elam Capdeville, still considered the “soul” of the Elam family was a poet and a writer. Before the early onset of Alzheimer’s disease at 65, she was writing the history of our family. Sadly, we have been unable to locate the original draft.

Now to my brothers: Despite the availability of the GI Bill, my oldest brother, Charles, did not want to go to college. Charles was, however, the one person we could rely upon in terms of keeping our homes well repaired, painted and spotless. He worked for the Boston Transport Authority and was also a building superintendent who, like our Dad, took pride in his work.

The baby brother, Clarence, who died in 1985 while I was Cultural Affairs Officer in Athens Greece, attended Boston University under the GI Bill. With an undergraduate degree in Business Administration and much later a Law Degree from Suffolk University, Clarence was the Executive Secretary of the Governors’ Council during Governor Christian Herter’s term. Later in his career, he was named Chairman of the Boston Licensing Commission. The middle brother, Harry, was the first African American judge on the Boston Municipal Court, the oldest trial court in the country. Harry became Chief Justice of that court and later was appointed Associate Justice to the Massachusetts Superior Court. He practiced law with Senator Edward Brooke in Boston more than 60 years ago. My husband and I were delighted to accompany my brother to the U.S. Capitol October 28, 2010 when Senator Brooke received the Congressional Gold Medal two days after the Senator’s 90th birthday. At the time of this edit, I am honored to note I was asked to do a reading at Senator Brooke’s funeral on March 10, 2015 at the National Cathedral. No doubt that request was because of the close relationship the Senator had with my two brothers for more than half a century. Throughout my career, the Senator was also a surrogate big brother to me.

Q: That must have been an interesting experience because of the popularity of Senator Brooke, not only because of the fact that he was an African American but his constituency held him in high regard.

ELAM-THOMAS: The Massachusetts voters certainly did. At that time African, Americans and other minorities comprised approximately 2% of the Massachusetts population. That's all! In short, Senator Brooke was not elected by the so-called "Black vote." Brooke was the trailblazer for the current occupant of the White House, President Obama. I found it extremely uplifting to see that there are maintain very close relationships with The Senator who turned 94 in October 2013. The Senator, as my brothers, helped chart my career path - - More on that later.

Clarence, Harry and Charles, were very close because they were a year apart. My sister is two years younger. She said my mother asked her to take the blame for my brother's pranks because my father was such a harsh disciplinarian yet he would not be harsh with Annetta. She bristled at my mother's request but had little recourse. My mother said she could not bear to have those three young boys in the house for discipline for a full week. The three brothers loved their little sister Annetta, no doubt in part because she kept them from harsh punishment. Lo and behold, I arrive nearly 17 years later and my sister had to share the limelight with a new baby sister. It had to be very difficult.

Q: Now obviously this experience, even though you were probably quite young at the time, did have some impact on your outlook as far as your future professional options are concerned. As a key advisor to Senator Brooke's campaign, what transpired for your brother to be in that position politically?

ELAM-THOMAS: During WWII, Clarence served in Italy with the 366th Infantry Unit with Senator Brooke. He loved Italian opera and I very reluctantly attended classical music concerts and operas with him. I had no idea that someday I would become a Cultural Attaché and host some of American top performing artists of all musical genres during the early portion of my diplomatic career. Through Clarence's WWII friendship with Ed Brooke and Harry's law practice with Ed Brooke, my brothers were a longtime member of The Senator's inner circle In the mid-1950's, Harry shared Senator Brooke's law offices in Roxbury, Massachusetts. The "Berry," as it was known then, was the black section of Boston and home to Malcolm X. The Law Offices of Brooke and Elam served as the community's resource for all things legal. The two of them did so much pro bono work that they garnered unconditional support on both of their political ventures. In fact, my brother Harry often said he became a judge because several leaders met with Governor Francis Sargent and said, "You need to make Harry Elam a judge." Governor Sargent took their advice.

As chairman of the Boston Licensing Board for restaurants, hotels/inns, lodging establishments and alcohol, I am certain my brother was the recipient of "special" treatment at these dining places. With the wisdom of age on my side, I now understand that "special treatment could include a case of wine or spirits from these restaurant owners which contributed to Clarence's dependency on alcohol. He also smoked heavily and died of throat cancer.

Q: Well obviously these experiences, the professional experiences, did have a positive impact on the overall family and more specifically particularly on you. Can you talk a little bit about how you felt?

ELAM-THOMAS: I was a very shy adolescent and teenager. For years I was the little Elam girl in Boston. No one seemed to know my first name. My sister and brothers were known quantities, but I was the afterthought. One church member always called me the “little Elam girl” and I could not stand that. One day I mustered enough nerve to tell her, “My name is Harriet. I have a first name.”

Because they were so much older, my brothers were very much like parents. A few weeks before I was scheduled to enter The Lewis Junior High in a very rough neighborhood, Harry and Clarence went to Boston City Hall. They informed the responsible persons that their little sister should attend the more reputable The Patrick T. Campbell Junior High. I do not know what they did, but they succeeded and I was transferred to The Campbell School. Since it was a greater distance from my home, I walked approximately 5 miles round trip each day which contributed to my weight loss.

After junior high my parents then enrolled me in Boston’s classical high school for girls, Girls Latin School. I thought that was a fate worse than death. After a few months struggling to learn Latin, I pleaded with my parents to take me out of that school. I reminded them, “I am not my brothers and I cannot learn Latin so please take me out.” They did and I entered Roxbury Memorial High Schools for Girls (RMHS). Once again, I had another subtle encounter with discrimination.

When my brothers learned that the high school guidance counselor had assigned me to the commercial course, my brothers went to her and insisted that based on my grades I merited assignment to the academic track. We all suspected that the moment the counselor saw this young “colored” woman she automatically assumed that I should enter the commercial course. If it were not for my brothers assertions, I may not have entered college.

My brothers were extremely important influencers in so many aspects of my life. I worked on political campaigns and in their law offices or at City Hall. Early on, I thought that I would be a legal secretary. I had no idea that I would enter a career which would take me almost around the world.

Q: This is a great revelation here, the impact-of your frustration with Latin language and your learning two hard languages subsequently!

ELAM-THOMAS: Of course when you met me at USIA, you had no idea about my challenges with Latin.

Q: No, I didn't know any of that.

Q. Since you mentioned that your brother insisted that you follow an academic track in your early education, let's talk a little bit about your early education.

ELAM-THOMAS: I went to the Boston public schools which were, at that time, among the best in the nation. My parents thought that I should follow my brother Harry and go to Girl's Latin School, the classical high school in Boston; Harry attended to Boston Latin, the boys' classical school. After four months in that school, I asked my parents to take me out of that school. I was struggling with Latin and reminded them I was not like my brothers and did not like being compared to them. Convinced I was not able to learn that difficult language, they relented. I had no idea that years later I would learn Greek and Turkish. I was then enrolled in the Patrick T. Campbell Junior High and later I attended Roxbury Memorial High School for Girls (RMHS)

Overweight and very shy, my refuge from society was my homework. Totally inept in social settings, I dared not speak to anyone I did not know. Children were to be seen and not heard. Given the fact that my parents were the ages of my peers' grandparents, my actions were not unusual. I arrived almost 17 years after my closest sibling and I kept my parents young. They passed away when I was 33. While most of my friends' parents were divorced or separated, I grew up in a very stable environment.

At age 16, I worked in a drug store where I hand packed ice cream and made root beer floats and banana splits. All of a sudden I had to speak with total strangers. Being a "soda clerk" was service oriented so I learned to respond to customers politely. That brought me out of my shell. Heaven only knows what might have happened if I did not have that initial exposure to the general public.

Q: And how about your social interaction with your peers in school?

ELAM-THOMAS: High school or college?

Q: High school.

ELAM-THOMAS: It wasn't very great. One, I was indeed "chubby" as we were called back then. I did not play sports. I wore size 18 gym bloomers. Trust me, they were really big and I struggled doing many of the exercises back then. Eventually, I began losing weight during adolescence. In the interim, however, I withdrew from most social interactions and just studied. The only time I really felt good about myself was at my high school graduation when I walked across the stage with two of the three major scholarships awarded during that ceremony. At age 17, I realized that maybe I had done something right. I was going to college when a lot of my classmates were not. I had increased confidence and by the time I entered college, I had lost significant weight. New challenges appeared. I entered Simmons College – one of the few remaining all female colleges in the U.S. The majority of my classmates were wealthy girls had gone to independent schools and they often wore black and navy blue cashmere sweaters and black watch plaid skirts and expensive loafers. As much as I wanted, I knew I could not have cashmere twin sweater sets. My mother marched me down to the famous Filene's

Basement. As I said earlier, I shopped there until its 2011 closing. My mother sent me clothing from there during my three years in Paris.

Q: What percentage of this all girls' high school was black?

ELAM-THOMAS: Probably two or three percent. Even though Roxbury Memorial High School was located in the predominantly black community at that time, it was considered one of the more competitive high schools and there were very few students of color.

Q: Were there any unique experiences that you had during this- Because this is a post socialization period that you're in now.

ELAM-THOMAS: My high school classmates and friends were of all races: Italian, Polish, Jewish, black. There were fewer Hispanics in Boston in the mid -1950's. Long after our graduation whenever we attended class reunions, we wished that the Boston Globe Newspaper covered our event. We reflected on the benefits of the multi-racial, multi-cultural friendships we experienced in the late 1950's. Many of us remain close to this day. While we were aware of unpleasant events in the southern part of the U.S., our main focus was to get an education.

Some of my high school classmates of West and East European descent were embarrassed when their parents spoke their native tongue in public or even at home. My Irish classmates had other challenges in Boston. It was not a pleasant time for any so-called minority. In essence, my high school experience was most positive. One African American classmate became a State Senator; another Jewish friend owned one of the top catering businesses in Boston; another African American classmate recently deceased (1/5/2014) held a major position in the Catholic social services in Boston. Of course from time to time some were called to the principal's office, but the mutual support network was strong.

Q: Well obviously, although you were living in a mixed environment but obviously having this experience, this interaction with many ethnic backgrounds had an impact on your communication- your successful communication processes, regardless of the individual later on, which we 'II get to.

ELAM-THOMAS: It certainly did!

Q: Did you find yourself looking at people through a different prism than you probably would have looked at them if you had been in a different ethnic mix, predominantly one or the-other?

ELAM-THOMAS: I always enjoyed meeting the immigrant parents of my friends. I was fascinated to hear foreign accents. That curiosity may have been the first sign of my later interest in international affairs. Perhaps that initial exposure sparked my desire to communicate more effectively across cultures.

Two of my elder brothers were community activists and involved in Boston politics. As a result of their high profile in Roxbury, we came to know many people. My summer jobs at municipal pools or at Boston City Hall allowed me to feel comfortable being the only person who looked like me in work settings. I was always intrigued by the respect which my brother Clarence engendered when he was The Chairman of the Boston Licensing Board. Now I that I fully understand one of the key responsibilities of that job (to approve the liquor licenses for hotels, restaurants and bars) I know why these individuals at least implied they truly respected my brother. Having lived a bit longer, I can now read between the lines that this “respect” was a mixed blessing. I honestly believe that the employees he supervised genuinely respected Clarence. He made little old ladies feel as if they were queens for a day. As I observed Clarence’s approach to his staffers, I learned the value of treating your employees with respect.

Q: Well I'm hearing several things here that parallel an advanced development in communications, the soda jerk, meeting strange people, the high esteem in which your siblings, your brothers in particular, enjoyed in the community; they were received in a very different- and all of this had an impact on you, obviously.

ELAM-THOMAS: It certainly did have a significant impact on me.

Q: This would be a good transition for us to turn the tape over. Hold your point. This is tape one, side two, interview June 2 with Ambassador Harriet Elam-Thomas.

Ambassador Elam-Thomas, what I'd like to do is just pick up where we took the break. We were discussing the kinds of things that had an impact on your early development of your extensive communication abilities:

- Your family enjoyed a favored position the community seemed to accept them in an apparently unbiased political and social atmosphere*
- You secondary school and early employment placed in you in diverse settings*
- Your first job that you had when you were 16 years old as a soda jerk.*
- Did any of this lead to your thinking about the type of higher education you would pursue, the type of university, the courses that you would take?*
- Were you thinking at this period of your life about what did you want to do when you grew up?*

ELAM-THOMAS: A bit later in my youth I worked in my brother's law offices and I became fascinated with the law. I enjoyed reading cases and felt empowered each time I typed a summons. For some reason, I was impressed with the blue covers on each summons. That cover immediately indicated the enclosed was a serious document and action must be taken. I was even more intrigued when I typed Last Wills and Testaments. At that time, I recognized the importance of written and oral communication. And speaking of communication let me tell you a bit about my sister, Annetta Elam Capdeville. You have learned plenty about my brothers and now to introduce you to “the soul” of the Elam Family.

My sister was a poet and had a mellifluous voice. While I cannot sing, I memorized Biblical passages and recited Bible stories at church teas. No doubt I was searching for my parents' acceptance and, since I could not sing, I read and I recited in public. My sister Annetta drafted the history of our family. Unfortunately, we are unable to locate that draft and perhaps it was meant to be. She has suffered with Alzheimer's disease for the past 23 years. Currently at a Nursing Home in Yelm, WA, the essence of her being is still evident despite being unable to speak for the past 8-10 years. Her caregivers seem to surround her with their love and her oldest daughter lives in the assisted living facility right next to the Alzheimer's Unit. Annetta's second husband Andrew Capdeville was legally blind. She was his note taker as he pursued his Master's Degree in Social Work from Boston University. Never once did she consider the care of Andrew a burden and since I am the only remaining member of the initial five children who can speak or write, I shall do my best to carry out the Elam Family History through my memoir. My brother Harry completed most of his memoir prior to his death at 90 in August 2012.

Back to my brothers –

When Harry dated Barbara Clark from Simmons College, I fell in love with her almost as much as he did. She became my second sister for she was totally committed to my development. A Children's Librarian who directed the Boston Public Schools Library Program, Barbara introduced me to the joy of reading at a very early age.

When I received the college scholarships, one major one came from Simmons College. I was thrilled and decided to attend Simmons rather than Boston University. I wanted so much to be like her. She had major influence on my life.

My other brothers were married to incredible women as well, but I must admit, I felt closest to Barbara. She took me to museums, libraries and children's concerts. I was not always enthused about going, but once we arrived I was happy. My mother had instructed Barbara to be the sponsor of a teenage club for my young female friends. That interaction solidified my relationship with Barbara. My mother wanted me to learn proper etiquette, comportment, appropriate attire and to be comfortable in social settings. The club, "The Teenettes," coordinated a speaker's series, teas and fashion shows. We hosted Gloria Lockerman, the young African American student (then Negro) who won the predecessor to Jeopardy, The \$64,000 Question. I could not believe this celebrity actually came to our home. We also hosted Tom Mboya; a Kenyan politician during Jomo Kenyatta's government, was also a guest in our home. My brother Clarence met Mboya during the 1968 visit to Africa with Senator Edward Brooke. Upon reflection, thanks to this exposure to national and international figures, we broadened our horizons and career options.

Q: Well here we have a couple of other influences. You talked earlier about your brother and going to the opera; now you're talking about going to the museums, etc. So we are talking about expanding your horizons again at a very early stage in your life.

ELAM-THOMAS: I was not thrilled at that time. At age 15 and 16, knowledge of classical music and opera was not my first priority. However, I became more appreciative of all art forms as I became older and wiser.

Q: But you were obviously influenced.

ELAM-THOMAS: Certainly. I had no idea I would be a cultural attaché 20 years after I was a reluctant concert goer. I had no idea I would coordinate programs for many U.S. artists at foreign museums, theatrical venues and concert halls. When I watch the Annual Kennedy Center Awards, I am thrilled to think I interacted with many of these revered artists of every genre during my time as a cultural attaché.

Q: Tell me a little bit about Simmons.

ELAM-THOMAS: Simmons undergraduate school is, as I indicated, one of the few remaining all female undergraduate colleges. From 1959-1963, there were four black students in my class. There were two in the class before and one in the senior class. The Simmons educational experience changed my life. Two teachers: Dr. L'Homme and Dr. Neuman took me under their wings. Also, Mr. Woodrow Baldwin, Dean of the School of Business played a critical role in my international exposure. I no longer had to compete with my brothers. While I was accepted at Boston University, the interview process was intimidating. There were 50 people awaiting their turn for interviews. At Simmons, there were only two. The then Dean of Admissions, Jane Curtin, took her time in posing questions. Still shy, I doubted I would be able to raise my hand in a class of 80-100 students. At Simmons the classes the maximum class size was 18-20 students. That was much closer to my comfort zone.

I thought my French Professor, Dr. Neuman, was uniquely gifted. His French was fluent and he had a cosmopolitan air. Ironically, my other favorite teacher was my English professor who just happened to have a French name. Mr. L'Homme. His analysis of George Orwell's work in "Homage to Catalonia" captured my attention at the beginning of the semester and I looked forward to attending his class. These two professors opened my eyes to a different world through our readings and through the manner in which they presented the material.

In 1962, Mr. Baldwin called to see if I had been accepted by the Experiment in International Living for a summer abroad program. I informed him I was accepted, but I did not qualify for scholarship assistance. My family did not have the \$1100 for me to take part and I had to decline. I was amazed to learn that Mr. Baldwin had convinced a group of businessmen in Boston to provide \$900 towards the total cost. When Mr. Baldwin called to say, "Miss Elam, you are going to France," I was flabbergasted. I can remember being stunned as I held the phone in our foyer. It was one of those old fashioned black telephone and the receiver weighed close to three pounds. Somehow my siblings raised the remaining \$200 and I was able to go. Let me assure you, \$200 in 1962 was the equivalent of \$2,000 today. It was a significant amount of money. If I thought

other things changed my life, it was that summer in Lyon, France that really gave me a world view.

A French family in France saw my picture and welcomed me into their home. They didn't care what color I was and for 51 years we have stayed in touch. I spent my birthday in mid-September 2013 in Paris with my French sister, Dr. Paule Sassard-Serusclat. We visited the French Senate. They accepted me far more graciously than many of my hometown of Boston. I thank my siblings and Simmons College for having given me that opportunity.

I did not realize how significant the summer of 1962 was until I reflect on it now. Until then, I had been trying to prove myself, that I was academically equal to all of my white classmates. I was doing what my parents wanted me to do. In France I did not have to prove anything. This family welcomed another human being in their midst unconditionally. That experience really sparked my desire to live and work abroad. I slept in the room where my French mother taught the cello. I shared the space with a baby grand piano and other musical instruments. They took me to classical music concerts and to historic sites in the area. I shall never forget hearing Debussy's "La Mer" performed by a full orchestra for the very first time.

