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**REBECCA C. ADAMS**

*Interviewed by: Marcia Bernbaum  
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**TABLE OF CONTENTS**

Early Background

Born in Tennessee  
Parental influences  
Virginia  
B.A. Special Education–University of South Florida  
M.Ed. Public School Administration–University of Virginia  
Ph.D. Comparative International Education/Caribbean Studies–University of Virginia  
Early employment

Work with USAID

1987-1989–Washington Office Director, United Schools of America, Inc.  
Project Director–*Presidential Training Initiative for the Island Caribbean*

1989-1992–Washington Division Director, Aguirre International, Inc.  
Project Director–*Caribbean and Latin American Scholarship Program Monitoring and Evaluation I & II, Training in the Training Costs Analysis System, Project Implementation Order for Participants Generator.*  
Assistant Project Manager–Regional Technical AID Center II

1992-1993–Senior Associate, DEVTECH–Egypt and South Africa participant training program design

1993-1997–Education Specialist, USAID Haiti–Personal Service Contract

1997-1998–Senior Education Specialist, DEVTECH–USAID Office of Women in Development

1998-1999–Senior Education Specialist, Academy for Educational Development –USAID LAC Bureau, Office of Regional Sustainable Development

1999-2003–Senior Education Advisor, Center for Development and Population Activities–USAID EGAT Bureau, Office of Education

2005-2009–Senior Education Specialist, USAID–EGAT Bureau, Office of Education–Foreign Service Limited

2009-2013–Senior Education Specialist, USAID–Asia & Middle East Bureau, Office of Technical Services–Foreign Service Limited

2013-2014–Senior Education Specialist, USAID–Asia Bureau, Office of Technical Services–Foreign Service Limited

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2016-2020–Senior Education Advisor, CAMRIS International, USAID–Africa Bureau, Office of Education

Observations

## INTERVIEW

*Q: I am here with Rebecca Adams, who I'm interviewing for her oral history. This is Marcia Bernbaum, and this is Wednesday, April 21, at about 11:45 a.m., and we are going to be beginning a series of fascinating excerpts on Rebecca's career. So, Rebecca, please introduce yourself.*

ADAMS: I retired in 2020 following thirty-two years of working in education with USAID. Various mechanisms supported my work with the Agency, ranging from contracts, Personal Service Contract to Foreign Service Limited. It was a different path from that of a Foreign Service Career Officer. For more than three decades I served the field and Washington in Latin America and Caribbean, and the bureaus of Economic Growth, Agriculture and Trade, Asia and Middle East and Africa. My USAID experience was geographically diverse, challenged by unique environments and filled with difficult projects. Presidents spanned from Ronald Reagan to Donald Trump. I was privileged to work with many inspirational development professionals all along the way. It was an adventurous and challenging career that hopefully affected more change than what we

can measure. I'm pleased to share some of my life and career experiences and the key influences that attracted me to international development work.

## **Early Background**

I was born in 1950 on a hot July day in a little town called Brownsville, Tennessee. It's on the western side of Tennessee, near Memphis, closer to the Mississippi River. And when I was born, the population rose to about 393. I have one sister a few years older than me. It was a town with a main square that was complete with statues of its fallen confederate heroes. Everyone knew each other and all attended a protestant church, mostly Baptist. Brownsville had no Catholic Church or Synagogue and blacks had their own schools and separate entrances to stores. Brownsville was a great place to grow up if you were white and protestant. It was a very different time.

I had two wonderful parents, who were progressive and loving. They loved intellectual curiosity, reading and travel. My parents were significant influences on my sense of social justice and giving back. They encouraged exploration and fascination of other places and people. In retrospect, these core values provided a foundation for my educational and professional path.

My mother was from Brownsville, TN. Her family had lived there since the mid-1800s farming cotton and timber. My grandfather built the school house on land he donated and my mother was the principal, as well as a teacher. She was a great Southern lady, very progressive. My mother was a civil rights activist, which attracted lots of friends and enemies. It was not uncommon to have crosses burned in our front yard. My mother would put my sister and me in the backseat of the '47 Chevy and drive in the middle of the night, with the lights out, into cornfields, where black activists would be meeting and strategizing about how to overcome the poll tax or transport folks to the polls on election-day. We would pile into the car, (we'd even upgraded at some point to a '54 Pontiac), and make the trip out into the rural parts, picking up people to take them into town to vote. I may have been a child but the images were powerful. I also saw a strong, independent woman in my mother.

This is one story that illustrates my mother's character. On polling day, a black man at the polling station, which was downtown in the middle of the square, was shot. My mother put him in the backseat of our car, our fairly new Pontiac, and drove him to the only hospital, which was a white-only hospital. And when she got there, of course, they said "We can't take this negro man". He'd been shot in the leg. My mother said, "Yes, you will take him." She helped get him out of the car and they treated him. I remember as a child, before we left that area, going to a black church that had a sawdust floor, and they named the church after my mother because she had been so active in their support.

My parents were an unlikely match despite their marriage lasting until the end. My father was from Washington DC. Both were children of the depression. He graduated from Auburn University in Alabama with a degree in civil engineering having attended on a football scholarship. He was the star quarterback. He met my mother during a weekend

trip to his roommate's home in Alabama where my mother was also a guest. He proposed the same day they met but she waited four years, until he graduated. He served in Europe with the 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne during WWII and returned four years later to a bride he'd left six months after marriage. Following the war's end he went back to Europe for its reconstruction (Marshall Plan). The Korean War began. He spent a great deal of time away from us during the 1950s. His work took him to exotic places – Holland and Thule, Greenland. He always sent dolls from all of the countries he visited and they were magical to me. Education was one of my parents' core values. Our family was also grounded in the church. It was the center of our social life. But my parents were not evangelical.

In 1957, my mother took my sister and me to Memphis to meet Elvis Presley. Elvis and his parents had just moved in and Graceland was under construction and my mother drove the 54 Pontiac through the gates and chatted with Elvis's mother, Gladys. She sent us, the children, to the back yard where Elvis was swimming. He was filming Jailhouse Rock at the time but we didn't know that. There were no photographers or security. Gladys was outside feeding the chickens that roamed in the front yard. The famous wall and gate were underway. Elvis was wonderful to us. My sister and I saw him as a terribly handsome teenager.

## **Virginia**

*Q: Rebecca, how old were you when you moved to Virginia? What was next in your journey?*

ADAMS: It was 1957 when my family moved to Norfolk, VA from Tennessee. I was seven years old. My father left the military and obtained a private sector engineering job there. In 1961, we moved to Springfield, VA when my father took a job with the General Services Administrator as a cost estimator. At that time, Springfield was a small Washington bedroom community. So, in 1961 I entered the Fairfax County Public School (FCPS) system at age 11. Except for kindergarten, all of my schooling was public, and the majority in Fairfax County, VA.

Despite Brown vs Board of Education in 1954, I, sadly, never attended school with a black student. Nor was the German language taught. A large number of my teachers from middle through high school were retired military officers, who were mostly men. My high school was one of the first five secondary schools in Fairfax County and was named Robert E. Lee. It was recently changed to John L. Lewis.

As most will acknowledge, school was a social event and I was social. I was a class officer and on the homecoming court. I enjoyed every aspect of school. The President was assassinated in 1963 and I remember a great sadness that was pervasive and remained a long time. My mother took us to Washington to watch the funeral procession. In those days, it was easy to get a front row view without showing up hours in advance. I was in love with the Beatles and went to their first US concert in 1964 at the Washington Colosseum where I got to meet them in a snowy parking lot. I was twelve.

One of the biggest influences on me was growing up in Northern Virginia. While I can look back at my early life in that small Tennessee town as idyllic (for some), moving to this area presented a range of new opportunities, many of which guided my professional curiosity and development. While Springfield wasn't very diverse in the early sixties, Washington was and it seemed very international to me as a young person. Washington was always a fun destination during high school. While in high school, I would drive to the Library of Congress to research my school papers. I was in love with that place. My school years were marked with war, assassination, riots and violent protests. I actually skipped school to participate in the 1967 October march on the Pentagon, which was the first national protest of the Vietnam War. The year that I graduated from high school was punctuated with the assassinations of Martin Luther King and Bobby Kennedy.

I'm a product of the sixties. I was highly influenced by the women's movement and the anti-Vietnam war movement. Roe vs Wade was years away. The women's liberation movement, as we called it, was very instrumental in setting my trajectory. I couldn't read enough women authors, everyone from Erica Jong and Kate Millet to Betty Friedan and Gloria Steinem. These women were influencers of the time. Because married women were primarily housewives, I couldn't see much value in pursuing marriage. Carol Lindberg's book, *Born Female*, revealed that only two percent of women in the United States obtained PhDs. This had a significant impact on me. I was determined to become part of that two percent. Like most young people, I backpacked across Europe in 1971 and had the time of my life.

## **Education**

In the late 1960s, universities and colleges in Virginia were still segregated by race and sex. Both of these characteristics were disagreeable to me so I went out-of-state to the University of South Florida in Tampa for my undergraduate degree. At that time, the University produced seventy percent of Florida's teachers and had an excellent faculty. I pursued a BA in Special Education with a specialty in gifted education. I completed the degree in 1972 and began teaching high school in Florida. It was a school for migrant workers and PT Barnum Circus kids. A majority of my students were there on court order, having committed felonies. It was a pivotal experience for me. At that time there was no Department of Education so all of the education and welfare work was done through the Health, Education and Welfare Department. I worked closely with them distributing food and implementing programs to stop incest in the migrant white communities.