There were 10 American students and, of course, I was the only minority in the group. How many other 18 year olds could spend Bastille Day watching fireworks at Fourvieres in Lyon, France? We rode bicycles; we camped out; went to museums and explored a country I never thought I would see. The best thing that happened one day was when someone said, "La Noire, comme elle est belle." (The Black girl, how pretty she is!) Well nobody had said I was beautiful before in my whole life. I thought, this was someone happened to pass me on the street who made such an observation. Now I know what I look like, but just hearing that phrase lifted my soul.

When I returned to Simmons I got all As in French and a B plus in English. My parents were perplexed and asked, "How could you get a B plus in English and As in French?" I said I love my French teacher and my time in France this summer helped me excel in the written and spoken word. Of course I had to hunker down and improve the English grade the next semester.

While posted to Istanbul, Turkey, I hosted my French mother and sister in Istanbul. My French sister had visited me in Boston just before I graduated from Simmons. They stayed with me for a week. I took them to concerts and in my capacity as the public affairs officer at the consulate in Turkey I was able to say a very special "Merci beaucoup" for what they had done for me 36 years earlier.

Q: It must have been also a positively moving experience for them.

ELAM-THOMAS: Yes. And then I went to see them again when I was in Brussels and she died a several years ago. Mme. Sassard passed away in her late 80's. She was more patient in perfecting my French than my French sister. Living with them, I was then

convinced I could be far more effective in changing the perceptions of America and how minorities were viewed in America if I worked abroad. In fact, I was away from the U.S. during the height of the Civil Rights Movement working at the Embassy in Paris from 1965-1968.

In many ways, I miss not having been in the States to take part in the demonstrations which have allowed me and so many others to hold positions that may not have been possible.

Q: And maybe you weren't. Maybe this was your contribution to Civil Rights...

ELAM-THOMAS: I remember reading about my brother Judge Harry Elam, in Time magazine. He rode through the city of Boston with the Mayor at that time to calm the community after the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King on April 4, 1968.

Q: Side two, June 2nd, 2006, oral history interview with Ambassador Harriet Elam-Thomas. Ambassador Elam-Thomas, we were talking briefly about the experiences that you were having during the civil rights reactions to the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King, the involvement of your brother with the mayor of Boston on quelling some of the disquiet leading up to the possible- to possible violent disturbances and your own position at the time with your experiences of having been an exchange student and a decision that you were making, probably subliminally, to project American culture and society and more specifically the positive image of the American Negro and his and her potential. Do you feel now looking back that those were elements of contributions that you were making parallel to the civil rights movement?

ELAM-THOMAS: Looking back I would say yes because again I spoke French fluently and I spoke French better than many of my white colleagues at the embassy. While in Paris, these other young women stayed very close to me mainly because of my language skill. I also met many French people who were just curious to talk to me about what life was like in the U.S. for people of color. I believe I helped change some of the misperceptions which the French had seen on television. They were particularly curious about my family background. Whenever I described the humble beginnings of my parents and the accomplishments of my siblings, they were clearly impressed. I was not bragging, I was stating facts and these young French men and women learned that the stereotypical images they had seen in print and electronic media in 1968 were not the norm. Thus began my journey to bridge cultural divides.

ELAM-THOMAS: I went to the Boston public schools which were, at that time, among the best in the nation. Overweight and very shy, my refuge from society was my homework. Totally inept in social settings, I dared not speak to anyone I did not know. I followed the rule in those days that children were to be seen and not heard. My parents were strict disciplinarians and they were the ages of my peers' grandparents. I arrived almost 17 years after my closest sibling and I kept my parents young. They passed away when I was 33. While most of my friends' parents were divorced or separated, I grew up in a very stable environment.

Q: And how about your social interaction with your peers in school?

ELAM-THOMAS: High school or college?

High school.

Q: Well obviously although you were living in a mixed environment but obviously having this experience, this interaction with many ethnic backgrounds had an impact on your communication- your successful communication processes, regardless of the individual later on, which we'll get to.

ELAM-THOMAS: You're right.

Q: Did you find yourself looking at people through a different prism than you probably would have looked at them if you had been in a different ethnic mix, predominantly one or the-

ELAM-THOMAS: In thinking about that you're absolutely right. I liked meeting the parents. I got a big kick out of Irish accents and Italian- the woman who wouldn't want her mother to speak Italian and didn't want her mother to come pick her up at school; I said Theresa, why don't you let your mommy come? No, I don't want her to come to school. I guess I was curious. I didn't know what it was going to develop into at a later date. I was just plain curious and I liked them as people and that's all. Children have to be taught to hate and I didn't know any difference and they didn't know any difference. We were just curious about one another. So come to think of it, that probably had something to do with my ability to communicate across cultures later in life because I had that- there was the North End where all of the Italians lived in Boston; South Boston which I didn't go to for a long time, which was all Irish; Mattapan, which was predominantly Jewish. But again, with brothers in politics you got to know everybody and I got summer jobs where, again, I was the only person that looked like me but it didn't make any difference. I was always fascinated when I watched my brother Clarence during his tenure at the Boston Licensing Board. These women, mainly Irish and Italian loved my brother because he treated them as if they were critical to the office's operation. Judging by their reactions, I assume other bosses seldom gave them such respect. I liked the fact that my brother received this kind of admiration from everybody. I learned that more from him than any training I received in management from the Foreign Service Institute.

Q: Well I'm hearing several things here that parallel an advanced development in communications, the soda jerk, meeting strange people, the high esteem in which your siblings, your brothers in particular, enjoyed in the community; they were received in a very different- and all of this had an impact on you, obviously.

ELAM-THOMAS: It must have. I didn't think about it.

My sister had been the poet and she sang beautifully and I couldn't sing but somehow I could talk all right, I could- I felt I could and in Sunday School you'd have to memorize passages and tell little stories, Bible stories, and you had to do that at teas at your church, and I got a kick out of doing that because I knew I couldn't sing but I couldn't be like my sister, but again you're vying for your parents' attention in some way, shape or form when you have four other siblings. And that's perhaps natural, natural in the sense that if I had been an only child I might never have done that. So I can tell you that it wasn't until my brothers began dating and Harry began dating a woman who went to Simmons College. I love this woman to this day. She cared deeply about me. A children's librarian, she introduced me to books. She was my motivation to gain a college education.

And so when I got the scholarships, one major one came from Simmons College, and I was thrilled to go there because I loved Barbara so much that I wanted to be like her. So I can tell you that her influence on my life was significant because she had a knowledge about creative things because of her writing. My other brothers were married to different kinds of women but somehow she would take me to museums, kicking and screaming, and to libraries but also my mother had asked her to be the sponsor, the chaperone of a teenage club so then I really became close to her because we were members of this club because my mother felt young ladies needed to know more about how to dress, how to comport themselves in public and to learn how to be polite, some of the "finer things in life." My dear, my mother didn't give my sister-in-law a chance to say no; she said you will be the chaperone for this teenage club called the Teenettes. So we had teas, we had fashion shows, we had speakers come. I'll never forget the young woman who won the \$64,000 question, Gloria Lockerman, came to my house. I'd forgotten about that. Now, this is when television was black and white and any significant person- Tom Boyer came to my house because of my brother's involvement and the teenagers in this club got to meet people like that who were significant activists in communities in the United States and I- obviously from Africa. I didn't even think of that.

Q: Well here we have a couple of other influences. You talked earlier about your brother and going to the opera; now you're talking about going to the museums, etc. So we're talking about expanding your horizons again at a very early stage in your life.

ELAM-THOMAS: I wasn't thrilled at that time.

Q: But you were obviously influenced.

ELAM-THOMAS: I guess so, never knowing I'd be a cultural attaché 20 years later, taking other people to museums, bringing performing artists, knowing more of our art than I would have ever imagined. Yes, that was fascinating now that I reflect on it.

Q: Tell me a little bit about Simmons.

ELAM-THOMAS: Simmons undergraduate school is an all-girls college and when I was there we had a total of four black students in the entire school, in my class rather. There were two in the class before and one in the senior class. This is 1959 through 1963. I can

say to you that the experience at Simmons changed my life. One, there were teachers, two teachers, Mr. L'Homme and Mr. Newland who took me under their wing and Mr. Baldwin. I had a chance to find myself without competing with my brothers. I had been accepted at Boston University as well but it was a huge institution and when I went for interviews there were 50 people sitting outside the door for the final interview where at Simmons there were only two of us and they took time and I thought a classroom with 80 people, I'll never be able to raise my hand to ask a question. At Simmons the classes were 15 or 20 students in each class.

One of my favorite professors, Mr. James Newman, was my French professor. I just thought he was wonderful because his French was fluent; he had an air- a cosmopolitan air about him. Mr. Charles L'Homme. Interestingly enough, while his name is French, he was my English teacher. He made George Orwell's work in "Homage to Catalonia" come alive. He reminded me of the Dartmouth professor featured on 60 minutes years ago who taught classical Greek and Latin. The students loved him for he enacted portions of plays which kept the students engaged. Many of my friends attended universities where professors lectured because class size prohibited interactions. These two professors opened my eyes to a fascinating world by the way they presented the material. I was hooked on reading yet again.

I thank Simmons, Mr. Baldwin and my dear brothers as noted earlier for having given me the opportunity to spend a summer in France. The French citizens I encountered in Bron and Lyon, France accepted me unconditionally. That was the spark that led me to consider living and working abroad. This family (Madame Sassard and her daughter Paule Sassard) took me to classical music concerts, exposed me to important historical sites in the region and literally broadened my horizons. I shall never forget hearing my very first full symphony orchestra performing Debussy's "La Mer" at the Bastille de Fourviere.

There were 10 American college students in my group. I was the only African American person in our group. I felt uniquely fortunate to have been placed with this family. I lived with them in a city Bron, a suburb of the gastronomical capital of France, Lyon. We rode bicycles and went on camping trips. These were experiences I never had. But the best thing that happened that, again, someone said, "La noire, comme elle est la belle." (Translation: The black one, how pretty she is.) Well, aside from my parents, I had never heard I was pretty before. To be honest with you I knew then and now, I am far from "pretty" by the superficial Hollywood standards which most teenagers and adults judge themselves. However, hearing that pronouncement in French certainly heightened my self-esteem.

While I served in Istanbul as Branch Public Affairs Officer, I hosted Madame Sassard, her daughter Paule and Paule's grown son Huge (pronounced You-gh) for a week-long visit. I took them to concerts, scheduled meetings with museum directors and we toured all of Istanbul's revered historical sites. What a wonderful way for me to say thank you to the family who helped change my life 36 years earlier.

Q: It must have been a positive experience for them as well.

ELAM-THOMAS: Yes. The next time I saw them was during my time in Brussels. Madame Sassard died in her mid-80's in 2003. She was far more patient with me in helping me to learn French than my French sister Paule. Madame Sassard spoke very slowly, explained the grammar and pronunciation and intonation. Again, it was precisely that experience which led me to think I could be more effective in changing the perceptions of America and how minorities were viewed in America if I worked overseas. I am sure some of my friends may have perceived my desire to work abroad as a cop out. They may have thought I was running away from the troubles in America.

Q: And maybe you weren't. Maybe this was your contribution to the Civil Rights Movement.

ELAM-THOMAS: Even though I was working as a secretary in the American Embassy in Paris when major cities in the U.S. suffered the effects of widespread riots, looting and burning, I followed all of those events very, very closely. After all, I grew up in what was then considered the ghetto of Boston – Roxbury. I remember reading about my brother and the then Mayor of Boston Kevin White in “Time” magazine. The two of them drove through the volatile areas of Boston imploring the citizens not to riot. My brother was then Chief Justice of the Boston Municipal Court – the oldest trial court in the U.S. I said to myself, “Good heavens, this is my brother. Roxbury is going up in smoke.” The unrest took place shortly after was after Dr. King's April 4, 1968 assassination.

Q, June 2nd, 2006, oral history interview with Ambassador Harriet Elam-Thomas.

Ambassador Elam-Thomas, we were talking briefly about the experiences that you were having during the civil rights reactions to the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King, the involvement of your brother with the mayor of Boston on quelling some of the disquiet leading up to the possible violent disturbances and your own position at the time with your experiences of having been an exchange student and a decision that you were making, probably subliminally, to project American culture and society and more specifically the positive image of the American Negro and his and her potential. Do you feel now looking back that those were elements of contributions that you were making parallel to the civil rights movement?

ELAM-THOMAS: Looking back I would say yes. I spoke French fluently and more fluently than many of my young white colleagues at the embassy. In fact, we were all very close during those three years in Paris. That closeness did not last when we returned to the U.S.

Because of my language fluency, I met a number of French people who were just curious to talk to me about the United States. Invariably someone would say, “But you don't seem like the Americans we see on television.” When they asked about my family and my upbringing; I enjoyed telling them about my parents. Then, I will admit, with a certain sense of pride, I would explain the positions which my brothers held. Without

exception, they all seemed amazed. After all they expressed only what they had learned from stereotypical images in the print media and the electronic media which existed in 1968. They learned what they had seen was not necessarily the norm. I then decided that it was my duties to let all of my interlocutors know that we (people of color) speak the English language and other languages. We have a history and we can indeed communicate across cultures.

Q: And obviously we're leading now into a transition of your awareness of professional directions during your studies. When did you first become aware of the possibilities of a career in Foreign Service? Was it during your studies at Simmons or was it afterwards?

ELAM-THOMAS: It was afterwards. In the early 60's when women graduated from liberal arts colleges often the first question visiting recruiters posed was, "Do you know how to type? I said yes. Remember my initial goal was to be a legal secretary. My mother insisted that I learn typing and shorthand during the summer prior to my senior year in high school. After a working a year in Washington, I was assigned as a secretary at the American Embassy in Paris. The work was not challenging and I decided I should leave the U.S. Government. Upon my return to the U.S. I went to New York City for an interview with the Ford Foundation.

Surprisingly, I had difficulty in navigating the New York subway system despite having managed to go everywhere in Paris via the Paris Metro.

Q: So tell me about the examination process.

ELAM-THOMAS: I must tell you about the New York experience first. Here is what transpired.

Richard Nixon was elected President two weeks before I went for the Ford Foundation interview. On day after my Ford Foundation interview, Sen. Edward Brooke called me. My brother Clarence, a senior advisor to the Senator in Washington, DC, informed the Senator I was going to leave the U.S. Government. The Senator said, "There is a possibility that you could work in the White House." I said that might be interesting for a couple of years. With amazing speed, I was assigned to the White House from 1968 - 1971. Ironically, I had to stay in NY for six weeks as I worked in President-Elect Richard Nixon's transition office at the Pierre Hotel. The next two and a half years I worked in the West Wing of the White House for President Nixon's Special Assistant for Appointments. My office was just outside of the Oval Office and to my right was the entrance to the Cabinet Room. That exposure significantly enhanced my self-confidence. Daily contact with cabinet members, heads of states, foreign ministers, leading businessmen, academics and journalists taught me not to be intimidated by anyone.

In June 1971, well before Watergate, I left the White House and went to the State Department's Bureau on Education and Cultural Affairs.

Q: Okay, as a Civil Service employee?

ELAM-THOMAS: That's correct. I began that assignment as a Foreign Service Reserve Officer. The Assistant Secretary for Educational and Cultural Affairs at that time was John Richardson. (Deceased Dec.26, 2014) My new position was Program Officer in the Office of Youth, Students and Special Programs. One of the key goals was to counter the influence of communist nations on young political leaders around the world. I traveled with the American Council of Young Political Leaders and the U.S. Youth Council to meet with their counterparts in Europe. The American political activists thought they were well-informed. However, it was fascinating to watch members of the German Bundestag and young British parliamentarians win debates. I was also responsible for high school exchange programs which included: The American Field Service, Youth For Understanding, The International Christian Youth Exchange and The Experiment in International Living. These exchange programs had partners in Western Europe, but not in Asia, Africa or Latin America. The State Department offered grants to the exchange programs to increase their involvement in countries outside of Europe.

The so-called Turkish invasion of Cyprus took place in 1974. Our office was tasked to get these high school students back to the U.S. safely and we did. I went to NY to brief outgoing U.S. exchange students. I thrived in that job and no doubt that is when a very bright light went on. I said to myself, this is the work I would like to do. My then boss, Dick Arndt said you I should become a cultural affairs officer. I followed his recommendation and immediately pursued the path to becoming a traditional Foreign Service Officer.

Q: Now how many Blacks, Negroes in those days, were in that office?

ELAM-THOMAS: None. I was it. There were, however, two African Americans in relatively senior positions at that time. One - former U.S. Ambassador to Trinidad & Tobago Richard Fox who was then the Executive Director of the Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs (CU). The other was former U.S. Ambassador to Haiti William Jones who was at that time A Deputy Assistant Secretary in CU. The third was former ambassador to Liberia and South Africa, Edward J. Perkins. He was then working in the office of the Executive Director for the Near East Asia Bureau. Another gent named William B. Davis was a Russian speaker in United States Information Agency (USIA) who was in a senior position in the Office of Exhibits. I had to assume that as a fluent Russian speaker, he took no prisoners. Whenever I had a meeting with him on a project, I knew I had better have my brief well prepared. These four gentlemen prepared me for the Foreign Service Oral Exam. As a former reserve officer, I had to take the oral exam. At the time, I thought they were unmerciful as they drilled me for the upcoming oral exam. Not only did they provide me with a heavy reading list, they asked questions based on the readings. When I took the orals, I found myself before a panel of serious-looking diplomats. Three hours later, I exited the orals and prayed. The preparations paid off for I passed the exam. Even though I had minimal interaction with these gents, I got to know all of them much better through the mentoring program of the Thursday Luncheon. These men were indeed the trailblazers for African Americans currently in the U.S. Foreign Service. William Davis not only spoke Russian, but he was conversant in Czech. When

Sec. Albright addressed the Thursday Luncheon Group, Mr. Davis was seated next to her and as he spoke to her in Czech, she was duly impressed. As I observed that interaction, I became even more excited about my burgeoning Foreign Service Career.

Q: How were you received overall? Let's go back to before you passed the orals, before you'd come in as an FSR, a Foreign Service Reserve Officer.