In 1974, I moved back to Virginia to teach in Fairfax County for one year. I enrolled in the University of Virginia's Masters in Education program and eventually moved to Charlottesville. I was shocked to attend a school that wouldn't accept me previously because I was female. While I was in Florida, a group of women sued the University of Virginia to open the school up to women. They won, which affected all of the state-supported schools in Virginia. It was sweet revenge in some strange way that this was now my school.

When I entered the master's program I was one of three women. It was the first time women had been accepted to that program. I recall my introductory one-on-one meeting with the Department Head, who said to me, "I'm not happy that you're here and I will do everything possible to get rid of you." I responded, "Well, we'll see." I completed my master's degree in education, and specialized in public school administration and supervision with supporting majors in organizational management, curriculum and instruction. That professor and I developed a good working relationship by the end of my program but it was challenging. I completed my degree in 1977.

In 1977, I started my doctoral program at the Graduate School of Arts and Sciences in Charlottesville and pursued comparative international education with supporting majors in education research and evaluation, curriculum development and theoretical foundations of differential education for the gifted. The University of Virginia was a fascinating experience for me. I had wonderful professors who challenged me intellectually.

As I was developing my doctoral dissertation plan, I pursued the topic of education in Jamaica. There had been a tremendous decline since its independence in the 1960s. It was the lynchpin in the Caribbean. The Embassy of Jamaica successfully lobbied the Organization of American States to give me a research fellowship. I went to Jamaica in 1980, during a bloody conflict over Cuba's role in Jamaica and was attached to the Ministry of Education in Kingston until it was safe to travel to the rural areas. I was exploring and identifying emerging political, economic and social characteristics that reflected a changing role of education in Jamaican society since its independence.

The research included the utilization of an extensive one-year field survey and the development of community case studies depicting the relationship between basic education policy reform and community member's participation in the rural all-age school. The research included statistical (SPSS) and qualitative analysis and the results were reported in my dissertation titled, *School and Society in Jamaica*. I conducted a multi-variant analysis using data I collected through household interviews. It was a wonderful introduction into working overseas. As I went forward into my career, working with the LAC (Latin American and Caribbean) bureau and even with the EGAT, I continued to support Jamaica through the decades, and still had many acquaintances in government. That was a very rewarding experience for me. I completed my Ph.D. in 1980.

Receiving my PhD was a great accomplishment for me. My personal and academic background and even my Florida teaching, were preparing me for a development career.

### **Early Employment**

As a kid, I was the first paper girl for the Washington Post in the Virginia suburbs, a babysitter, telemarketer, and cashier for the local and only Chinese carry-out. I was always seeking employment, however menial.

My first teaching assignment was in East Bay, Florida, which is the tomato capital of Florida, and very rural. It served a migrant community and the Barnum & Bailey Circus children from Sarasota. It was challenging and fascinating. About half of my students were there on court order and some on felony charges. I had a circular office in the center of the classroom surrounded by bulletproof glass with an emergency panic button. One student had tried to murder his previous teacher. The communities I served impacted me greatly and reinforced my belief that education had an important role to play. I returned to Virginia in 1974.

I accepted a special education teaching position at McLean High School in Fairfax County. Most of my students were poor and black. They were bused into the school from other areas of the county. It was a rewarding experience. I loved teaching and would have continued if I could have made a decent income. But, teaching didn't pay well. One experience stands out to me. I invited one of my students from Florida to visit Washington. The students were excited and held car washes and bake sales to raise money for his visit. His visit was remarkable. The students rallied around him. This was one of my students whose mother was a prostitute and father a heroin dealer in Miami.

During this time I began taking UVA education courses at night and even traveled to the Soviet Union in 1974 to study Soviet Education, which at the time was a rarity. While there, I entertained conservative William F. Buckley Jr., of the National Review, in my hotel room. His hotel room was next to mine and he'd been locked out so he knocked on my door for help. Even then, I knew who he was and was stunned at how nice he was. I was against everything he stood for. He was there to look at how Christians were being persecuted but ended up writing an article on how dysfunctional the elevators were in the hotel.

During my doctoral studies at UVA, I held a number of jobs. For three years I was the Assistant Director to the Graduate Education Programs where I assisted in the development, implementation and administration of a multi-disciplinary graduate-level education program. I taught classes, graded papers, recruited academic specialists, and coordinated study-travel to the USSR and China. I also worked for UVA's School of Continuing Education delivering in-service teacher and principal training throughout the Commonwealth. I specifically taught gifted and talented education and drug use and abuse. These were emerging topics.

I also served as a graduate instructor for about five years. I developed, coordinated and instructed. Courses that I taught or co-taught included Politics of Comparative Education, Global Education, Soviet Education, Asian Education, Problems in Philosophy of Education, Politics and Economics of Education in the Developing World, Sex Roles and Stereotyping in Education, and Social Foundations of Education. One very interesting assignment I had with the Virginia Endowment for the Humanities was as textbook committee for the development of a manuscript entitled, "*Aesthetics and Education*".

## **Work with USAID**

*Q: Well, Rebecca, thank you very much for this fascinating background which you shared with us in such an eloquent fashion. So, let's now turn to your activities that took you to the point at which you had your first contract where you worked with USAID.*

ADAMS: My initial intersect with USAID was serendipitous. A friend of a friend called me and suggested I meet with a firm who was managing a training project with USAID. It was 1986, when United Schools of America, Inc. hired me as the project director for a contract with USAID's LAC Bureau, the Presidential Training for Island Caribbean (PTIC). It was an initiative of the White House under President Regan. Marcy, this is when you and I met. I was interviewed by Dr. Joe Carney and Dave Evans both of whom I learned a great deal from and they remained friends and colleagues for the next several decades.

I didn't have a clue how to manage a contract. The WANG Computer would come to USAID the following year but its capabilities were greatly limited. So, I read everything, including the USAID Handbooks, reached out to others and began to figure it out. This was my first experience with USAID and it proved to be a great boot camp. This was a project that provided scholarships for Caribbean students to attend US universities, colleges and technical schools. Although logistically challenging, it was an impactful project. To this day, I believe participant training was one of the best things that USAID ever did in terms of making the investment directly into human capital. It brought my fascination with the Caribbean and belief in the transformative power of education and training together. It was dynamic and exciting.

In 1989, I began working for another minority-owned small business, Aguirre International, who held contracts with the LAC Bureau to evaluate the various participant training programs. The work exposed me to the many countries of Latin America and the Andes. We were doing evaluations of the various regional programs such as the Central America Scholarship Program and the Caribbean & Latin America Scholarship program (follow-on to PTIC). All of these programs are managed by Washington. NGOs and businesses were implementing, mostly bringing individuals from these countries to colleges and universities and technical schools in the United States, providing them with what was called "Experience America", and providing scholarships for them to stay and obtain degrees.

During this period, I also worked on other projects. One LAC project, the Regional Technical Assistance—RTAC (Regional Technical Assistance Center), RTAC II was unique. It was based in Mexico City, and was the second phase of the project that President Kennedy had begun under the Alliance for Progress. RTAC provided translated textbooks to university students in Latin America using an innovative financing scheme that reinvested the book sales to ensure sustainability of the bookstores' ability to purchase university textbooks.

In an effort to become more knowledgeable about government contracts, I enrolled in a second master degree program in contract law at UVA. Although I didn't complete the



program, I gained significant knowledge about government contracts. This served me well for my future years working with USAID.

*Q: This is Thursday, May 5, and I am interviewing Rebecca Adams for her oral history. This is the second session. I am Marcia Bernbaum. And I'm now going to turn it over to Rebecca to continue.*

ADAMS: In 1991, I began working for DEVTECH, Inc., another small minority-owned business. I traveled to Egypt and designed a \$75 million integrated mission training program. The mission's sectoral offices managed their own unique participant training contracts and leadership wanted to integrate all of the training under one mechanism. My stay coincided with an earthquake, which was quite severe. The Nile Hilton was my home during my month stay and I remember the building swaying back and forth and the horrible sounds of the building cracking. I fled my room with shoes on the wrong feet and headed for the stairs. I vividly remember men fleeing while their wives and children were left behind in the room. It was shocking to me. I ended up helping a group of elderly tourists from Scotland who were injured in the lobby. I entered the kitchen of the restaurant to find some towels and discovered that every dish was broken. It was quite an experience. I also supported the South Africa mission. Because apartheid was soon to topple, USAID was gearing up to support this historical transition. The education sector was segregated so there were grossly unequal education tracts. USAID wanted a plan to blend and integrate the educational systems into one South African educational system. I met with many black advocacy groups at night, under cover, so to speak, since they were considered illegal organizations. I have vivid memories of that assignment. I worked in Johannesburg for a few weeks because most of the organizations were based there. My hotel didn't allow blacks in. The hotel restaurant had only black workers who were serving only white patrons. It was so reminiscent of my life in Tennessee during the 1950s. And this was the 1990s. It was a haunting flashback. My report recommendations were implemented.