ELAM-THOMAS: The welcome was cool to say the least. Everyone in the ECA Bureau knew I had worked in The White House. I understand that all now, but what I knew I had to establish credibility with my new office colleagues, many of whom were older than I. Upon reflection, my then secretary sounded as if she should have been a patient in a nursing home. She was so elderly and frail. I did not dare ask her to make copies for me. I thought oh my heavens, this woman is almost old enough to be my mother. I must respect her. I turned that situation around and all of my colleagues came to respect and acknowledge my work. My brother taught me that, that you need to treat each person with dignity and respect and you can learn so much from them. Believe it or not, one of my former secretaries in that Office of Youth Students and Special Programs, currently lives in Boca Raton. She is now 98. My husband and I paid her a visit in 2008 and I spoke with her on her birthday in 2014. Each time we speak, I marvel at her clarity, her positive spirit and her joie de vivre.

Q: This is the most interesting and unique introduction to the Foreign Service particularly for a Black officer and specifically for a Black female officer in those days because you were going up against two ceilings in the days when a career for a female officer, regardless of color-

ELAM-THOMAS: That's right.

Q: And here we have a black female coming from the White House

ELAM-THOMAS: I had been a secretary. Many of the Civil Servants were not at all thrilled with my arrival. I may have been imagining things, but I honestly felt that their goal was to make me uncomfortable. They tried, but did not succeed.

Q: That was their reaction to you, not as a Black woman but their perception that I was a political type burrowing in.

You mentioned some names of Black officers.

ELAM-THOMAS: Yes.

Q: You mentioned Ambassador Perkins

ELAM-THOMAS: Ambassador Fox, Ambassador Jones. I mentioned another person.

Q: John Anderegg?

ELAM-THOMAS: No, Bill Davis.

Q: Bill Davis. And who was the other person, John Ander?

ELAM-THOMAS: Yes, John Anderegg.

Q: Anderegg. How do you spell his name

ELAM-THOMAS: A-N-D-E-R-E-G-G. He's not African American.

Q: Oh, he's not, okay.

ELAM-THOMAS: However, he is a member of the Thursday Luncheon Group (TLG)

Q: Yes

ELAM-THOMAS: He has been for years. Over the years I have observed his genuine commitment to merited career advancement of TLG members.

Q: I know John Anderegg

ELAM-THOMAS: He was one of my bosses. Jim Donovan was another. And the other African American officer who helped me prepare for the Foreign Service was Robert Dumas, Director of USIA's Personnel. Bob Dumas and Bill Davis were the two founding members of TLG

You may have noted there were no women in this group of mentors. There were very few senior women in the Foreign Service at that time. However, there is one woman who made up for the absence of all the women who were not career diplomats at that time. This was a Foreign Service Secretary who I thought was the head of the Economic Section of the American Embassy in Paris because of the way she carried herself each time I saw her. Her name: Mary Pearl Dougherty. I will provide you more info on her later.

Q: Do you know how many other colleagues were taking the oral at the same time as you were and what percentage of you were accepted? Well let's say the exam.

ELAM-THOMAS: To be honest with you I have no idea.

ELAM-THOMAS: I must mention that a week prior to the oral exam, I was promoted to the next higher grade at USIA. However, the "powers that be" at the Board of Examiners did not accept that new grade after I passed the examination. I was informed that they examined me at the FSO-5 level. They said they were not authorized to promote me to that new grade despite my record. If I wanted to be a career FSO, I would have to accept entrance at the lower grade. I did. When I mentioned this episode to Ambassador William

Swing, he said, "You did what? There's no rhyme or reason for them to say that they evaluated at the FSO a five level other than the fact that you got a four in a promotion. Once in the career Foreign Service, I never got the promotion salary. I cannot help but think this was yet another subtle message re women and minority candidates. Does that sound familiar?"

Q: That sounds very familiar, very familiar.

ELAM-THOMAS: It gets better; you haven't heard the rest yet.

Q: Well let's talk about it.

ELAM-THOMAS: I spent eight years without getting promoted despite good reports and despite having learned a hard language - Greek. Yet, I remained a career diplomat until 2005.

Q: Okay, we'll get there in sequence.

ELAM-THOMAS: I spent four years in Athens, received what I perceived were excellent evaluations reports and worked diligently as the country affairs officer in the European Area for Greece, Turkey and Cyprus. To add insult to injury, a member of my selection panel (since deceased) made the cardinal error. He told me I was on the promotion list before the list was published. When the official list was distributed, I could not find my name on it. I just knew there was an error. Having served on several selection panels since, I understood that the Selection Panel sends the top candidates for promotion, but the number promoted depends on the budget available at the time. There is no guarantee that all of the names submitted will be above the line determined by budgetary factors alone. Now panelists are given serious briefings and must take a solemn oath which eliminates the leaking of information that transpired decades earlier. I was so frustrated and disappointed in the mid-80's that I came very close to resigning. Fortunately, a dear friend, Ofield Dukes, now deceased, counseled me to remain in the service and to continue to excel. He also reminded me never to allow anyone else to define me. Yes, he was yet another pivotal individual in my navigating this complex and competitive Foreign Service.

Q: That's interesting. Now, when you joined that was still when we had the Bureau of Cultural Affairs, which was still a part of the Department of State? This was prior to the transition in 1978, I believe it was.

ELAM-THOMAS: Yes you are correct in late 1978 or 1979.

Q: Seventy-nine, yes, '79 when we transferred CU to USIA. And you made that move.

Let's talk about your first – What was your very first assignment after you get in?

ELAM-THOMAS: Assistant Cultural Affairs officer in Dakar, Senegal.

Q: Did you ask for that?

ELAM-THOMAS: At this point I cannot remember precisely how that assignment came about. This was before the Open Assignments System was instituted. I do not recall asking for it. In 1968, I traveled to Senegal with my brother Clarence. Earlier Clarence was part of a Congressional Delegation to visit Senegal with Massachusetts Senator Edward W. Brooke.

Excited about the prospect of returning to Senegal, I was sobered when told my duties included serving as President Léopold Sédar Senghor's English tutor. Ambassador Frances Cook had just left Dakar as Cultural Attaché and she was President Senghor's tutor. While few challenges frightened me, the thought of teaching a head of state English did. I was most anxious, but that did not deter me from taking the assignment.

Problems with the existing Public Affairs Office (PAO) resulted in few bidders for the CAO assignment. Fortunately the late Blake Robinson, a former Fulbright Director in Liberia, took the assignment as CAO and he taught Senghor. I was so relieved. As indicated, the PAO-Dakar at that time was demanding and had minimal management skills. The work environment was far from positive. Despite numerous challenges with the work setting, I completed my tour. The daily contact with Senegalese academics, journalists and other professionals made helped me put the office situation in perspective. Also the U.S. Ambassador then was O. Rudolph Aggrey. An African American of Ghanaian descent, he was a scholar and diplomat and one for whom I had the utmost respect. My official commission as an FSO arrived while I was in Senegal. I was honored that Ambassador Aggrey swore me in as a full-fledged Foreign Service Officer. To return to that post 28 years later and occupy the same position as Ambassador Aggrey was absolutely amazing.

Q: That is an interesting parallel within one's experience.

ELAM-THOMAS: Yes. It really is. I had forgotten about that.

Q: What was your most- and I know that most people don't think when you ask them- what was your most significant contribution to explaining U.S. policy, expanding U.S. culture and society in a foreign culture as a junior officer? Nevertheless, there must have been some unique experiences that- and in your case in particular since you went back years later, that you could appreciate.

ELAM-THOMAS: While Assistant CAO in Dakar, I was frustrated with my attempts to set up an American Studies Program. Each time I approached someone at the Ministry of Education I had to first meet with the French "Conseiller Technique." In 1975, Senegal was still a recently- independent nation. The French remained for many years in the role of technical advisor at every ministry. Our attempt to gain Senegalese cooperation on an American studies program was an uphill battle.

In order to circumvent the influence of the technical advisors, I used my interactions with ministers and key educators at representational event to lay the groundwork for such a program without the interference of technical advisors. I highlighted the value of the broad knowledge of American society their students would gain from American Studies Programs and how it could help improve the Senegalese educational system.

I also noted that I would include respected Civil Rights advocates from the U.S. who could provide an historical context for what transpired in the U.S. I was so frustrated with the slow progress we made towards getting an American Studies Program at the University of Dakar. Imagine my delight to return 28 years later to participate in the 19th Anniversary American Studies Conference at the University of Dakar. The focus was on the American Legal System. As ambassador, I was the closing speaker. Approximately 250 participants from other universities in Sub-Saharan Africa attended. I was delighted to see the fruits of my work at those representational events 28 years later.

Subsequent to this Oral History Interview, I attended a Salzburg American Studies Seminar in October 2010. After four days of in-depth discussions on Continuity and Change in U.S. Foreign Policy, I expressed my disappointment with the absence of participants from sub-Saharan Africa. I made a commitment and provided a scholarship to ensure there will be a Senegalese participant within the next two years at that prestigious seminar. I am pleased to report that one attended the 2014 Seminar and another will be selected in 2015.

Q: Side b, interview with Ambassador Harriet Elam-Thomas, January 2- I'm sorry; June the 2nd, 2006.

Ambassador Elam-Thomas, what I'd like to do is, before we leave Senegal I'd like to get some impressions from you about the embassy staff and the Senegalese reaction to the embassy staff. I would like to find out from you how many Black ambassadors had there been when you were first assigned there and you can also talk about the subsequent number of the ethnic mix of ambassadors. I'd like to talk to you about (tape malfunction)...

ELAM-THOMAS: Prior to Ambassador Aggrey there was Ambassador Mercer Cooke (who lived in the same condominium building where I lived in Silver Spring. What an elegant gentleman and scholar as well. How I enjoyed being in his presence listening to him speak well before I had any idea I might serve as Ambassador to Senegal. After Ambassador Aggrey there was Ambassador George Moose. Ambassador Walter Carrington, a political appointee, under the Carter Administration served for a very brief period since Carter served only one term. As for women ambassadors: Katherine Shirley (1991-1992) the wife of the USIA's former Counselor, Jock Shirley. He was then ambassador to Tanzania. Ambassador Richard Roth was my immediate successor. Assistant Secretary for Consular Affairs - Janice Jacobs was the third woman ambassador to Senegal (2005-2007). Marcia Bernicat was our ambassador from 2008-2011. Senegal has welcomed four women ambassadors and three male African American ambassadors.

Q: Let's talk about the staff makeup at the embassy, that is, both the Foreign Service national as well as the American staff and what kinds of interactions you enjoyed and what were the reactions of the Senegalese to the different ethnic groups within the staff.

ELAM-THOMAS: Well the foreign national staff was predominantly Senegalese, but there were several from Guinea Bissau. After the 1998 coup in Guinea Bissau, the U.S. Embassy was closed and some of the staff came to the embassy in Dakar. Other colleagues were Togolese or Lebanese. I was impressed at how they all worked together. Interestingly enough, Senegal is a predominantly Moslem nation. However, its first post-independence president was Leopold Sédar Senghor, a catholic. I am sure as other embassies; we celebrated Christian and Moslem holidays. Inter-faith and inter-racial marriage was not unusual in the 70's. Many Senegalese were trained in French universities. Religious conflict, with the exception of the Casamance region, was minimal. I often tell my students and friends that Senegal is not as well-known as Rwanda and the other conflict regions of Africa precisely because there has not been a major religious or ethnic conflict. Senegal did get positive coverage in the news after the Ebola outbreak for containing the one case and then serving as a transit site for medical equipment.

The 534 embassy staff was standard at that time for a mid-sized post. The U.S Agency for International Development had the largest component with 223 staffers. The AID Director, Don Clark, portrayed what I considered one of the most positive images of genuine commitment to AID's mission. Respected by the indigenous population and all of the Senegalese ministers, Don Clark led a superb operation during my time as Chief of Mission (COM) Dakar. Perhaps his marriage to the daughter of a former diplomat from Burkina Faso added to Don Clark's credibility among the Senegalese. She was equally effective in establishing a highly respected environment for all of the USAID and Embassy employees. It was not unusual that Dakar's Country Team was comprised of career diplomats. I was delighted to find that the economic and political section heads upon my arrival were women. The political officer, Deborah Malac became our Ambassador to Liberia and has comported herself with distinction during the 2014 Ebola crisis. The Deputy Chief of Mission, Terence McCulley is now on his third ambassadorial assignment as the U.S. Ambassador to Cote d'Ivoire

Q: Security Officers and Security Assistance?

ELAM-THOMAS: Major Robert Gaddis led the Office of Security Assistance. The Defense Attaché was an African American Marine Lieutenant Colonel Todd Coker and graduate of the Naval Academy. Retired from active duty, he was a consultant to the Ivorian Government and in 2014 returned to the U.S. as a civilian DOD employee in the Office of African Affairs. Other Country Team included the Peace Corps Director, the Federal Aviation Agency's regional representative, USAID's Inspector General Director and Treasury Department Representatives and the standard office directors in the embassy.

As I entered my first country team meeting, I did not feel a genuine sense of warmth. They were politically correct and stood respectfully. It is not unusual for a new team in any setting to be restrained as they welcome new leadership. However, I felt a strong need at that moment I did not need to prove myself any more. I had been confirmed by the U.S. Senate, led a U.S. Government agency and had worked for 37 years in the career service. During that first meeting, I politely set out the ground rules of my management style. They would all be required to adhere even more strictly to the rules and regulations. I would not accept security breaches and would not welcome any attempt to circumvent administrative procedures. Drafting had to be impeccable for my name was at the bottom of every official message. No one in Washington would consider that that a message may have been written by a Foreign Service national for whom English was a second language. This was the assumption made whenever a cable came in when I was a Country Affairs Officer for Greece, Turkey and Cyprus. I knew that the standards for messages coming from my embassy would be strict. Vehicles were to be used for official reasons only. I instructed the technicians who installed phone lines at the Ambassador's residence that he must include a separate phone line for internet access. At that time we used the dial up system. He was surprised and said, he never did that before. I cannot help but wonder if other chiefs of mission did not make the distinction re phone usage. I knew I could not take that chance. By the time I arrived in Dakar, I had an unblemished career for 37 years and I did not care to tarnish it at that point. During my two years as Counselor of USIA, I became aware of improprieties and other sometimes innocent rule infractions which destroyed the careers of senior diplomats.

A year and a half after my time there the first DCM moved on and I took special pains to select a new DCM. That person happened to be a person of color whose reports were filled with positive examples of his management skills. After having read Ambassador Princeton Lyman's recommendation, I made my selection. Alan Latimer's performance in Dakar followed the positive pattern chronicled in the evaluation reports I reviewed. However, I noted certain new challenges arose in the management section of the Embassy. Sadly, upon reflection, I cannot help but wonder if the action of several officers in that section were not comfortable with the two individuals at the head of the Embassy who happened to be African American. This is just my feeling, for I cannot offer concrete facts to prove my suspicions.

I also found it interesting that no one ever questioned male ambassadors for selecting other males who looked like them as their DCMs. When the new DCM instituted a tracking program for embassy equipment, residence furniture, etc., the resistance to this new approach from the GSO and the Facilities Management Officer reached the Department. When I received a call from the Director General indicating that she would send out an arbitrator, I said, there was no need for Washington to become involved. I could handle the management of this post. I resolved the issue and The Department did not send anyone out to the post. The newer DCM left post with a significant level of respect. His research of salary surveys over the past twenty years in Dakar resulted in an 18% salary increase for the Foreign Service Nationals. I insisted that the DCM make the announcement to the 250 FSNs. The Embassy Dakar staff respected us. They knew that they could not play games for we ran a very tight ship. When I left, the Senegalese said at

a reception hosted by the Minister of Foreign Affairs and Minister of Culture, it was a special time in Senegal.

Q: Contrast that with your first assignment to Senegal.

ELAM-THOMAS: Very different. I was a junior officer when I arrived in Dakar in 1975. Only hard work would bring me credibility. When I returned on January 3, 2000, I arrived to a more sophisticated and developed Senegal. While many former contacts were deceased, several others held positions of significant authority.

While on the first flight to route to Dakar as the new ambassador, I saw the former President Senghor's chief of protocol Samba Ba. It was a delightful coincidence. My husband and I were in business class and he was in first class. Whatever he did after our brief conversation aboard the flight resulted in a memorable arrival in Dakar. The flight attendants insisted that my husband and I disembark first. We entered the VIP lounge with the press awaiting. Samba Ba spoke about my time there as a junior diplomat and somewhat upstaged the designated welcoming party from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

Q: Oh my God.

ELAM-THOMAS: Yes, I must say it was "Divine" intervention. I thought there was a chap in Charles de Gaulle airport who reminded me of Samba Ba. Since I had not seen him in 28 years, I was not sure. Early on Samba Ba was a dashing young man always attired in his white military uniform. Throughout my time as Ambassador in Dakar, Ba was extremely supportive and very discreet. He never asked for special favors for he knew the burden placed on those in "high" places. I certainly appreciated his discretion. It was truly a wonderful way to return to Senegal.

Q: Were there any unusual challenges you wish to share?

ELAM-THOMAS: Yes.

In a private meeting with me, a young Assistant GSO who happened to be African American asked if he could have a firearm. I immediately said: "Why are you in this office?" His response: "Well because you know I thought if I asked you... I stopped him in mid-sentence and said, "The DCM's office is directly across the hall." I rejected his request. Before he left, I queried him as to why in the name of heaven he did not go through channels? I learned he had gone through channels and received a negative response. He thought by coming directly to me, he might get a positive response. Oh how wrong! That was not only the first challenge he faced with me.

On the second occasion, he informed me he lost keys to the Embassy warehouse. I had all I could do to maintain my composure and instructed him to inform the Regional Security Officer (the RSO). When the young officer said he might find them at home, I barely allowed him to finish his sentence. I told him his first stop was to the RSO and then to his residence to search. I am sure the young FSO thought that I was the worst person on the

planet. It is my pleasure to report, he is now doing very well as a mid-level officer. The admonitions he received and the example I portrayed seem to have helped get his career on a positive track. He is doing extremely well and I am very proud of his accomplishments. Early on in my career I supervised two other young male officers. These young men received sobering and honest evaluation reports from me which caused them to question my support of African American officers in the Foreign Service. They were in their early twenties at the time. Both have retired after satisfying and highly successful postings in Europe, Latin America and Asia. When they questioned me about my reports, I told them if I don't tell you the truth others may not. This highly competitive system is set up for you to fail for the slightest deviation from the norm and also for unwise choices in connection with your work. In retrospect, I think they are glad I was honest.

Q: A follow on with respect to the challenges dealing with the Senegalese in your capacity as ambassador.