## **Haiti**

In 1993 I accepted a Personal Service Contract position with the Haiti Mission. David Cohen was the Mission Director who was followed by Larry Crandall. I went to Haiti as the Education Officer for four years.

*Q: I think it would be helpful if you gave the reader a sense of what was happening and how the U.S. was responding generally so you can put in context of what you were doing. Okay? Just in general.*

ADAMS: Yes. The mission evacuated most employees in 1991 due to a coup d'état that ousted the first elected democratic president, Aristide. He was exiled. The USG's goal was to return Aristide. I joined the mission a year before President Aristide was returned to Haiti in 1994 to complete his term in office. The public school system had collapsed. Schools were closed due to security concerns and food insecurity. The Ministry of Education was unable to pay the teachers. The major education project, which included

radio education, teacher training and school material support for targeted private primary schools, had slowed over the years. Most activities were under stop work orders. Despite a limited scope, the mission's support to the Foundation for Private Education (FONHEP) continued. An economic embargo had existed for many months and was crippling the country. The number of desperate Haitians trying to reach the Florida shores on boats dramatically increased.

In the late eighties the mission supported the creation of an organization, FONHEP, to help organize the Haitian private education sector. It brought Catholic, Protestant and non-religious schools together under one organization. At that time, eighty percent of all primary school age children, who went to school, attended a private school. None were regulated or governed by the Ministry of Education. It was challenging and rewarding to support the private schools' collaboration with each other and the Ministry of Education.

Once President Aristide was restored in 1994 to office, in Haiti, we pivoted from the coalition government to the Aristide government. We strengthened our relationship with UNESCO who served the pivotal coordination role for the education sector. We partnered with UNESCO to lead a two-year sector survey that government employees conducted. Once the diagnostic survey was complete we funded dialogue sessions across Haiti where thousands of people were invited to discuss results of this sector survey. The dialogue accelerated the decisions of the government about what steps to take to improve the education dilemmas. USAID then funded the development of the Haiti National Reform Plan for Education. President Clinton visited Haiti once it became the biggest international crisis in the world.

I also had oversight for the Georgetown Caribbean-Latin America Scholarship program (CASS). This program provided scholarships to disadvantaged youth to attend US community colleges. This was a program I had been involved with prior to Haiti so it was rewarding to be involved in the early steps, on-the-ground.

Things got worse before they got better. Violence was throughout the provinces, malnutrition and food insecurity was worsening. The Embassy and Washington pressured the mission to provide insight and data on what was happening. This was a dilemma because security concerns prevented USAID travel to many areas. I suggested to mission leadership that we consider hiring qualified former participants, and train and equip them to go to the provinces and report back to us. The mission hired more than twenty-five young people who had successfully completed their US scholarship programs. These former participants became the eyes and ears for USAID for a span of a year. It was a great way to utilize talented young people. Haiti was a wonderful professional experience for me.

## **Washington**

*Q: So, Rebecca, that is absolutely outstanding. Please tell us about what you did after you returned from Haiti.*

ADAMS: I returned to Washington in 1997 and began a DEVTECH contract assignment with the Women in Development (WID) office, which was very focused on girls' education. First Lady, Hillary Clinton, had an initiative around girls' education and the WID Office planned to hold a large gathering of organizations that supported girls where the First Lady would speak. My role was to support the development of the conference. I learned a great deal about various organizations and their frameworks for girls' education. It was fascinating because these were early prototypes and discussions that informed today's position on girls' education. I also returned to Haiti to conduct a gender assessment as part of a larger sector assessment the mission was undertaking. For me, it was a great opportunity to learn more about the exciting arena of girls' education.

## LAC

From there I went to work for the Academy for Educational Development (AED) in 1998. This was through a support contract AED had with the LAC Bureau's Office of Education. During this assignment, I supported the US role in the Summit of the Americas, which now had an education focus. The Bureau was preparing for the second Summit of the Americas in Chile, wherein President Clinton would attend. During the Summit, First Lady Hillary Clinton announced a new initiative, which we had been working on, called the Partnership for the Revitalization of Education (PREAL).

PREAL was an idea of the Inter-American Foundation. Their position was that both a bottom-up and top-down approach was necessary. PREAL was attracting political and academic elites to develop evidence-based policy. This was complementing mission basic education activities, which had been growing in size through Central America. A key outcome was the creation of country report cards in 1999. They were published once-a-year and graded countries in access, quality and financing giving a grade, A, B, C or D minus. This was very public and proved a highly effective tool for motivating governments to improve. I believe this was the first time country report cards had been done in education. LAC was a trendsetter.