As indicated, the country team experience was sobering. However, the Senegalese not only welcomed me with open arms, but they knew I would be totally candid in my assessment of their commitment to an improved educational, health and economic program. I often reminded that their government's expenditures on health and education were not sufficient. As a result, they did not meet the World Bank's requirement for assistance for countries considered Heavily Indebted Poor Countries (HIPC).

Q: Yes.

ELAM-THOMAS: In 1996, The World Bank and the IMF determined which countries would be categorized as HIPC nations and eligible for debt relief. Those nations were monitored carefully to ensure the newly available funds from the debt relief was used to improve education and health facilities. The World Bank Representative investigations in collaboration with the embassy's economic and political section and economic officers determined that Senegal did not meet that requirement. During my consultation visit to the Department of State, I met with the then National Security Advisor Dr. Jendayi Frazier and informed her of the World Bank representatives' report. While Senegal had made some progress, education and health institutions showed minimal improvement. I advised that the USG should hold off our support for Senegal's receipt of \$40 million from the World Bank. President Abdoulaye Wade was a personal friend of the World Bank's President then James Wolfensohn. Wade called Wolfensohn. Shortly thereafter, Wade announced that Senegal would receive the \$40 million. Despite the sincere efforts of the bank representative and the embassy colleagues, our recommendations served little purpose. Once again, we saw the impact of a personal relationship.

Despite that frustration, I was as candid as possible whenever I met with President Wade. I doubt many other ambassadors who would tell a head of state 20 years my senior. "Mr. President, you don't want the Europeans to think you can't run your country." I cautioned Wade that despite his pronouncements to the contrary, many observers would believe he wanted more aid than trade. I also reminded him that observers wanted Senegal have the

same economic success as political success. The international press lauded Senegal for smooth democratic elections and transition of power. If only the much-needed improvements in education and healthcare could merit similar coverage.

Senegal is a star performer in terms of multiparty elections thanks to the legacy of President Senghor. He had the wisdom to step down while respected and called for elections

Q: Well we probably will come back to some unique experiences and incidents in Senegal. Let's move to your second assignment after you entered Foreign Service and I believe that was to Turkey? What was your second Foreign Service assignment?

ELAM-THOMAS: No, Abidjan, Cote d'Ivoire

Q: Abidjan.

ELAM-THOMAS: I went to Abidjan. And that was a pivotal assignment because I served under the wonderful tutelage of Ambassador Monteagle (Monty) Stearns. This U.S. ambassador and his wife were highly respected by all levels of the Ivorian community. The Ivorians admired and indeed loved them. I had never seen such sincere admiration for an ambassador in my career. Stearns continues to play an important role in my career to this day. I use one of his books in my Honors Diplomacy Class at the University of Central Florida.

Q: Did you not serve in Mali?

ELAM-THOMAS: Yes, I went to Mali; however, I was there for a three-month Temporary Duty Assignment (TDY).

Q: Abidjan was the next full time assignment after-Dakar?

ELAM-THOMAS: Yes, after Dakar, Abidjan was my next post.

Q: How did that happen?

ELAM-THOMAS: Good question. I guess I just was in the right place at the right time when the Assignment Officers were searching for one with French language skills and I knew I was to be worldwide available. I did not question the assignment.

Q: Or you just accepted what you thought- You had signed up for worldwide assignments and this is what-came up?

ELAM-THOMAS: That's right. Yes and it's funny, they were all in Africa. Isn't it interesting?

Q: Yes.

ELAM-THOMAS: Very interesting.

Q: Because I think that what's going to happen we're going to arrive at a point where you are aware of the fact that there are other horizons other than Africa and so you start asking for them, but so far you have not been asking for them.

ELAM-THOMAS: That's right. At that time in my career, I had no idea of how to bid strategically on assignments. Despite my naiveté, I thoroughly enjoyed each assignment. In those days, FSOs were not required to bids in all geographic regions. Also, the U.S. Information Agency officer talent pool was much smaller than the State Department and the bidding process was far less complicated. Again, this was before the Open Assignments System was instituted in USIA as well as State.

Q: Well obviously language was probably the dictating factor here.

ELAM-THOMAS: You're absolutely right. I spoke French so Abidjan was a natural follow-on post.

Then called the Ivory Coast, Abidjan was considered one of the better posts in Africa. The U.S. had significant interests there for the economy was more diverse than Senegal's. Abidjan had a commodities trading board. The Ivorians were savvy businessmen. At times I thought they were more French than the French. I found it curious that in 100 degree temperature, they were often attired in three piece suits. They did not sport traditional dress as often as the Senegalese. Their personalities were far more complex and I found them more difficult to read than the Senegalese.

As I continued to watch and marvel how Ambassador Stearns operated in Abidjan, I began to realize our diplomatic work was important. Genuine outreach through speeches, representational functions and program events incorporated what I believed were the best diplomatic practices. My career goals crystallized. Stearns had such rapport with the Ivorians from all walks of life. To me, it was unbelievable. As a Bostonian, I was fascinated that this Brahmin-like American from New England was so humble. He truly bridged cultural gaps in a manner I never imagined. His fluent French, his knowledge of U.S. as well as Ivorian history and his engaging personality served as a model for effective diplomats. I often tell young diplomats and my diplomacy students to observe carefully senior officers whom they admire. When Ambassador and Mrs. Stearns left Abidjan, ministers, elected officials and embassy contacts were at the airport to say farewell. I had not seen such an outpouring of respect and immediately aid to myself, this is what diplomacy should be. Stearns was always dignified. A former Marine he stood ramrod straight. I have remained very close to him and his wife. Sadly, Ambassador Stearns has lost his eyesight to macular degeneration and suffers from degenerative heart disease. On a visit with him and his wife at their Cambridge, MA residence in April 2014, he shared with me news of the Phoenix Award he had received from the Greek Government a month earlier and the fact that he had just finished his second book on the late Greek Prime Minister, Andreas Papandreou. Their daughter is now on her fourth or

fifth FSO tour with her FSO husband in 2013 in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. She says she credits me with helping her succeed in the Oral Exam. While she passed the written exam twice it was not until the third try she got through the orals after she spoke with me on some of the idiosyncrasies of the process.

Q: Before you leave the Ivory Coast, what was your position there?

ELAM-THOMAS: I was the Cultural Affairs Officer (CAO) or cultural attaché in general diplomatic parlance. There were two younger assistant cultural attachés. By chance, both were African-American males. They were intelligent, charming and, at times, thought they could charm their supervisor without taking on some of the less glamorous responsibilities of their positions. William V. Parker and Don Q. Washington are the two officers I mentioned earlier on in the interview. Both of them have retired after highly impressive diplomatic careers. They made me proud.

Now back to Abidjan- what was the rest of your question once again?

Q: The question was your position and the next question will be the most significant contribution that you made.

ELAM-THOMAS: I believe the most significant contribution I made was to send an Ivorian journalist to the States who had been a harsh critic of the United States.

Q: Tell me about that.

ELAM-THOMAS: His coverage of the U.S. exhibited blatant skepticism about U.S. foreign policy initiatives. Despite his arrogance, I was determined to learn why he had such a negative view of the U.S. Granted, our foreign policy positions in many countries are not always welcomed. Since he had never visited the U.S., I asked him how he could make such critical assumptions without seeing the country with his own eyes. He had no response.

The late PAO John Garner was very supportive of this nomination of the journalist. With John's help we embassy committee approved the nomination. Garner was also another FSO who provided me with excellent advice on how to manage a sizeable post. Whenever he traveled, he designated me as Acting PAO. I was very proud to take on that task and appreciated a boss who had such faith in me. The best lesson I learned from John Garner was not to micromanage. He passed away in February 2010, but we stayed in touch for many years after I left Abidjan.

Let me return to the journalist with anti-American views:

Once the journalist returned to Abidjan after his travel to the U.S., he did not totally change his views nor did he become pro-American. His analyses, however, were far less strident and more balanced. The Ambassador and our mission colleagues recognized the

value in sending him to the U.S. All agreed that the USG gained more by exposing this journalist to the U.S. than if we sent someone who was already pro-American.

Q: Did you have any- Did you notice any differences in your interactions with the Ivory Coast contacts vis-à-vis earlier interactions with the Senegalese? You mentioned the stark contrast in a very proud sense of nationalism, that they were more French than the French.

ELAM-THOMAS: In the mid to late 1970's when I was there, I thought the Ivorians were less nationalistic. I now understand that many of the Ivorians emigrated from surrounding areas and that explains what I perceived as a lack of real national pride. With close to a dozen indigenous languages and an equally-large number of ethnic groups, French is their lingua franca.

Q: Yes, so that was your view of the Ivorians.

ELAM-THOMAS: And the Senegalese-

Q: And the Senegalese were Senegalese.

ELAM-THOMAS: Yes, they were.

The University in Abidjan was very well appointed. The French invested heavily in Cote d'Ivoire to benefit from the diversified economy. Then Ivorian President Houphouët-Boigny was a medical doctor not a politician. Unlike Leopold Senghor, he was not a poet or an intellectual. The French still respected Houphouët-Boigny as well. The varied origins of Cote d'Ivoire's population may explain why they seem to cling to things French more so than the Senegalese.

Q: Thank you very much. We will pick up on that theme in the next session and we'll take a break.

This is tape three, side one, oral history Ambassador Elam-Thomas, June the 2nd, 2006.

Ambassador Elam-Thomas, we have completed the assignments in Senegal; we have completed the assignment in Ivory Coast. I believe you had an interim assignment next that followed in Mali. Can you talk a little bit about that; what was the purpose and what were the highlights of that assignment? What were the highlights of that assignment?

ELAM-THOMAS: I was sent to Mali on a TDY (temporary duty) as Acting PAO while the post awaited the designation of a new PAO. It was a wonderful opportunity to serve in this history-rich African nation. I traveled to Timbuktu and Mopti where I viewed the remainder of universities which existed well before the oldest U.S. universities. Sadly many of Mali's historic sites were destroyed in the 2012 conflict. While in Mali, I worked closely with the ministers of culture and education on educational exchange programs. It was very somewhat intimidating when I learned that the senior foreign

national assistant in the public affairs office was the niece of the then Malian president. American FSOs had to be circumspect in any reference to the existing Malian government. I must admit, it was not the ideal work situation. The President's niece was a tall imposing woman and walked with grace, pride and dignity. I was very careful not to destroy the credibility of our program by an inappropriate reference to the Malian government or culture. In fact, upon reflection, I may have been too careful and too diplomatic. Per the Malian responses to the programs which I coordinated during my short stay, the initiatives were well received. Fortunately, we did not have any major political crises. In the developing world where there was often much skepticism about the U.S., the mere existence of a public diplomacy program which resulted in heightened interest in the U.S. was considered an accomplishment.

I remember wondering why the PAO's residence had a swimming pool since the water supply was minimal. The electricity was sporadic. I so enjoyed reading and certainly had plenty of time to read while there. What was I to do without stable power. I resorted to my trusty flashlight many evenings. An AID colleague suggested that I carry flashlights everywhere and to pack a higher wattage light bulb for the hotels I might use while traveling throughout Africa. At times I wondered if I had returned to my ancestor's days when in fact it was 1976. It was mutually beneficial for me to visit villages and the families of Foreign Service National employees for again I experienced the genuine hospitality which helped me learn more about their traditions and their rich history. However, I'll admit, I was pleased to return to Senegal. Even though I did not remember having done anything significant during my three-month stint in Bamako, the Chargé, Stephen Dawkins' evaluation report on me indicated the relationships established through carefully-targeted programs proved beneficial. When Dawkins came to speak during my time in The Senior Seminar in 1994, he reflected positively on my 1976 TDY assignment to Bamako.

Q: Now does it strike you as being somewhat unusual, this was your second Foreign Service assignment abroad; the first one you were the assistant cultural attaché, second one you are the cultural attaché and in an interim assignment you're the PAO?

ELAM-THOMAS: No. The Assignments Officer thought I could handle such an assignment and I did. To be most candid, I did not find Bamako terribly challenging for the U.S. Embassy in Dakar was much larger and more complex. I think I understand the deeper meaning of your question. My work in Dakar must have demonstrated an ability to take on more challenging tasks such as Acting PAO in Bamako. When I returned to DC after Senegal, the European Area Director, Jodie Lewinsohn asked to meet with me. She asked that I consider an assignment as Branch PAO in Milan, Italy. Honestly, when I reflect on it, I cannot believe that I turned down that assignment. I told her I was happy in French-speaking Africa. At that point in my life, I was not keen on studying Italian. I had no idea that I would eventually learn Greek and Turkish.

Q: Well that makes it even more interesting, the fact that obviously you had come to someone's attention in Washington that felt that regardless of where this was the fact is you were a principle officer in your agency for an interim period so obviously what you

had done in the first two assignments had come to someone's attention to say that even if it was only for three months.

ELAM-THOMAS: I guess so.

Q: And this is an interesting segue that you mentioned that you had an offer for a non-Africa assignment and in those days it was not usual, it was not normal for African American officers to have assignments outside of Africa, the Caribbean, some part of Latin America, most- that was where most of the assignments were but you had been offered very on a European assignment, at which time you felt you were very comfortable where you were and what you were doing.

ELAM-THOMAS: Yes.

Q: What was your next assignment after the Mali assignment?

ELAM-THOMAS: I finished my tour in Dakar and went to Cote d'Ivoire. When I finished that assignment, I received a Jefferson Fellowship from the United States Information Agency (USIA) to attend the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy at Tufts University. I earned a Master's degree in Public Diplomacy in one year. The program was rigorous. I don't know quite how I managed for I took eight courses and wrote eight papers. I became a hermit and studied four to five hours each night after classes. Dr. Willard Johnson, a tenured professor of political science at MIT, taught the course on U.S. Policy towards Southern Africa. He was the first and only African American professor I ever had. Fletcher engaged him as a guest professor several years before I arrived. Johnson was incredibly knowledgeable, serious and demanding. All of the students wanted to please him and we worked doubly hard to get good grades. I was inspired to do my best particularly because I was so proud of him and I did not want to disappoint him. He was probably prouder than I when he attended the Simmons College commencement 15 years later when I received an honorary doctorate from my alma mater. Ambassador Stearns and his wife were there as well.

After I completed all of my academic requirements for the master's degree, I took the French language test. One of my classmates was a UN interpreter and we conversed frequently in French. Since Fletcher did not have language instructors as part of their program at that time, they asked one of their French speaking economic professors to administer the exam. Coincidentally, that professor, Dr. Abdul Aziz, had traveled to Athens while I was there as CAO on a speaker program. He was a friend of the PAO in Athens. I did not pass the written portion of the exam to his satisfaction (I found that curious since I had received a 3/3/in French from FSI and had served for 7 years in French-speaking countries. Perhaps I was nervous, but I did not think I was.) After my second attempt, I passed the written and oral portion of the French exam administered by Prof. Aziz.

Q: Was he a native speaker?

ELAM-THOMAS: I do not believe he was. I believe Arabic was his native language.

Each time I think of this, I am frustrated. If I met the State Department's language requirements to serve overseas in French, how could this graduate school professor prevent me from obtaining that Master's degree? As I said I took the exam a second time for a non-native French speaker.

Q: I was going to ask you, you had already satisfied the State Department's language proficiency requirements at a professional level, a minimum of three/three.

ELAM-THOMAS: That's right. When I completed the exam, I realized then that academia can be very political. Something was going on; however, I could not put my finger on it. For sure, I would not return for a doctorate. When I graduated in 1980, I said, the only way I will ever get one it will be an honorary one. I had no idea that years later, I would receive four honorary doctorates.

Q: How did you come to be selected to study at the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy? Did you apply for it?

ELAM-THOMAS: I applied for the fellowship and Ambassador Monteagle Stearns wrote what I thought was an incredible recommendation letter. USIA's selection committee met and I was the 1979 recipient of the Jefferson Fellowship.

Q: Do you know how many others were competing for the same fellowship?

ELAM-THOMAS: No but I know there was only one Jefferson Fellow each year and I was the 1979 recipient.

Q: And traditionally we had- the United States Information Agency had a diplomat in residence at the Fletcher School. Was there a diplomat in-Residence then?

ELAM-THOMAS: Yes, Hank Ryan.

Q: Hank Ryan. Were you in touch with him while you were there?

ELAM-THOMAS: Yes. He was a wonderful elder statesman. Ryan had retired from the Foreign Service many years earlier and has since passed away. As a Latin American specialist and I learned much about the U.S. policy towards Latin America during my visits to his office. Hank Ryan always welcomed young FSOs from USIA and State whenever they came to Fletcher. For years he had been a legend in USIA and I was honored to be in his presence.

Q: Well what's after Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy?

ELAM-THOMAS: After Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy I returned to Washington and was a Career Counselor in USIA Personnel. I wondered why I was

assigned to be a Career Counselor. After all, I had just studied foreign policy, conflict resolution and international relations in graduate school. I soon realized that conflict resolution and finding the right person for the assignment required the aforementioned expertise.

Q: I know that there are professional considerations even now, years later, that you're not at liberty to discuss but in general, what were some of the experiences that you gained from for your own professional development and what were some of the mentoring experiences you might have had during that assignment?

ELAM-THOMAS: I can remember a mid-level officer who was one of my clients. He was on the "threshold" of becoming Officer Counselor (FEOC). When his name was not on the promotion list, he came to my office and said this career was no longer worth it. He said to me he had faced many personal and professional challenges and was terribly depressed. In essence he was going to take his life because he did not make it into the Senior Foreign Service and he dashed out of my office. I literally ran down the stairs and took him in my hands and said, "Nothing related to this promotion list is so important. No profession should define you." To this day, none of us can second guess the final choices of Selection Panels. When I told him of other sobering challenges other FSOs had faced, one whose child (only 9) had just died of cancer and the USG would not cover the cost of flying the family back to the U.S. to be together, he sounded as if he would reconsider his desire to commit suicide. After I gave him a few more examples of even more devastating personal crises which FSOs had overcome, he calmly left the premises. This reality check helped keep this colleague in the service. Honestly, I was not trained for such experiences, but one draws on whatever necessary during crises.

Many FSOs believed the system was not fair to single women. They saw evidence that large posts like Mexico, Hong Kong were given to tandem couples. In those settings USIA did not have the concern of one spouse supervising the other. One female client said, "I am ready to learn Chinese but you're not going to send me because Beijing was a tandem post."

It was extremely difficult to encourage clients to bid on Bahrain, to Qatar and other-Doha in the early 1980's. I learned to do so with total transparency. I could not be disingenuous when I described these posts. They would be challenging and they needed to be staffed. I had 225 FSOs in my talent pool. Seventy five of them moved through the system the two years I was there. One was Marjorie Ransom, who was the first woman PAO in Egypt. Most were stellar performers. I will never forget one client, Tom Johnson. He went to Liberia and sent me a thank you note because he really wanted that assignment. This was one of the more challenging of my career positions. When one person got his/her assignment, there were six to ten others who did not. Career Counselors walked a fine line being a diplomat within the Service. Fletcher's training was valuable.

Q: Did you find yourself in a unique position not only with your constituents-

ELAM-THOMAS: For 42 years, I remained unique. Very few of my colleagues looked like me. However, at times it was more challenging being a woman rather than being a person of color.

Q: -Not only did I mean unique because they did not look like you, but also with the various area directors who had a particular desire for a person to follow a particular assignment track?

ELAM-THOMAS: How did you know that? Yes, that was often the case but I can honestly say that they may have tried to apply subtle pressure on me. They quickly learned I had a strong sense of integrity. Perhaps I was less vulnerable than some of my white counterparts because I knew I had to follow strict rules of the assignment system. If the person had the qualifications, studied the language, knew the region and had the appropriate earlier assignments, they were competitive. I was not the final arbiter for the assignments. I had to represent each candidate based on their performance and not corridor reputation. I prepared carefully for each Assignment Panel to ensure each candidate received fair consideration given the facts.

Q: Were you ever concerned about how this would impact on your own career especially when the fact is that you were only going to be in this position yourself for one, two, three years at the most and many thought you would set yourself up for a good assignment?

ELAM-THOMAS: I did. I worried about that because I knew that no matter where I went people would say you're in personnel so you're going to get yourself a good assignment. I was surprised when Ambassador Monteagle Stearns invited me to dinner when he was Vice President of the National Defense University. He and his wife told me of his nomination to be ambassador to Greece. He wanted me to be his CAO. I told him I was honored, but that the assignment system did not work that way. I would have to bid on the assignment. I also told him that others would perceive this posting a very special assignment in Europe and since I was a Career Counselor. He said, "I still think you should bid on Athens." I did not want to bid on this because I knew how it would be perceived. Finally, I did include my name on the bid list. When I was not selected for the assignment I was somewhat disappointed because I had no desire to learn Greek. I also mentioned this to Ambassador Stearns. He said my French was fluent and that I could learn Greek. As I sat at the dinner table, I looked at posters in Greek and thought, my heavens, is he really serious? I reflected on the faith this Ambassador had in me and that is why I went ahead and bid on the post. In less than six months, three months, Peter Synodis moved from the cultural attaché job to the press attaché job. Another Career Counselor called me and asked, "Harriet how is your Greek? You are going to Greece." I said, "Don't play with me." He said no, you've been paneled; you're going to Greece. Assignments can change at the last moment. Nothing is written in stone. Depending on the needs of the Service you may be going in a totally different direction than you thought initially.

I remember going to Counselor Deidre Ryan's office because I didn't get the assignment to Greece. She said it was a very difficult choice between me and Peter Synodis. She said

she wanted me to meet with Jim Hackett, the assistant secretary for management, for administration. I met with him and he thought I should go to Cameroon because it was the Switzerland of Africa. And I said Mr. Hackett, "I've served in Africa, I've been in Abidjan, I've been in Dakar. I have no desire to see the Switzerland of Africa. I said I've been in the Paris of Africa; I don't want to go to the Switzerland or Geneva of Africa. I think I did say I think I've had enough of serving in Africa. That's it. He sent a memo back to personnel with a note on it indicating they should find something good for Miss Elam; she's impressive. For some reason, I was not encouraged when I saw that note.

Q: So then you were off to language school?

ELAM-THOMAS: For a year of language school and then I went to Athens.

Q: Where did you go to language school?

ELAM-THOMAS: At the Foreign Service Institute.

Q: How many of you were in the class?

ELAM-THOMAS: There were six of us.

Q: How did you find your training?

ELAM-THOMAS: Difficult for many reasons.

Q: Did you find it challenging for you individually or difficult as a language?

ELAM-THOMAS: The language learning environment was challenging for me individually and difficult in terms of grasping the Cyrillic alphabet and well as the language. During my first week, the senior Greek teacher said to me, "We want you to do well." He patted me on my shoulder when he made that comment. I bristled at that act which I perceived as being patronizing. Remember, I was much younger and this Simmons College graduate did not need someone at FSI telling me that I needed to do well. That day I was determined to pass my Greek examination. I was 42 years old. The synapses did not work as smoothly as they did when I was 21. I passed the exam and got a 3/3 in Greek (written and comprehension). I was the only African American in the class. Of the six students, two did not take the training seriously. For me, a USIA officer, I knew we could not function in the role of CAO, IO or PAO without the Greek language. We were not allowed language waivers and I knew I had to get the coveted 3/3. If I thought Greek was a challenge, trust me Turkish was a far more difficult. I'll tell you about that later.

Q: Let's go to Greece.

ELAM-THOMAS: Greece was my shining moment. I honestly believe this is the assignment which proved to me that my work had merit. Perhaps I was so engaged in

moving Greeks away from their inherent anti-American focus I did not realize that my boss, the PAO perceived my positive rapport with all levels of our Greek contacts threatening. During my eight years dealing with Greece and Turkey I did not get promoted. Four of those years were spent in Athens. One line in the evaluation report indicated that, "...she was so well received that they thought she was the PAO." There were other similar references to the wide swath of contacts I had in Greece (not just Athens). In my naiveté, I thought this was a compliment. Later, thanks to the counsel I received from the then Deputy Director General of the Foreign Service, Ambassador William Swing who reviewed my evaluations, I learned such comments and lack of specific references explained why I had not been promoted. The PAO did not describe how I met the U.S. Embassy's goals and objectives. While I provided that info in the notes given to the PAO, he did not incorporate them into my report. I certainly learned a very hard lesson. From the Athens assignment forward, I made good use of the last page of evaluations which give the employee an opportunity to highlight his/her successes or challenges.

I had devoted a year to learning Greek. Upon my arrival, I worked diligently to improve America's image, created credible ways to remove the misperceptions Greeks had of America, and heightened the respect for American artists of all genre through their performances and exhibits. For four years my Greek contacts confirmed my work in their news reporting and interviews done with me. Ninety percent of the guests invited to my representational events attended. I gave almost as many public speeches as the Ambassador and **two** of them in Greek. I received frequent invitations to the homes of the embassy's coveted "A" list of contacts. I used every opportunity to educate Greeks about African Americans in science, education and technology. Two of the Fulbright lectures I presented were in Greek with members of the Greek Academy present. As I mentioned, Greek journalists wrote positive articles about my work with the academic, artistic and business communities during my time in Athens. However, now I understand that the PAO did not appreciate my taking some of the limelight from him. When I returned to Athens in 2005, after a month-long stint as the Dukakis Lecture at the American College of Thessaloniki, one of the journalists sent me a note in which he said, "When you and Ambassador Monty Stearns were here we called it the golden age of diplomacy." I sent a copy of that note to Ambassador Stearns.

While many of the Greeks demonstrated in front of our embassy once a week, we did not let that deter us from our work. At that time the then Prime Minister Andreas Papandreou's wife, who was an American, would also express less-than-positive views about the U.S. This was Papandreou's first wife who was from Elmhurst, Ohio.

The Greeks had also an clever way of welcoming you into their orbit. However, I soon learned they often had an ulterior motive. They were deep thinking, serious, philosophical people but they also wanted to be sure their little "Yorgos" (George) would get into MIT. With their financial wealth, all they needed was a letter of recommendation from the Cultural Attaché or the Ambassador and this child would gain entry to one of America's most prestigious educational institutions. The hardest thing was to convince a

Greek that a letter from a USG official would not be welcomed at the many very independent and private U.S. institutions.

On balance, despite not being promoted, I had four absolutely wonderful years. My study of Greek educational system opened our eyes to the challenges that all European educational systems face. Their method to teach by rote and memorization minimized creative and analytical thinking. My service as the ex officio member of the Fulbright Board which allowed me to interview candidates was enlightening, instructive, and educational.

Q: At what level of access did you have in the Greek- with the Greek government? Was there a minister of education?

ELAM-THOMAS: There was a minister of education and a separate minister of culture. The revered Greek film actress and political activist, Melina Mercouri was the Minister of Culture. She epitomized Greece for many of my generation. Her role in *Never on Sunday* was legendary, but her commitment to artistic freedom and the return of the Elgin Marbles from the British Museum were the issues which kept Melina in the forefront of the political and artistic scene for decades.

Q: Did you feel any retribution from the PAO because of your access, either at the government level or to certain levels of academia, high levels in academia?

ELAM-THOMAS: No, I did not. If it existed, the action was so subtle I was unaware. I certainly had the access. Melina Mercouri always acknowledged my presence whenever we attended an event in common. I have fond memories on one occasion when I accompanied Ambassador Stearns to see her in preparation for the 1988 Olympic Games. She was her usual charismatic self. Ambassador Stearns with his patrician bearing dignity was to gain confirmation from her of the Greek's role in the Los Angeles Olympics. I chuckle each time I think of this for I truly think Ambassador Stearns was so enchanted listening to Melina that he almost forgot the purpose of our meeting. Finally I politely interrupted and said, "Mr. Ambassador we're here to talk about the Greek participation in the Olympic Games." Just before he began that discussion, Melina was about to light a cigarette. Honestly, I've never seen an ambassador move so quickly to be gallant and light her cigarette. I will admit, she was mesmerizing. She charmed me, so I don't doubt she charmed everyone in her presence.

Q: Side b, Ambassador Harriet Elam-Thomas, June the 2nd, 2006.

While we're in Greece and the fact that you had extraordinary access in addition to obviously successes in what you were doing there, what were some of the highlights of that assignment? I know that there probably were many things that were exceptional as far as your professional reward but can you separate out one or two highlights in the order of promoting American culture, society and the articulation of American policy?

ELAM-THOMAS: *Yes I can in just a moment.*

With regard to my assignment in Athens, Greece, there are so many positive things that took place that it's hard to single out any one. Two come to mind. One was my work with Melina Mercouri and Boston Opera Company Director Sarah Caldwell. These two women had incredible personalities and I often use this experience as an example to show how culture and politics cross one another. During the time that we were working on a production of "Medea," an opera production that was done in Boston, costumes being made in Greece, material being woven in Greece, we collaborated closely with the ministry of culture. Sarah Caldwell would call only a day or two in advance before her arrival in Athens and wanted to meet with Melina Mercouri. And at one point the American military bombed a certain part of Southeast Asia and there was a significant interest on the part of the Greek government that this was not the right thing for America to do. I knew that it was going to be a very tense meeting.

We enter Mercouri's office, Melina says to Sarah Caldwell, "I can't even talk to you; I may have to go out and fight the next battle myself." Of course Melina was being overly dramatic, but we got the message. Sarah Caldwell responded, "Madam, I didn't bomb anything; the U.S. Government did." I had to chuckle to myself. The meeting was not productive. U.S. military action had direct impact on a major cultural undertaking. Caldwell made a costly trip from Boston to Athens for one meeting. When the tension re the bombing issue diminished, Caldwell made a subsequent trip to Athens.

One of the traditional tasks of the Cultural Section was to highlight the best of American arts. Whether Leonard Bernstein, Mikhail Rostropovich, Dance Theatre of Harlem, the New York Ballet, the New York Philharmonic or Alvin Ailey Dance Company, all of them performed in Athens under USG sponsorship while I was in Athens. I met Kurt Masur, Chick Corea, Buddy Guy, Herbie Hancock, and Wynton Marsalis. As most of my CAO colleagues, the list of recognized American artists in all genres could go on and on. I treasure the fact that Rostropovich spoke to me in front Ambassador Stearns and said, "Thank you for all of your efforts on my visit. I know the cultural attachés do all the work." I felt 10 feet tall just from that genuine acknowledgement. It was simple, yet sincere.

About a year later, I had another indication of the role of culture in diplomacy when the Embassy's Cultural Section prepared for another American performing arts group's participation in the annual Athens Festival. Ambassador Stearns' successor, Ambassador Robert Keeley was justifiably concerned about the rampant anti-Americanism still prevalent in Greece. To counter or at least minimize the strains in our relationship, Ambassador Keeley asked me to negotiate television rights of The Dance Theatre of Harlem's (DTH) performance at the Herodes Atticus Theater. It was Keeley's belief that country-wide telecasts of the performance would present a more positive view of America, its artistic achievements and its diversity.

Of course I set up the initial negotiation with the impresario with the help of my trusted senior Greek Executive Officer. I had no idea that we would have to negotiate the cost from \$110,000 down to \$40,000, which is all the Greeks could pay. In two-and-a-half

days we succeeded despite the very real possibility of DTH canceling all performances. Am I glad I got my 3/3 in Greek for it certainly helped save the day in this instance. Just as I began to feel good about myself, lo and behold we learned that the Greeks wanted to pay the \$40,000 fee in Greek drachma. What could a U.S. dance company do with Greek drachma? Eventually we worked it out and the funds were deposited in U.S. currency to DTH's American account.

Ambassador Keeley's request resonated with my views regarding the role of art in diplomacy. The performances aired for two weeks after the company left. There were press articles which not only covered the live performance, but noted the televised performances in their reporting as well. I could not help but think to myself, how ironic that a predominantly African American dance company was able to present a more positive image of American abroad. The dancers established almost immediate rapport with the multifaceted Greek artistic community. Workshops and master classes allowed for sharing of expertise, new techniques and mutual respect.

Q: Your relationship with the rest of the staff there, the American staff, I take it, was very positive.

ELAM-THOMAS: Yes. Our offices mounted a blockbuster exhibits which was usually done only in the former USSR or in Eastern Europe. A special line-item in the Foreign Affairs Budget was designated for such exhibits, but only for countries behind the "Iron Curtain." Remember, I served in Greece from 1983-1987 well before the Berlin Wall came down. This exhibit was entitled, "The History of Filmmaking in America." We transformed the entrance of The National Gallery of Greece to resemble the entrance of a Broadway Theater. Wherever the exhibit was shown, it highlighted the Oscar-winning roles of actors from that country and usually there was the actual Oscar which the actor or music composer had received. You may remember the film Chariots of Fire. In 1982, Vangelis Papathanassiou won the Oscar for the composition of the score Chariots of Fire. Interestingly enough Vangelis did not travel to Hollywood to accept the Oscar for he suffered from the fear of flying.

Whenever such blockbuster exhibits came to the post, it was a tradition that either the exhibit director or trusted Cultural Section head returned the Oscar to the owner at the end of the exhibit. You can be sure I convinced the exhibit director that such duty was indeed mine. I loved the film and the music, and this was one time I was going to "pull my weight" as Cultural Attaché. When I arrived at Vangelis elegant British residence, we spoke about Erica Jong, author of Fear of Flying in connection with his phobia. We also spoke about Markella Hatziano, a young Greek opera singer whom I feel proud of "having discovered." Vangelis was concerned about Markella's agent known not to be the most reputable one in the business. I shared Vangelis' advice with Markella who soon found a new agent. Through my collaboration with Sarah Caldwell, I was able to facilitate Markella's audition with a U.S. opera company in Texas and since then, Markella has had been performing throughout the U.S.

Q: Yes, I know.

ELAM-THOMAS: For several weeks, I worked closely with many then I considered elderly Greek men, curators, builders, engineers, set directors and designers. The U.S. Government gave the museum electric window blinders we had to install to block Athens powerful sun. These blinders were extremely expensive, but we knew the museum needed them, but the cost prohibited the museum from purchasing them. After we visited several potential sites, we agreed that The National Gallery was the optimum location. Such a prestigious location in the center of Athens came with a cost, the gift of the blinders.

This major exhibit was approved for Athens even though Greece was not behind the Iron Curtain. Why - because Melina Mercouri charmed then USIA Director Charlie Wick. No further explanation is needed.

Q: Did Charlie Wick visit Greece while you were there?

ELAM-THOMAS: I believe he did although I honestly cannot remember if I was posted there when he came. He certainly did during the time I was desk officer for Greece, Turkey and Cyprus. During that Washington assignment, I wrote speeches for Director Wick whenever he had to address audiences with a relationship to Greece, Turkey or Cyprus.

Q: What after Greece?

ELAM-THOMAS: After Greece I returned to Washington and served two years as Desk Officer for Greece, Turkey and Cyprus. While on this domestic assignment I learned that even though you are a career diplomat many assume that you are a staff aide solely because of your gender. The automatic assumption was that most if not all women in the Department were administrative assistants, budget & fiscal officers or other support staffers. Few women were in the so-called "substantive" positions. Whenever I went to the State Department building for weekly meetings, I thought colleagues walking down the hall deliberately found ways to ignore my presence because I was female. I now know that seems to be the culture of such a huge bureaucracy and I was being overly sensitive at the time. I will admit, I enjoyed being able to report on three countries in those meetings. No doubt because of a much larger employee pool, the State Department had a different officer for Greece, Turkey and Cyprus. I was fortunate enough to have the portfolio when Prime Minister Andreas Papandreou had an affair with his then-mistress who later became his wife. Not only did I report on continuous political conflicts with Cyprus and Turkey, but also on how the Prime Minister's extra-marital affairs might impact on U.S. negotiations on a host of issues.

After the three years as the desk officer of Greece, Turkey and Cyprus and visits to all three posts. I was intrigued to go to Turkey. Since Director Wick had used almost all of the travel funds for the European Area very few if any desk officers were able to travel to their posts. I was determined to visit my posts so I got approval to use my frequent flier miles to make the trip. I could not be an effective desk officer without visiting the

officers doing yeoman work in the field. That travel was one of the wisest decisions I have made. That face-to-face contact confirmed my sincerity to be supportive of all my colleagues in the field. I remember reading in an evaluation that the PAO in Turkey said they felt we had an advocate who was right here on the ground with us every time we sent a message asking for follow up on issues in Washington.

Whenever I got a request from a PAO I went to the functional bureau to see how we could provide that post with what they needed. I did not send it down in a memo; I hand carried it to the responsible individual, engaged my colleague in conversation and demonstrated my respect for the role they played in keeping our overseas operations running. I was the desk officer who was never in her office because I delivered the requests personally. If you get a memo, it will remain in your in box until you complete other urgent tasks. It is much easier to decline a request if there is no face to face encounter. I got to know many of the budget and fiscal staffers and directors. It seemed easier to get post funding for well-justified requests because these officers often said, "We never see the desk officers, but we see you." I told the new Pickering Fellows with whom I met it is important to recognize the value of the support staff, admin, logistics, the dispatcher and certainly the drivers. You cannot make a demarche to any ministry at home or abroad if you don't have a functioning vehicle and a driver who takes you there.