By 1999, I was supporting the LAC Bureau through a mechanism called *Technical Assistance for AIDS and Child Survival* (TAACS). Having been spearheaded by the LAC Bureau, I became the first education person hired under the mechanism. Global Health created this mechanism to recruit technical experts in HIV-AIDS. However, education was under child survival, which enabled education to use the mechanism. The Center for Education and Population Activities (CEDPA) held the TAACS contract. The attractive characteristics of this mechanism included the ability to represent the government and manage contracts and grants, things that you normally can't do as a contractor. For the next six years I served as a TAACS across two bureaus.

*Q: Today is Thursday, May 19, 2022. I am interviewing Rebecca Adams, and this is our third oral history interview. This is Marcy Bernbaum. Rebecca, please continue your fascinating story.*

ADAMS: Continued my work with LAC's Office of Education and supported the planning of the third Summit of the Americas in 2001. The President was George W. Bush who announced education and No Child Left Behind his number one domestic issue, which meant we followed suit.

Around this time research indicated that very few of USAID's education activities sustained themselves. Additionally, most of what USAID was doing in education was not systemic and reflected patches of green. Discussions about why we were building junior high schools in Senegal and developing science education in Jordan were common. When each country was examined it was difficult to identify a clear sector strategy. Typically, education projects were chock-filled with teacher training, school materials, curriculum development, testing, and community participation. Evaluation systems primarily undertook qualitative reviews. Trying to work through these issues resulted in a new strategy for education. Data was sparse. We used proxies for quality education.

The President's *No Child Left Behind* initiative had a significant focus on reading. We knew that reading was receiving some real uplift in LAC and should be the education topic at the Summit. Subsequently, the *Centers for Excellence in Teacher Training* (CETT) were conceived. This project would be implemented by Universities in the Caribbean, Central American and South American, and LAC provided \$20 million. Three regional hubs were created, and those regional hubs would be made up of all these universities that were in that region so everybody was a player. The primary focus would be on training teachers to improve reading instruction. This was also at the time that the early grade reading assessment was in its very early phase, developed primarily by the World Bank and the Research Triangle Institute. CETT was announced in 2001 by George Bush at the Summit. Yet, the White House was particularly interested in the public-private partnerships that were being formed around CETT. They wanted a big event with partners stating their contributions. The problem was that the White House wanted this at the beginning of the project before private partnerships were solidified. We met with the OAS Ambassadors, issued one thousand invitations and continued negotiating with our private sector partners for deliverables. Ministers of Education from all LAC countries were invited.

Three days before the event LAC AA, Adolfo Franco, came to me and said, "The White House has just canceled the president's attendance." I now had to notify all of the missions and embassies, so they could notify host government ministers of education. I asked Adolfo what was replacing our event on the President's calendar. He said he would find out. A few days later he came to me and said, "You asked me to find out what was on the President's schedule." He told me that the President would be attending a hot dog fundraiser in Texas. While the President raised money off of hotdogs, we were stuck with a bill that exceeded two hundred thousand dollars. We launched CETT and focused on reading instruction. It targeted 15,000 teachers and one million students. We ended up with regional centers in Jamaica, Guatemala and Peru and had participation from all the universities in those regions.

**EGAT**

In 2003 I joined the Economic Growth, Trade and Agriculture Bureau's education team. I remained a TAACS. Buff Mackenzie was the Office Director for Education when I arrived and was followed by John Grayzel, Dr. Joe Carney and David Barth. I became the primary backstop for all LAC countries, so I was still very engaged. I led the design of early grade reading programs in Jamaica, Nicaragua and Haiti. My responsibilities also included supervising Presidential Management Interns and new Foreign Service Officers.

When they entered EGAT they had no mechanism to service the field missions. I was asked to lead the development of a new Indefinite Quantity Contract (IQC). I designed two IQCs totaling \$2.1 billion. It was the largest one that they had done in education, ever. There was one IQC for basic education and another called ABE Link, which facilitated combined education and health activities. I managed those for the entire time I was there, and we did significant business, and the field missions were pleased that we had a mechanism. So, that was a big accomplishment.

In 2005 the Government Accounting Office (GAO), at the request of Congress, was asked to audit USAID's basic education programs. I was asked to lead that two-year effort and serve as the agency's liaison with the GAO.

Also in 2005, the Administrator, Andrew Natsios, made the decision to end the TAACS mechanism. Not surprisingly, this caused uproar with Global Health, who had the preponderance of TAACS advisors in Washington and the missions. The administration determined that TAACS advisors would be shifted to Foreign Service Limited (FSL) (non-career). Subsequently, I was hired directly by USAID in 2005 and remained in EGAT doing the same work.