Q: So as a result of that assignment thus comes Turkey?

ELAM-THOMAS: Yes.

Q: And back to language school again.

ELAM-THOMAS: Yes.

Q: Talk about being selected for Turkey. Did you ask for it?

ELAM-THOMAS: Once again, I almost again felt as if this assignment came to me. When I was in Istanbul, I was so impressed that the then Consul General William Rau who was fluent in both Greek and Turkish that I thought I could do the same. After the Athens assignment, I honestly do not remember the need to fight for any of my future assignments.

I will admit, I was getting older but thought that if I could master a language and the Cyrillic alphabet, Turkish would be much easier. Oh how wrong I was. Once I learned the Greek alphabet, the sentence structure was the same as in English. Turkish, however, presented an unexpected challenge. The syntax, the construction of sentences was totally different. From my perspective, it was worse than German which also placed verbs at the end. Turkish is an agglutinative language, which means you add a suffix to the word to change the meaning. You could have one word with 15 suffixes which would make up a sentence. Turkish is an Altaic not an Indo-European language. To wrap my brain around all of this at age 47 was a challenge. I spent half of the yearlong language training at FSI. During that time some of my classmates did not seem to take the language learning process seriously. After the first half of the 44 week program, I called the language

coordinator at USIA to express my concerns. Once I recounted what transpired in the class, I was enrolled in a private language school. For the last six months I studied with an incredibly patient and effective instructor. Interestingly, my Turkish teacher was married to a Greek. It was far from easy but I learned Turkish and got my three/three in Turkish. Let me tell you what prompted me to work even harder to learn Turkish. Three weeks before my Turkish exam Nelson Mandela gave a speech a joint session of Congress. I used every former contact I could to get a ticket for that speech. As I sat in the Senate Gallery on the steps which divided the rows, but near the late Judge Leon Higginbotham (one of the top candidates to replace Justice Thurgood Marshall) I was in awe as I listened to Mandela. I said to myself, if he could spend 27 and a half years in jail without bitterness, I can pass this Turkish exam. For the next three weeks I became a hermit and studied more than my usual 3 hours a night. I passed my Turkish exam the first week in July 1990. That inspiration from Mandela was pivotal in my succeeding in Turkish. And I often quote Mandela's statement: "When you speak to a man in a language he knows, you speak to his head. When you speak to a man in his native language, you speak to his heart." For most of my 42 years in this profession, I have tried my best to speak to the hearts of our hosts in each of my posts.

Q: And then you went off to Istanbul?

ELAM-THOMAS: For four fabulous years.

Q: And your position?

ELAM-THOMAS: Branch public affairs officer in a city that was larger than Ankara, the capital. Istanbul is often referred to as the New York of Turkey.

Q: Did you find that it was difficult or not difficult working in a cultural business center of a country where the capital was less than active thus the embassy and your relations to the embassy?

ELAM-THOMAS: Yes and no. Ambassador Strausz-Hupé came to Istanbul once a month. The embassy maintained an apartment in Istanbul for the business and cultural life was more vibrant than in Ankara. I knew I should not to alienate my Ankara colleagues for they controlled Istanbul's program budget. Whenever I proposed a program I made sure that Ankara would be given the option of inclusion.

Q: What were the highlights of the assignment?

ELAM-THOMAS: There were many. However, once again the impact of an exhibit comes immediately to mind. The I Dream a World Exhibit: Portraits of Black Women who Changed America. Brian Lanker, a Pulitzer Prize winning photographer, mounted the fruits of his 1974 project into an exhibit in 1989. Of the 225 original pictures, he selected 75 large scale photos of contemporary artists, lawyers, performers, writers, teachers, politicians, civil rights proponents and others. In 1989, when I saw the exhibit at The Corcoran Gallery in Washington, I said to myself, "This exhibit must be sent

abroad.” I was a mid-level USIA Officer, but decided the idea of USIA sending this abroad was worth exploring with the USIA’s Exhibits Office. That conversation led to others seeing the exhibit and they confirmed the powerful and positive message such an exhibit could bring to our international audiences and Istanbul as well as Izmir were two of the posts fortunate to host the exhibit.

The Turks came to the exhibit on the eve of the beginning of Ramadan. I realized I had to do something significant to show our appreciation to those who would come out to an American exhibit on the eve of that important holiday. My decision was to give my opening remarks in Turkish. The Turks were pleased and the press mentioned my remarks in the press the next day. Our Turkish hosts were also very pleased that Ambassador Richard Barkley traveled from Ankara for the opening and gave remarks as well in English. That night, the exhibit hall was located in a prime location downtown Istanbul, was filled. I will admit I was relieved. To ensure we would have a steady flow of visitors to the exhibit, our staff coordinated secondary school and university student visits as well as others who attended art schools in Istanbul. We also include appropriate bibliographies with the exhibit brochures to encourage additional research about the women highlighted in the photographs. The exhibit met our goals to illustrate the role these women played in the Civil Rights Movement and how their efforts served as the catalyst for the Women’s Movement and other minorities groups in the U.S.

The second which comes to mind involves a highly sensitive political issue: an allegation about the U.S. and the PKK (The Kurdistan Worker’s Party – a terrorist group). An avowed fundamentalist Turkish newspaper published an article which claimed the U.S. had provided food for the PKK terrorists. The Ankara-based PAO called to deliver Ambassador Abramowitz’s instructions that I meet with the editor of the fundamentalist newspaper and tell them the statement was not true. Rather than blindside the editor, I instructed our senior Turkish press assistant to alert the editor of the reason for my visit. Given the sensitivity of the issue, I wanted to be sure my interlocutor would be prepared to hear the U.S. position. During the meeting I provided the editor and his staff with several examples of the disinformation campaigns which had slurred America in many other countries. When they heard of the other fabricated stories, the editors realized they had fallen for the misinformation I had described. The examples I gave were credible and some had also appeared in Turkish media. My Turkish assistants and I presented all of this information in Turkish. Perhaps my ability to conduct that entire meeting in Turkish had some impact on the result of that hour-long session. That really does not matter. The next day, the newspaper printed an apology in the first section of the paper. Our press assistant said that in his 30 years of working at the American Consulate in Istanbul, that was the first time he had seen a written apology.

The third experience which comes to mind was an American studies conference. The topic was the literature of African American writers. Toni Morrison won the Nobel Prize for literature that year. The Turkish professors knew more about Toni Morrison than I could ever know. Our officers had coordinated the travel of two U.S. literature professors. Their topic: The image of African Americans in U.S. print, electronic and television media. During one of the panel discussions, a professor from Northeastern

University included in her remarks a statement which indicated that “The Cosby Show” while impressive, it was not representative of Black America. The professor had no idea how I might react to such a broad generalization. She knew I was a career diplomat who was the Branch Public Affairs Officer, but she had no idea of my family background. Why did she say that with me in the audience? I waited for the conclusion of the panel and decided I was not going to be the “consummate” diplomat. I was going to be Harriet Elam. I proceeded to tell them about my family. I informed her that I came from a family of five lawyers, a judge, a librarian and yes, a career diplomat. In fact, there are more professionals in my family. I said my nieces and nephews attended Yale, Princeton, Harvard, Duke University, Radcliffe and Vassar. And oh how I wish to meet this professor as I am editing this oral history transcript for the nephew who graduated from Harvard is now the Vice-Provost for all undergraduate education at Stanford. As we all know, there are a many families just like mine

Q: Did you find- it's interesting that two overseas assignments were juxtaposed like that, Greece and Turkey, both very interesting cultures and their culture in and of themselves being so close. That must have been an exciting highlight in your own professional career to be able to work in two cultures almost within the same timeframe, in their language, within their culture. What kinds of assessments were you able to make?

ELAM-THOMAS: They are very similar. The religions are different but they have a long history of attachment. The founder of the Modern Turkish Republic Kemal Atatürk and former Greek Prime Minister Eleftherios Venizelos were strong proponents of mutual understanding and agreement between those two countries. Despite the media reports to the contrary, I saw an attempt to move closer to one another. I have returned to both countries on three occasions beginning in 2005. During those visits, I noted significant improvements in the relations. The earthquakes that took place in the late '90s in Turkey and in Greece brought those two countries together. I have often thought that God delivered a message to bring those two countries together and the earthquakes set an mutually dependent and beneficial climate.

Q: ...side A, Ambassador Harriet Elam-Thomas, June the 2nd, 2006.

Ambassador Elam-Thomas, we have just made a deep swing through the cradle of civilization and with the unique comparisons of the two cultures, Greece and Turkey, where you played vital roles as far as articulating U.S. policy and extending U.S. culture and society to both of these societies. What was on the plate next for you?

ELAM-THOMAS: My next step was, in a way, to become a student of my own country because. I was selected to be a member of the Senior Seminar. This assignment, however, did not come about without input from the ambassador. After two months of not hearing a word from my initial application for a Senior Seminar, Ambassador Richard Barkley decided he would call USIA personnel and he did. He then wrote a follow up message in which he indicated he could not imagine a woman of this caliber awaiting this long for word about her next assignment. We faxed Ambassador Barkley's letter to USIA personnel director Jeffrey Lite. Within 24 hours, I received a phone call at about 11 p.m.

Istanbul time from Jeff Lite who said there's an ambassador who's very much interested and impressed with you. Ambassador Barkley said you are interested in the Senior Seminar; I don't remember seeing anything. I reminded Jeff, I faxed the completed form and justification to DC. I was led to believe that fax never transmitted. Rather than cast blame without evidence, I faxed the documents again and in August 1994, I became a member of the 37th Senior Seminar. We traveled throughout the U.S. to learn how domestic policy impacts on foreign policy. From the officers of major corporations in the World Trade Center to the poorest parishes in Louisiana, to NORAD, to the Sandia Laboratories in New Mexico and to major U.S. cities dealing with urban sprawl.

Q: Today is June the 24th, 2011. This is a continuation of the interview with Ambassador Harriet Elam-Thomas from our last interview session, which was June the 2nd of 2006.

Ambassador Thomas, what we want to do now is to continue with your professional assignments while you were in USIA. We have covered your assignments to Mali, to Senegal, to Athens, to Istanbul. The one that we have not covered is Brussels; can you tell me a little bit about, number one, how you were selected to go to Brussels? Did you volunteer for it, what was your assignment there? I noticed that when we were talking about your experiences and expanding on U.S. culture, society, policy articulation, you had an opportunity to do this at our mission within NATO in Brussels.

ELAM-THOMAS: My assignment was Public Affairs Counselor at the U.S. Embassy in Brussels.

Q: It was the embassy, not NATO.

ELAM-THOMAS: I understand the need to confirm my location for the U.S. Government has three separate missions in Brussels.

Q: Okay, well, why don't we just start off with how did you go there? Did you ask for it?

ELAM-THOMAS: While in the Senior Seminar, I noticed my State colleagues lobbied forcefully for whatever future assignment they desired. John Taft, who was then the president of the Senior Seminar and now the U.S. Ambassador to Russia said to me one day, "Harriet you need to go to Brussels." John was the President of the 37th Senior Seminar Class and I was the Vice President. John said, "There's a PAO job opening at the embassy in Brussels and I really think you should consider it." I said we don't usually do that in USIA. He understood my hesitancy and he called someone in the European Area. The next thing I hear is that USIA's EU area director suggests that I lobby for the position. This was far from what I would have expected, but I then learned that the ambassador was a political appointee. To add to the excitement, this ambassador thought I should travel to Brussels for an interview. Ambassador Alan Blinken was a Wall Street investment banker. His brother was the ambassador to Hungary.\

After much discussion on whether or not I should travel to Brussels, the incumbent PAO, Ashley Wills, convinced Ambassador Blinken that Harriet Elam did not need to come out

for an interview. Trust me, Mr. Ambassador; she is capable of handling this post. Fortunately, the ambassador agreed with Ashley Wills. The very day I arrived, however, after dropping off my luggage and freshening up, I went to the embassy for this long-awaited “interview.” Early on in our first meeting, Ambassador Blinken said I have I probably have done something wrong today; I said that the Vlamsbaack Party is a racist party.

Q: How do you spell it?

ELAM-THOMAS: V-L-A-M-S-B-A-A-C-K. It’s a Flemish word, Vlamsbaack Party. I said Mr. Ambassador, you can’t say that. That’s the last thing you can say. Well it’s the truth, he said, and the Belgian prime minister said it was as well. We are probably going to get some flak about that in the press soon. What a welcome. The first day I arrive, probably the first probably person of color to be the Public Affairs Officer and the first task before me may be to refute the ambassador’s all-too-candid statement. I told the ambassador that his best approach would be to ignore any reference that appears in the press. Sure enough the next day an article appeared in the press. We said nothing and, thank heavens, the story died. That experience prepared me for the former Wall Street banker who operated the embassy in a totally new fashion from all the career ambassadors with whom I had worked. He admonished his senior officers to find ways to legally to accomplish his goals and reminded us that in the private sector, there are teams of lawyers who research ways to accomplish whatever goal and do so legally.

My colleague in the Foreign Commercial Service and I became Ambassador Blinken’s “go to team” whenever he wanted to see tangible evidence of his ideas. We had independent budgets, staff and other resources we could bring together to satisfy one of Ambassador Blinken’s signature projects: the establishment of a U.S. Trade and Investment Center in Brussels. The “center” was an information center for businessmen from the Newly Independent States (NIS) who explored ways to enter the U.S. market. The USIA Library had a small section that we reconfigured to house computers and separate carrels where the clients could research American companies. Once the center was up and running and we produced a video which highlighted the services available, Ambassador Blinken was thrilled. I shall be forever in debt to my FCS colleague the late Terry Flannery for that success and other positive aspects of my Brussels assignment.

Blinken liked to give speeches and therefore a lot speechwriting came with this job. I had not served with an ambassador who ate lunch in the embassy cafeteria. He would engage the visiting parents and embassy guests in conversations. I am sure they remembered that embassy visit. He hosted dinners for the Country Team and senior staff which in my experiences was unusual.

The Belgians ran a vibrant Fulbright commission. They selected first rate candidates. I have to remember, these candidates attended universities in an industrialized nations. My earlier experiences even in Greece and Turkey never mind the developing world could not match the caliber of candidates. The Belgian Fulbright Commission helped manage the Luxembourg mission’s Fulbright cultural- Fulbright program. While there were a host

of challenges as we worked with the political appointee ambassador to Luxembourg, we met them and selected good candidates from Luxembourg as well.

Q: This sounds - This is a most interesting observation. This is a political appointee-

ELAM-THOMAS: Correct.

Q: You may not have known that you had a feel not only for management and leadership but I'm hearing you say that you were totally integrated into the country team as the PAO.

ELAM-THOMAS: I was part and parcel of the embassy and I truly enjoyed this responsibility.

Q: And how did you feel about the receptivity of the rest of the country team? Did they accept you as a fully integrated entity on the country team?

ELAM-THOMAS: We had a respectful and professional relationship. The DCM happened to be a woman and the most senior staffers of that embassy were women. The Chief of Station was a woman, the Deputy Defense Attaché was a woman and the PAO was a woman. When President Clinton announced Madeleine Albright as Secretary of State, we called the Ambassador Blinken and expressed collective delight. And told the ambassador we wanted to celebrate. He said, "I'm waiting for you for with champagne." That was an incredible boost for female officers. The Belgians were very pleased with Blinken. He retains a positive relationship with key members of Belgian society. The ability to communicate that warmth came so naturally to him and if he, again, if he did not know the nuances he would defer to the professionals. How refreshing!

Q: It's most interesting.

ELAM-THOMAS: Blinken and his wife have stayed in touch with me for 20 years. He attended my wedding, my 70th birthday gathering and he has hosted me and my husband on several occasions at their elegant East Side New York apartment.

Q: What was the focus of the embassy vis-à-vis trade and commerce and policy advocacy? I ask that because of the fact that this is a tri-mission and I heard you say that one of the successes that you enjoyed was pairing up with the FCS, the Foreign Commerce Service and incorporating their catalog, their foreign commerce library in with the USIS library. Was the focus on trade?

ELAM-THOMAS: Yes, the focus was on trade and investment.

Q: Okay.

ELAM-THOMAS: Setting up this center with that focus could have been dicey because Ambassador Stuart Eizenstat headed the U.S. Mission to the European Union. I was a bit

concerned that Eizenstat might consider Blinken's initiative as stepping into Eizenstat's turf regarding European economic and business interests. Fortunately, that was not the case and the Newly Independent States businessmen made excellent use of the center.

Ambassador Robert Hunter was our U.S. Representative to the U.S. Mission to NATO. Imagine serving in a country with three high profile political appointee ambassadors, all of whom have a reputation for excellence in their field. Trust me; we had to dance a very delicate diplomatic dance internally to maintain collaboration among the three ambassadors.

Ambassador Marc Grossman alerted me when preparations were being made for the annual NATO ministerial meetings. Marc knew how to deal with the potential sensitivities of all three gentlemen as he arranged for the motorcade with then Secretary Christopher from the airport. At one point Marc said, "Can you imagine what a task I have before me with respect to who rides with the Secretary from the airport?" I jokingly replied, "Marc you can make a stop along the way to switch the ambassadors so that all get to have face-time with the Secretary." I did not envy Marc's position.

Christopher was an avid tennis player as was Eizenstat, Marc warned Eizenstat not to bring his yellow pad to the tennis court to discuss work. The Secretary wanted to relax and to play tennis. We were told that Ambassador Eizenstat brought his yellow pad just in case the opportunity presented itself to discuss an issue. I have no idea what transpired, but I smile when I think how personal idiosyncrasies must be considered.

Q: Now how about your relations with your- did you have a counterpart relation with the other two missions, U.S. missions?

ELAM-THOMAS: There were three PAOs since there were three missions in Brussels. I was considered first among equals because the embassy PAO had budget oversight for both the USEU and NATO missions. My goal was to minimize inevitable tensions particularly since both PAOs were women. I employed more of my diplomatic skills with respect to internal negotiations than outside of the mission. I recognized all of us were operating in a predominantly male oriented profession and we all needed to succeed. I had to work very carefully not to alienate either one of them. Sometimes it was very difficult. These challenges prepared me for my next/unexpected Washington assignment as USIA Counselor and to coordinate the integration of USIA into the State Department.

Q: Before we go back to Washington, this is an interesting observation here because where we do have several missions we find that the U.S. mission to that host country was in charge of bi-lateral relations. As you've already pointed out, the embassy had the responsibility of providing the resource support to the other missions. You obviously had separate budgetary guidelines for each mission. Was there any lesson learned area that you found useful as you're about to delve into your next assignment?

ELAM-THOMAS: Yes. I had to learn to listen more to the other perspective. I know I give speeches about listening all the time. In this instance, I had to practice what I preach.

I had to understand the different kinds of demands to support their day-to-day operation. When they recognized I really heard their concerns that action helped minimize the inherent tension that I knew existed. Each female officer dealt with male counterparts who were not always supportive. We tried to manage our operations well. My listening was critical to supporting the U. S. Mission to the EU and the U.S. Mission to NATO.

Q: I noticed in reading some of your background material that you were a member of the U.S. delegation to the 25th United Nations General Assembly. At what point in your career did that happen?

ELAM-THOMAS: It was in 1971. As a program officer in the Office of Youth, Students and Special Programs in the Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs (ECA) before the bureau became part of USIA.

Q: Before integration.

ELAM-THOMAS: No, not the USIA-State integration which took place in 1999. The ECA Bureau was always part of the State Department. All Cultural Attaches were seconded to USIA to take on their overseas assignments.

About a year after I had been in the office, I was selected to be the youth delegate during the 25th UN General Assembly (UNGA). Then Ambassador George Herbert Walker Bush was the chief of the U.S. mission to the UN. Arthur Fletcher was one of the delegates. Bernard Zagorin was the other. While editing this document, I learned that Zagorin passed away March 18, 2015 at 95. He was the person to whom I reported. I was tasked to write a report on the potential impact of the youth delegates who attended the 25 UNGA.

Each morning I sat in the General Assembly sessions and listened to heads of state deliver their country's message which sounded so much like boiler plate that I had to force myself to stay awake. I began to wonder if these sessions were more photo ops than substance. Later during my first week, we attended sessions of the Economic and Social Council as well as other working group meetings. All of a sudden, the topics were interesting and I realized that the action work of the UN takes place in those sessions. I also noted that the few young diplomats present were not considered even worthy of recognition. It was as if to satisfy some new requirement the youth delegates were there merely to window dress.

In my report I recommended a far more inclusive work-oriented plan for the youth delegates. Rather than have us provide our views in separate messages to the committees, we should be allowed to be an integral part of the committees with assigned topics to research and analyze. We wanted to have a platform to remind the clearly aging members of the delegation that our views would have merit particularly since we were the next generation of world diplomats.

Ambassador Zagorin's response to my report was positive. I just came across a note from him in which he said we will certainly share the findings with other members of the U.S. Mission to the UN. From his perspective, the recommendations I made had merit.

Q: Well what were some of the major issues that they addressed?

ELAM-THOMAS: To be very candid with you I do not remember for this document was written in 1971 or 1972. I do remember there were many newly independent nations from Sub-Saharan Africa. While their heads of state were venerable older men, many of their delegation members were my age.

Q: I think for the record it would be useful if you could just expound just a little bit about what does a U.S. delegation- what does it do, what are their interests, responsibilities?

ELAM-THOMAS: The delegations are there to inform other member nations the U.S. position on a host of international issues from human rights, to nuclear weapons to human trafficking, etc. Our Permanent Representative (the ambassador) could not possibly cover all of the issues alone and thus the U.S. Mission section heads led the charge on their subject areas. No doubt each section had to meet with the various interest groups present at this UNGA session. Those interest groups were of course lobbyists. From our observations of the senior officers, we learned how some of these lobbying groups provided critical information on issues which were highly technical. It was there that I learned that these interest groups offered a valuable service to diplomats when it came to drafting highly complex scientific proposals for consideration of the full UN membership. U.S. delegates were briefed each morning and had their talking points and U.S. positions to share with other member nations. The goal was to garner as much support for our interests from other delegates and this was often done through one-on-one conversations. Delegates also had to be prepared to articulate our perspectives in various working group meetings.

There were many high profile "representational" receptions during that UNGA. I could see how such settings were far more conducive to informal negotiations than sitting in a conference room. These social gatherings often took place in the Delegate's Lounge or reception areas. With today's tense security climate, I doubt that many receptions are held within the UN buildings.

Q: And the way these delegations are structured they receive their instructions from the departments, from international organizations or did they receive them from the permanent mission?

ELAM-THOMAS: They received them from the department of IO (Bureau of International Organization Affairs). There were subject matter experts: e.g., environmentalists, nuclear physicists, chemical engineers, medical doctors and others with critical expertise. The SALT talks were on the agenda well before we had to address the sophisticated weaponry that we have now. However, the delegation members got their instructions from IO.

Q: And what was a highlight of that assignment that you had as a member of the U.S. delegation? What did you take away from it as far as your own professional development?

ELAM-THOMAS: That America wasn't the only game on the planet. There are knowledgeable, talented, well versed communicators from every part of the world. I sat in awe listening to delegates from the Caribbean, from Asia and Latin America as they explained their country's position often in superb English. Without a doubt, English may not have been their first language. I was only 30 or 31 and found this incredibly impressive. I quickly realized I had to sit back and absorb the fact that the United States is not the only country capable of producing representatives/diplomats. Many of them were far better informed than I was because they had done their research. If they had not done it, they were equipped with excellent staffers to provide them the information needed. Of course ninety percent of these individuals were male. That also struck me. Again, this was 1971 and I should not have been surprised. Fortunately, there are a few more women in key UN positions today.

Q: Well I thought it was very useful for you to note this as a part of your oral history because it is an important part of the professional role of a diplomat that not all diplomats unfortunately have the opportunity to participate. It's the ultimate form of articulation for U.S. policy.

ELAM-THOMAS: You are absolutely correct. If I may, let me fast-forward for just a moment while I remember? As counselor of USIA I organized and was part of a more senior U.S. delegation to a UNESCO meeting in Stockholm. The U.S. had pulled out of UNESCO for we were dissatisfied with the management of that UN organization. When we attended the Stockholm meetings, we had observer status only. However, the U.S. was allowed to state our position during the plenary sessions. As we entered the elegant conference setting, we were directed to our places in the back of the room where all observer delegates were seated. That was a sobering experience for each one of us. The Vatican was an observer, but they were used to the seating. For the slightly self-assured academic scholars and myself all seated in the back of the auditorium, it was a brand new experience.

Fortunately my work as a cultural attaché put me in touch with a host of anthropologists and cultural experts at American's foremost museums including the Smithsonian. Therefore, I had little difficulty in selecting credible delegates to this meeting. We all agreed it was a humbling experience.

As I exited the meeting session during a break, I met one of my top contacts and respected interlocutors from my time as Branch PAO in Istanbul, Turkey. In the early 1990's Dr. Ekmeleddin Ihsanoglu directed The Islamic Research Center. Ihsanoglu Headed the Organization of Islamic Cooperation from 2004-2014. He was an unsuccessful candidate in the 2014 Turkish Presidential elections and in 2015 announced his candidacy to represent Istanbul's District 2 for the Nationalist Movement Party.

Ihsanoglu and his wife have remained in touch with me especially during Christmas and Moslem holidays since my time in Turkey. I was honored to be invited to celebrate the 40th Anniversary of the OIC at the UNGA in 2012. I was told that the invitation came specifically at the request of Dr. Ihsanoglu. I attended the reception and briefly met the current Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan. In October 2013, Ihsanoglu invited me to attend another event in Washington, DC when he received a lifetime achievement award from the East-West Institute in DC. I mention this meeting because this international setting, as the UNGA, provided me and a host of other attendees that kind of access.

Q: This is a most interesting observation and I wanted to ask you about that and I think back to the delegation that went to San Francisco in 1945 where- and Ralph Bunche was a member of that delegation and he had been working very closely with Eleanor Roosevelt on Declaration of the human rights articles. And without going into the details for this oral history but he did collaborate with a delegation from New Zealand on the incorporation of the human rights articles.

Did you have any of those experiences, particularly with UNESCO when we were not a member on collaborating with any other delegations on positions that we felt very strongly about?

ELAM-THOMAS: I do believe we did. The others listened attentively for after all we are still the United States of America. I counseled our delegation to comport themselves in a very careful manner. If we wanted to have our language incorporated in the final communiqué, we should not alienate our colleagues. We should always begin our interjection with, “We would like to suggest that you consider this point in light of your perspectives...” I did not think it would be helpful to begin each interjection with: “the United States delegation in its observer status believes such and such ...” While delegations may be accustomed to hearing that formal language, but craft your statements in a less provocative manner. Our group followed that suggestion. Ambassador E. Michael Southwick was the ranking delegation member at that time and he made the presentation. I must say it was difficult to be the outsider looking in. Once again this was a humbling experience.

Q: Well you mention that this happened, that you had this experience when you were the counselor, which for the record was the senior most career position in the United States Information Agency and in fact you were the last acting director of that agency before it was incorporated and folded into the State Department. Was this your next assignment after Brussels?

ELAM-THOMAS: Yes it was. I received a call from then-director Joseph Duffey while I was in Brussels. He asked that I return to Washington to be the Counselor of USIA. I was absolutely flabbergasted. I said to myself, what have I done to deserve this? We were all keenly aware that USIA would be part and parcel of the Department of State by 1999. I also was seized by the fact that Counselor was the senior career position at USIA. The Director and Deputy Director were always political appointees. As I mused about this

officer, I got a call from Asst. Sec. Patrick Kennedy who said, they needed a consensus builder in this position. He emphasized what I already knew that the transition would be difficult. They wanted a career officer who could work effectively with the Department of State throughout this complex process. I kept thinking of the many elements: personnel, budget, and geographic, regional and functional bureaus. Never mind the mammoth task of melding two very different cultures. I spent much time researching corporate mergers and was even more sobered by the challenge, but I accepted the task.

Q: Did you bring in any outside consultants?

ELAM-THOMAS: No we did not bring in outside consultants. I relied on the recommendation of various case studies from the private sector to serve as a kind of template. I was painfully aware that the flexibility which existed in the corporate world did not obtain in the government. I would have to work within limited parameters and that was it.

To be most candid with you there are many USIA colleagues who will never be able to accept the fact that there is an institution that was their home for 40 years will never exist again. To be even more candid, I know their concerns had merit. However, there is no turning back no matter how many studies have been written. USIA no longer exists in today's environment, but USIA's steady, multifaceted approach led to successes during the Cold War era and resulted in the fall of the Berlin Wall and the USSR. We should always be proud of that positive legacy.

The challenge: Approximately 6,600 people USIA staffers sought guidance from the Counselor's office on how to mesh their work in the new environment. They lost budget and program control and yet they were gaining access and providing input to the decision makers in the Department, something much needed to improve overall programs.

In preparation for the actual merger, I traveled abroad to several PAO conferences in different geographic regions. On a few trips, Pat Kennedy accompanied me to lessen the anxiety as he outlined and explained the intricacies of the process. Again and again, I thank the senior USIA policy officers, budget officials and area directors for arming me with sufficient information to further allay justified fears and uncertainty from our respected colleagues in the field. When I reflect on the complexities, it is mind boggling. Imagine trying to mesh, country plan objectives, personnel systems, warehouses and the ever complexities of human beings. I had more food for thought than an appetite for it. The USIA staff was incredibly supportive. Bean counting does not work when you are dealing with changing a person's position and opinion on the USG's stance on an issue. How do you quantify changing behaviors? You are not tracking the number of adjudicated visas. You are not recording the number of passports issued. Fortunately, there were USIA colleagues who were able to craft a way in which we could make credible predictions of the value of the agency's work over its 40 year history.

Suppose 500-1000 people attend a theatrical, orchestral or dance performance. How can you indicate how this cultural experience changed opinion about the United States? The

Miller Crouch's USIA's former EU Director and senior policy person, helped us craft a credible report which met that requirement. Steve Chaplin was another who helped me understand how our goals and objectives could be integrated into the Department of State. The area directors were superb colleagues at a very difficult time. Their steadfast support in making sure I had all the data necessary every time I entered an integration meeting at State. That support strengthened my resolve to be totally supportive of them in whatever way I could. I remembered how several of my predecessors treated area directors and I did not wish to repeat their mistakes. The area directors and senior policy officers are the brain trust of USIA. They must be respected. Their careers led to a proficiency in a host of foreign languages, cultures and tradition and governments. My career assignments as with many meant I had minimal insight into the NEA region or the East Asian region. I had not studied those languages. Those area directors knew their regions were walking encyclopedias re those areas. I will never forget the excellent presentation which was done for me to give on how USIA would reach the Muslim community during the first Gulf War and shortly after the bombing in Bali. Their expertise was critical and I knew that my State colleagues were impressed with their in depth knowledge of those regions.

Shortly after my arrival as Counselor, the 1997 the financial crisis in Thailand gripped much of East Asia. It raised fears of a worldwide economic meltdown. At the time, Thailand had acquired a burden of [foreign debt](#) that made the country effectively bankrupt even before the collapse of its currency. As the crisis spread, most of Southeast Asia and Japan saw slumping currencies, devalued stock markets and other asset prices. Indonesia, [South Korea](#) and [Thailand](#) were the countries most affected by the crisis. [Hong Kong](#), [Laos](#), [Malaysia](#) and the [Philippines](#) were also hurt by the slump. The impact on all exchange programs in the region and Fulbrighters assigned to those countries meant we had to make wise decisions on how to handle all of these things.

I relied on the East Asia area director and deputies who prepared excellent briefs, recommendations. It was if they had been accustomed to crisis management along with the standard information and cultural programming. I knew that detailed research was done before we mounted a program in any geographic region, but I was not sure my State colleagues knew this. I was exceedingly proud of my colleagues. Throughout this crisis,, they demonstrated that USIA was a far more “substantive” organization than most of our State colleagues realized in the past.

Q: You've decided to answer a question that I didn't ask and I was going to ask it; I'm going to ask it so you can go on and expound on it because this is one of the challenges of the history of public diplomacy and with USIA and later the Department of State being lead agencies on its execution. What were the major challenges in making- there had been changes before as you've already spoken about and the old CU, Bureau of Culture and Education Department was part of State and then it became a part of USIA. There was the Office of the Inspector General, which actually moved to the Department of State before USIA went out of business in 1996, some three or four years before Department of State had the responsibility of oversight.

ELAM-THOMAS: That's right, that's right.

Q: So there was always this fluidity of focus on the execution of public diplomacy in all of the program planning. This probably is the historical highlight in the U.S. Government of refocusing this mechanism and the execution of public diplomacy. What were the major challenges that you were faced with other than the logistical kinds of things that you've already recounted here. There are mindsets involved, not only within USIA, those who had come to think that this was the only way it could be done but there was also a mindset in the receiving such proposals and you had to deal with that. Can you talk to that for a minute?

ELAM-THOMAS: One must remember that the people with whom I interacted were the senior leadership in the Department, many of whom were political appointees. There were also career officers at the next level. I knew I had to craft my approach to each group separately. Interestingly enough, the mindsets and perceptions of the career USIA and State career officers proved to be hardest to change. The political appointees were much less wedded to a 40-year history or attachment to USIA.

For State officers, policy formulation was the primary concern. In their minds, how USIA articulated or promoted that policy was secondary. It was always hard to get our area directors' input early on in policy deliberations. My goal with this integration was to increase if not ensure that our input/opinions were discussed and given a fair hearing prior to launching an advocacy campaign in places like Iraq, Afghanistan or Pakistan. Of course this was well before 9/11, but we were still feeling the results of the first Gulf War.

Q: Advisors and trainers?

ELAM-THOMAS: No, I was not referring to advisors or training. USIA did not have the role of the more recent Strategic Communications units which came into existence at DOD after 9/11.

Q: What we had- We did have the incursion in Iraq with Kuwait.

ELAM-THOMAS: Yes, that's right, we had advisors at that time

Q: Ninety-two?

ELAM-THOMAS: Ninety one or ninety two. I cannot remember.

Q: Ninety-two.

ELAM-THOMAS: My constant goal was to demonstrate to State colleagues the value of conducting public opinion poll research before we took action in a country and before we envisioned any USIA program for the country. State officers did not seem aware that we placed such value in advance research or that we did such research. As they learned how we operated, they understood the soundness of our approach. This was an "ah-ha"

moment. I was relieved for after I had attended senior meetings four days out of five a week in the State Department chaired by Strobe Talbott or Tom Pickering chaired I no longer received a bemused look when I spoke about press analyses and public opinion research. I purposely minimized reporting on performing artists or exchange programs unless they had an immediate political impact. I reminded the senior State colleagues that all USIA programs were mounted only after careful analyses of target audiences. The assumption that public diplomacy was in essence public relations persisted and we had to dissuade our State colleagues from that misperception.. Many political appointees often thought that the terms were interchangeable. That is precisely why there was an increased interest in branding. Some thought one could bring the Madison Avenue approach to winning friends and influencing people. They quickly learned conventional product marketing and advertising campaign approaches do not work. America is not a product to be sold. The emphasis on standard logos for all USIA posts abroad did not work. Videos showing the successes of Muslims in America fell on deaf ears. Nothing can replace the face-to-face encounter to really change perceptions of America.

Throughout the integration process, I used all of the diplomatic skills I could muster in Washington, DC. I know I did not always succeed for I was saddled with an unenviable position. As with political campaigns, each side would cling to its ideology. Never the twain shall meet. In preparation for my teaching, I have read scores of articles and studies on Public Diplomacy. Some by American and several are written by foreign authors. I am encouraged by the fact there are more tangible of effective Public Diplomacy programs in the U.S. and abroad. Of course these successes reignite the views of the former USIA officers who long for the rebirth of the agency.

Q: Who did you choose as the main State colleague who would give USIA's interests a fair hearing?

ELAM-THOMAS: In State?

Q: Now I know I'm getting away from the point

ELAM-THOMAS: Yes, yes.

Q: They had to make the merger happen.

ELAM-THOMAS: I knew they had to make it happen so I worked with the assumption that I need not waste precious time trying to seek an advocate for USIA's position.

Q: But someone else had to receive it and then make sure that the new structure understood it and whether it was the undersecretary of whatever, who was your target?

ELAM-THOMAS: Well I may not have had a target but I had an advocate.

Q: Okay, who was your advocate?

ELAM-THOMAS: It was Marc Grossman.

Q: Marc who? For the record do you want to say who- what he did?