The GAO report was issued in 2006 and said USAID is unfocused in its education sector. It confirmed what we already knew and had been discussing internally for quite some time. The report acknowledged that USAID was doing a lot of good activities but it lacked focus. Congress had also moved basic education out of the child survival account and into the development assistance account, which meant we had to compete with other sectors for our resources, despite the basic education earmark. We needed to develop a new education strategy based on all of the input.

One problem identified was insufficient training for USAID staff. I took the lead and developed a steering committee representing all of the regional bureaus and we created a training program called *Training for Education Sector Teams* (TEST). The TEST program developed several classroom courses mostly delivered by USAID employees. The content ranged from state-of-the-art technical information to how to manage an education portfolio. We delivered more than five one-week to two-week classroom training. We also developed mini-courses on early grade reading and education finance. I remained the chair until I left EGAT in 2009.

I was very engaged in the development of the new education strategy. We really wanted to know what our mission officers thought. Most believed we should focus on reading. It

was an area that Americans understood. It's not a complicated message. It was crystal clear that foreign assistance helped kids learn to read.

While in EGAT, I developed a toolkit, which the contracting office sent to missions on how to write a performance-based contract and a performance-based statement of work.

During that same period that I'm in EGAT we had twenty-two new Foreign Service officers that came in and I served on the selection committee in HR. The knowledge and skills matrix for education FSOs had not been updated for over ten years. I updated the matrix that HR adopted for hiring and evaluation. I left EGAT in 2009.

*Q: Before you make the transition, can you reflect on your knowledge on what ended up happening with the pillar bureau education office of the time?*

ADAMS: Yes, I can. Weeks after my departure from EGAT, David Barth replaced Dr. Carney, who had retired, as the Education Office Director. There were personnel issues in the office and increased pressure to produce a new education strategy. To Barth's credit, he led the office through personnel changes and the development of an education strategy. I attribute a great deal of progress to David Barth.

We went on to develop a new strategy that focused on reading acquisition, which causes great up-heaval in the Agency. We were being bashed by Congress for not having a focused strategy and I believe this was a necessary step in restoring the focus and value of USAID's education sector.

## **Asia & Middle East**

*Q: Today is Thursday, May 26, 2022, and I am interviewing Rebecca Adams, and this is our fourth oral history interview. Rebecca, welcome back. Looking forward to continuing to hear your fascinating story.*

ADAMS: In 2009 I transitioned to the Asia and Middle East Bureau (AME). I remained a FSL. I was happy to work in a regional bureau again and there was a lot of attention on this region at the time. The IRAQ Office had been created and detached from AME but Afghanistan and Pakistan had not yet been made into a separate office. All sectors were stressed because of the war, and post-war effort. Once these two portfolios had been pulled away into a special office, we could get about our business of working other countries of the Asia and Middle East. I was assigned, mostly, to Asia. My portfolio was broad and spanned from Indonesia to India. This was a region of the world where I didn't have much country expertise. These are times that one draws upon one's academic background now, and then you continue to do new research and new readings to begin to look at the history of the education systems and stresses affecting them. The complexity of issues was very different country to country.

In 2010 the Office of Iraq requested assistance to develop a new education project. Knowing that the Agency was developing its new education strategy, which had a focus

on early grade reading, I suggested to the mission leadership that reading should be a major focus. While in Iraq I met with many Ministry of Education Officials and they were supportive of early grade reading but wanted math included so, I included math in the design. I provided a full solicitation to the mission only to learn a few months later that Congress said no to a new education project. Consequently, the project did not move forward.

## **Asia**

In 2013, USAID divided Asia from the Middle East, which resulted in two bureaus. This aligned more closely with the State Department's structure. Nisha Biswal was the Asia Bureau AA. She had previously worked on the Hill with Representative Nita Lowey, who was our major advocate. I enjoyed working with her.

*Q: So, perhaps you could comment on literacy levels and re—probably vary tremendously from country to country. How critical was reading? What was the difference between Latin America and Asia? And obviously, in each case you get different countries. But did you see any differences in terms of level, need for focusing on reading?*

ADAMS: Generally speaking, Asia has higher school completion and literacy rates than Latin America. And Asia counts many countries as middle income. But reading fluency, which is essential for reading with comprehension, is low in both regions. Significant learning has been generated through neurocognitive research in the past few decades. It confirms the relationship of the brain and early learning, particularly reading. So, despite different country scenarios, the brain receptivity is the same and requires an evidence-based set of methods to teach reading at a young age. Reading is foundational for all other learning.