ELAM-THOMAS: Marc Grossman was then an area director and he became undersecretary, as we now know. My confidence in working with Marc confirms what I always believe and that is the value of relationship building. We served together in Turkey from 1990-1994. He was Abramowitz' DCM at the time. We all know Mark's career and even in the late 1990's. he had access to the movers and shakers in the Department. I kept Marc informed of most of USIA's integration progress. He helped me navigate the manner in which to facilitate USIA's smoother integrations to State. Fortunately, when Marc was EU Assistant Secretary, Brian Carlson was USIA's EU Area Director. The calm, studied approach of Brian to be the first PD Director in State's European Area was a model for the integration of the rest of the bureaus.

Q: You mentioned that he was an area director. There are some who would say that there was unevenness in terms of area director integration after USIA's official transfer to State.

ELAM-THOMAS: Yes.

Q: In the execution of public diplomacy among the bureaus. Some bureaus integrated it directly into their structure, other bureaus say go there, do whatever you do, just don't get in my way, and other bureaus fully integrated the USIA area directors. Wasn't this your responsibility.

ELAM-THOMAS: No it was not.

Q: But did you anticipate this?

ELAM-THOMAS: We did. And as a result of a key decision based on recommendations from none other than Miller Crouch, Brian Carlson was the area director to be the first to physically move his entire bureau to State. Brian had the right personality. He worked in concert with Marc Grossman and the result was a success story. Candidly, I must say, it is one of the few that turned out to be a success. The other area directors tried, but none of them succeeded in fully integrating the way Brian Carlson did with Marc Grossman. It was masterful and both of them deserve the credit for the success.

Q: The undersecretary for public affairs- of public diplomacy and public affairs came after the consolidation?

ELAM-THOMAS: Yes. Evelyn Lieberman was the first one.

Q: Lieberman was the first.

ELAM-THOMAS: Yes.

Q: I don't remember how long after '99 her position was created.

ELAM-THOMAS: She came aboard before the actual ceremony handing of the keys to state took place on October 1, 1999. Albright, Lieberman and I took part in that ceremony in front of USIA. Lieberman did not remain in the position from October 1999 to January 19, 2001

Q: So the people you had, from USIA in preparation for this transition included: Janet Brambilla, Rick Ruth, Miller Crouch, Stan Silverman?

ELAM-THOMAS: Yes, that's correct.

Q: Anyone else?

ELAM-THOMAS: I don't think Steve Chaplin had retired yet and he was critical to the move.

Q: For the record, Janet Brambilla was head of personnel.

ELAM-THOMAS: Yes, she was. Also Rick Ruth was our policy guru and I gather Rich is still working in the front offices of ECA at the Department. He is a Civil Service employee and thus would not have to retire at 65.

Q: He's back in ECA now.

ELAM-THOMAS: Yes.

Q: I'm asking these lead questions because again, I think that this is an important historical record.

ELAM-THOMAS: Yes.

Q: -and that in as such your own career and your contributions. Did you find that there was an understanding of PD work? Well. How did you perceive of the- what was now called the undersecretary of public diplomacy and public affairs? What was the intent of that office? It certainly was not in a supervisory role. It was not in a management role, either. It had no budget. How did you see that, the development and all; what was the purpose of that office as a part of the consolidation process? What was the original intent?

ELAM-THOMAS: I'm not sure what the original intent was but my perception was that it was created to appease USIA. If there we not an Under Secretary with that title, your work would not be considered equal in value to all of the other bureaus. As for the original intent, I would not venture to say that I know. There have been six individuals in that position since 2001. Few of them remained more than 20 months.

Q. Except for Karen Hughes.

ELAM-THOMAS: Except for Karen Hughes, that's right.

Q: I think that this is a key, one of the key elements from the State side of the house and I realize this might be getting ahead and outside of the purview of your professional responsibilities but what I wanted to do is to see if there were any conceptual ends in the creation of that office, whether they were going to leave it up to the area directors to define the execution of public diplomacy as they perceived.

ELAM-THOMAS: I would think that the area directors would be the only individuals who could define the execution of public diplomacy programs. The Under Secretary for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs, no matter how well versed in the media, media analysis, etc., could begin to understand the complexities of audiences around the world. At the time of this interview, I believe Judith McHale of the Discovery Channel was in that position but left in 2011. Charlotte Beers the Madison Avenue guru succeed Evelyn Lieberman and remained from October 2001 until March 2004. The list goes on and at the time of this edit, Richard Stengel is the Under Secretary.

Q: Karen Hughes left?

ELAM-THOMAS: She's just left, that's right. Once again, I remind the readers that America is not a product. We are dealing with human relations and behavioral patterns. To have an impact on either requires different skills and sensitive approaches. Your interactions with interlocutors must be sincere. As Americans often think that you can win friends and influence people by the mere fact of our presence and our present stature in the world. Other cultures are steeped in history and they consider historical precedence before they take actions. We don't have that lengthy history. We must recognize that if we're going to develop a sincere relationship with someone from Iran, from Iraq, from France. Whenever you travel in Europe, you see visible reminders of World War I. In the U.S. you do not have daily reminders of a war on your soil. Sadly, we now have Ground Zero. We dare not rely on a high tech approach to establish a meaningful relationship with audience members. Unless we delve deeply into our host audience's culture our messages may not bring the behavior change which we wish. We all know traditional diplomacy takes time and effective public diplomacy takes a very long time. The inevitable question remains, do we have the patience to gain the results we want.

One example which comes to mind on the mistakes we have made since the integrations is Karen Hughes' video for Muslim audiences. The PD team produced a film about the successes of people of Islamic faith in the United States. When I visited one of our posts in Doha he noted that none of the media outlets would show the film. It should not be surprised that the film was perceived as patronizing. No one bothered to reflect on how it would appear that all of a sudden Muslims in America had positive things to offer America. We tend to ignore the history of other parts of the world. I think we're beginning to learn, and I'm not sure we've totally learned that yet.

Q: Well I think that what we should do, and incidentally when do you want to take a break? Why don't we take a break right now?

ELAM-THOMAS: Yes.

Q: And we will come back and we will transition from this part into general career highlights.

Okay. Why don't we continue with your role as the senior career person in USIA and in fact you were the acting director.

ELAM-THOMAS: Acting Deputy Director not Director. Joseph Duffey left and Penn Kemble became Acting Director and I became the Acting Deputy Director.

Q: Acting Deputy Director during the consolidation of the public diplomacy, i.e., USIA, into the Department of State. What were some of the major personnel challenges you were confronted with in making sure that the transition of the infrastructure stayed intact, and that includes not only from the personnel perspective with a capital P but also looking at the very enviable training program that USIA conducted and how it was assimilated or re-assimilated into the overall structure of the Foreign Service Institute.

ELAM-THOMAS: We covered some of this a bit earlier, but now to the some of the details which I did not mention.

With State's FSI's a university-like setting and large student body, we knew our training program would have to meld into FSI's existing curriculum. There were, however, areas in which USIA did longer and more in-depth courses because we had fewer people to train and the officers had to know intricacies of cultures to be effective. To my pleasant relief, the integration of both training programs was smoother than I ever expected. Dr. Katherine Lee directed our training operation and she worked effectively with her State colleagues during the transition. I was glad that FSI leadership recognized the strengths of PAO, IO and CAO courses. We focused on the ever-present cultural sensitivities and traditions critical to our officers gaining credible access to target audiences. State welcomed the USIA training teachers and kept the USIA trainers in charge of PD-related courses. It has been encouraging to see that most of the PD courses to this day are taught by former USIA officers. Granted this assessment is a very personal one. I have no idea what might be the view of future State Department inspectors.

The story of USIA's final two promotion panels was not as smooth as the training program story I just related. Our USIA budget included sufficient funds for a credible number of promotions at the various rank with particular emphasis on the SFS ranks. When I presented the final list of officers recommended for promotion to my DG colleagues at State, I met significant resistance. The Director General, based on the analyses of their numbers crunchers asked, "How can you approve the promotion of these individuals at this point with integration on the horizon?" I responded, "Because we made

certain our budget would provide adequate resources for the FSOs who genuinely merited promotions. Why should they be denied advancement in the hierarchy merely because of the integration? After all, at that time we were still an independent agency.” Two years in a row I had to make that case with the Directors General. I had to use all the diplomacy I could muster. I must admit, near the end of both meetings, I wasn’t terribly diplomatic. Something tells me the DGs did not expect such a firm response from me, but I held fast to my position. I finally got the necessary “go ahead” from the DGs and both promotion lists were approved.

As I reflect on my career, it is interesting that I have served on several Selection Panels. Of course I met the legal requirement for women and minorities and that is probably why I had this experience a bit more often than others. The last time I was a panelist was during my time as a diplomat in residence at the University of Central Florida. I noted that many former USIA officers were not only competitive with their State colleagues; they received high scores from State officers and public members of the panel. Why? These officers were experienced human resource managers and financial managers. They had been responsible for program budgets before the integration. Such skills were not part of a political or an economic officer’s portfolio.

Q: Before we move away from this historic assignment as counselor, I’d like to go into your assignment as diplomat in residence at the University of Central Florida. Before we go there, are there any other significant observations during the period as counselor of the Agency that you’d like to address?

ELAM-THOMAS: Not at the moment.

Q: Good.

How did you get the next assignment, which was your final assignment as a career diplomat, as a diplomat in residence at the University of Central Florida? Was it something that you sought out or something that just happened?

ELAM-THOMAS: I did not seek this assignment. Trust me, after running an embassy and dealing with the aftermath of September 11th, I was ready to retire. That was what I thought. Then Director General, Ambassador Ruth Davis, called and said to me Harriet, “We need to have more women and minorities in this business and I’m convinced that I’m still here on the planet because there’s still work for me to do.” Anyone who knows Ruth Davis understands that you should not decline or reject this request. Ambassador Davis had rallied back after a major health challenge. I agreed to do the job for a year and began the domestic assignment with the same enthusiasm I had given my overseas assignments.

As a kind of “cultural immersion,” I met with all UCF deans. Of course I noted that at that time only one of the deans was a woman. That has changed in the 12 years I have been here. Whenever I made presentations on Foreign Service Careers, academic colleagues would refer to me as a kind of Pied Piper for foreign affairs. With their

refreshing honesty, students would say when they heard an ambassador was coming, they did not think they would see a woman. I did not the perception most held of diplomats; an elderly white haired gentleman in a pinned striped suit. I was approachable. Upon reflection, I was probably too accessible and found myself overly programmed. During the first four months at UCF, I gave about 42 presentations not only on campus, but at Rotary Clubs, Bar Associations, civic groups and at educational conferences.

The work was satisfying. Prior to my arrival on this campus, I would venture to say few of these students knew about the State Department or diplomacy. When I mentioned The State Department at career fairs, some students thought they could find my office in Tallahassee, Florida's capital. They thought it meant the state of Florida. The students now have a view of the world beyond Disney and Universal. They are now genuinely interested traditional diplomatic careers, The United Nations, The Peace Corps, The World Bank and other NGOs. Few knew the meaning of Non-Governmental Organizations. (NGO). I finished one year thanks to excellent support from our Human Resources and Recruitment colleagues. To ensure my message was inclusive of all in my audiences, I would preface my remarks/my pitch with, "I am here to speak with you about inclusion and a truly diverse foreign service. That means men and women in the Foreign Service who didn't go only to Yale, Princeton, Harvard or Stanford. That means white males as well as women and minorities. There's a wide spectrum of universities in the United States from which we need to draw our talent. So I don't want all the white males to get up and leave the room." I got such a treat watching the faces of my audience members relax. They seemed to welcome my candid remarks at the outset of my talks. Since my arrival on this campus we have had four Pickering Fellows and two Rangels. All are not minorities and those who are not have been first generation college attendees. I estimate there have been 20 who received State Department Internships. Four of my students who have gone on to graduate school have attended the London School of Economics, George Washington and American Universities and other respected schools of international affairs. The thank you notes and descriptions of students' graduate study or exchange experiences and comments from political science professors confirm the information I have shared had relevance.

After my first year at UCF I was ready to leave. UCF President John Hitt asked if the State Department would allow me to spend a second year. His letter to The Department with a request for my extension was approved.

At the end of that second year I reached that magic age of retirement. Lo and behold, I receive another letter from President Hitt expressing his interest to establish a Diplomacy Program. Two years of work the State of Florida's bureaucracy, almost equal to the U.S. Government, UCF received approval to offer a Diplomacy Certificate Program. In 2013, the program has proven successful enough to be designated as a minor in the Political Science Department. The new Security Studies Program has also been designated a minor.

I have been most fortunate to work in a very welcoming environment, the Office of Global Perspectives. The Director, John Bersia, a Pulitzer Prize winning journalist is

President Hitt's Special Assistant for Global Perspectives. President Hitt hired John in 2000 with a vision to internationalize the University of Central Florida.

The past ten years have been amazing. I never expected to have this totally new window on America and life in my own country as I have since my arrival at this university. I have been most gratifying.

Q: So you transitioned from Diplomat in Residence to Director of the Diplomacy Program?

ELAM-THOMAS: Yes.

Q: Do we still have a diplomat in residence?

ELAM-THOMAS: Yes, I believe the 2014-2015 DIR is at University of Florida in Miami.

We have had them at FAMU for Florida A&M University. As of the 2014-2015 academic year, the Diplomat in Residence hold the position for Florida International University and Miami Dade University. It has been a pleasure to see engaged younger FSO present to audiences the multifaceted elements of Foreign Service careers with such enthusiasm. I have listened to two of the DIRs not-resident in Central Florida make realistic yet convincing presentations of FSO careers and watched with great delight the genuine interest which their talks inspired.

Q: Now when you went into the assignment as diplomat in residence did you replace anyone or was it a newly established program?

ELAM-THOMAS: Very good question. I was the first Diplomat-in-Residence in Florida. It was a newly established program. I covered all of Central Florida and the universities in Tampa.

Q: So you established it and then you went on and built on it.

ELAM-THOMAS: Yes. I attribute my success in this new venture to my dear USIA colleague the late Pamela Corey Archer. Pamela was the model for most of the new DIRs in 2003. During the Washington Briefings for DIRs, Pamela offered excellent tips on how to effectively reach students during information session. This was before the Department produced the sophisticated videos/DVDs which they now use and which could convince many to think very seriously about a diplomatic career. We were always in competition with the private sector/corporate world who have the financial resources to do a high-tech production to entice candidates to work for their companies. We certainly miss Pamela's incredible energy and commitment to the university students. She left an enduring legacy and would be proud to see the current Florida DIR in action.

Q: For the record, do you want to just explain, we've been talking about Dips in Residence. And for the record this is a continuation of an interview with Harriet Elam-Thomas, June 24, 2011.

You want to just explain in a couple of minutes what the diplomat in residence program is and any other information as far as how expansive it is?

ELAM-THOMAS: Diplomats in Residence (DIRs) are career Foreign Service Officers located throughout the U.S. who provide guidance and advice on careers, internships and fellowships to students and professionals in the communities they serve. DIRs are available to answer questions and share insight with those interested in Foreign and Civil Service careers, internships and fellowships. I believe the initial focus was to inform those university students not attending Ivy League schools and major urban universities throughout the U.S. The Department was operating under the view that the majority of young officers in the existing talent pool attended those institutions.

The Department wanted to reach out to schools with significant minority enrollments, women and first generation university attendees. Again early on this meant universities in Oklahoma, New Mexico, Florida and others located in the Mid-West, North West and Southern part of the U.S. If we were to bring to the negotiating table only the perspective of those trained at these Ivy League schools, they may not offer the diversity of thought needed when negotiating in the developing world. For example, during my 42 years in this business, I met only two Native Americans. We now operate in a world where the leadership includes individuals not from the western industrialized nations. Our overseas colleagues are from Asia, Africa and Latin America, the newly independent states of the former Soviet Union. By incorporating individuals from all economic, ethnic, racial and gender groups, The State Department could be far more effective in establishing genuine rapport with their host counterparts.

Q: I sense from your response that what we are really talking about, we're not talking about something as simplistic as an extension of a recruiting program, that this is an outreach program.

ELAM-THOMAS: Correct.

Q: One of the major goals of DIRs: To educating our young college students and through them the community not only what diplomacy is, but providing the next generation a broader understanding of the global world in which we live?

ELAM-THOMAS: Yes.

Q: And I also sense from your response that you carry the same enthusiasm and motivation from a career diplomat on articulating U.S. policy, culture and society to audiences abroad to also extend them that same type of understanding to domestic audiences. You seem to have enjoyed being a diplomat in residence whose goals were a bit different from being a diplomat. Am I right?

ELAM-THOMAS: You couldn't have captured that better. In fact, I happened to see before I walked into here today, I received my last "evaluation" report as a diplomat in residence. In the hopes that the observations noted in it may be helpful to those who might find themselves working as a DIR at the University of Central Florida.

Q: Are you referring to the State Departments evaluation reports?

ELAM-THOMAS: Yes. This is an excerpt written by John Bersia, my host in the Office of Global Perspectives. "The Special Assistant for Global Perspectives at the University of Central Florida observes that Harriet Elam-Thomas has become a mini institution on the campus. Her contributions went far beyond the conventional DIR duties. Students used her presentation style to give their own presentations not because that may have resulted in higher grades, but because they admired her leadership style. She was hands on when necessary, disciplined and action oriented. After careful consideration of all options, the students believed they could succeed if they emulated the ambassador's practices.

And in the box for employee comments, I noted that it takes a nation to embrace its greatest asset. America is comprised of a multi-cultural citizenry that truly reflects today's world. My work as a DIR in Central Florida demonstrated that the Department is on the path to ensure we have diplomats which really represent all of America. As I addressed Florida-hosted university conferences on international affairs, moderated panels on human trafficking, addressed UN themed programs, Rotary Clubs, and addressed UCF leadership training institutes, I delivered a subtle yet profound message. Yes I, even I (an African American women who grew up in the midst of the Civil Rights Movement of the 60's) could become a successful diplomat, speak three foreign languages and represent the United States with credibility and integrity abroad.

Q: This is a long ways from the little Elam girl who was brought up in a loving and supportive family who also was very fortunate to have very supportive siblings who played a major role in getting the little Elam girl to this final chapter in this oral history of Ambassador Harriet Elam-Thomas. Thank you so much.

ELAM-THOMAS: I thank you for having taken the time to be with me. It seems fitting that in October I received The 2010 Onyx Global Award in Central Florida. The students who paid tribute to me in a video for that ceremony confirmed that my work had value. They now considered themselves open to the world. Once again, I say a very special thank you to you.

Q: And a thank you to you again, Ambassador Harriet Elam-Thomas. This concludes the interview on June 24, 2011, which was commenced on June 2, 2006.

End of interview