It's important to note that the key to the reading fluency strategy is having a diagnostic tool that can measure early grade reading. Although not a perfect tool, USAID embraced the Early Grade Reading Assessment (EGRA) tool. It was developed by the World Bank and the Research Triangle Institute, and specifically by Dr. Luis Crouch. This simple tool allowed school personnel to test students on their reading fluency. It's a sixty-second time test to determine the ability and fluency of the child. It's followed up with a comprehension test. The research tells us that if a child can't read at least sixty words per minute with comprehension, they're not reading fluently and likely to fall behind and eventually drop out from school. It's difficult to be a good learner if you cannot read. Even if the parent doesn't know how to read, they could still do this time test. So, it was a very effective tool. It was an imperfect tool but one that served its purpose well. We spent a year or more socializing this with the missions and ministries of education. The new education strategy was released in 2011. It would require a significant pivot in many missions and that made a lot of people unhappy. It had taken years of discussion and inputs.

It was never the intention to stay with this narrow approach forever. It was a pivot, and needed narrow parameters in the beginning. The approach was also a key to our ability to

measure results. This pivot resulted in the development of effective tools and methodologies. USAID also made a significant contribution to the literature on early grade reading. Today, USAID has gained a solid reputation for its expertise in early grade reading. This is a great accomplishment. Existing mission education projects were allowed to come to completion but follow-on projects were not authorized. We allowed every single project that we had a commitment to complete. The majority country ministries were pleased with this new direction. They were well aware that they had these problems. Despite the pain caused by the pivot, it forced people to think differently. Because the education sector had a common goal and standard measures, USAID's education sector was more cohesive and clear about its objectives. It helped FSOs, who were moving from post to post in the following years, to better design, implement and manage their education portfolios.

I've returned to your question Marcy about differences between Asia and Latin American countries with respect to literacy. Why would we focus on early grade reading in Vietnam? It's a good question. Because Vietnam is a middle-income country and doing well in education, it was determined that Vietnam would not program in basic education. Instead, the need for assistance in higher education was more pressing. As a result of the new strategy, basic education programming in some countries stopped and higher education became the focus. Vietnam, for example, was a country where USAID made investments only in higher education. This was certainly more likely for some Asian countries than Latin American countries. Yet, the majority of countries that USAID supports showed dismal reading results when children were tested using the EGRA tool.

During this time with the Asia Bureau, I developed and managed a Mekong Delta activity with Harvard. Senator John Kerry had a good friend that had served in the marines with him and the friend was tied to Harvard and the Asia Center and Kennedy Center. The Asia AA tapped me to be the person to follow up with a mechanism to help fund the Asia Center's interest in the Mekong Delta. This was political. Instead of a focus on education I focused on environment and economics. The Obama administration signed the agreement with Harvard that I developed. I managed this activity until I left the Asia Bureau in 2014.

In 2014 Congress raised some issues with the Asia and Middle East Bureaus about young people and wanted to know what USAID's big issues were for young people in the region. Prior to my arrival the director of the office had canvassed all of the Asia and Middle East missions about their program priorities. The result of the mission canvassing was school dropout. Representative Lowey's office indicated they liked this response. With no further detail the Congress sub-earmarked fifty million dollars to tackle the problem of school dropout. As a result, I was assigned the task of developing a fifty million dollar contract to reduce school dropout. A contract was awarded in 2010 to work in India, Cambodia, Tajikistan, and Timor Leste. We initially conducted diagnostics in these four countries and then developed implementation plans for each. It was a fascinating study. In Cambodia for example, the ministry was convinced that computers in every seventh grade classroom would retain the students in school. So, we used this as the research in Cambodia. Each country was different. Randomized control trials (RCT)



were used for each intervention. This was the first time USAID had conducted a RCT in education. In 2014 I was asked to go to Mongolia with a small team to investigate potential legacy projects since Mongolia as a mission was closing. I believe USAID had worked in Mongolia for more than forty years. Mongolia is a middle-income country and the role of USAID was to diminish. USAID wanted to create a legacy project, as they often do, that AID can leave behind. I went with a team of about four people. Interestingly, this brought back my studies of Soviet Union education. The Mongolian system of education was identical to the Soviet system of education. It was a cold but interesting assignment.

And one other thing, one final thing that was a lot of fun and very interesting, is that I was invited on two occasions to go to the War College in Carlyle, Pennsylvania, and participate in and do a session, three-hour session, to the officers which were there, on development and specifically on education. And so, that was a lot of—it was very interesting. It wasn't challenging, it was just interesting because it was a very different audience. You've got soldiers, or officers, I should say, and they're all going to be headed out to Afghanistan or one of these—Iraq and these places, and it gave me an opportunity to really talk with them about our education in crisis, which was also part of our new strategy. We had early grade reading, but we also were—we had a big section on how do you deal with countries that are in crisis, and that crisis may be war, it may be natural disaster, it may be a lot of different things, it may be a government that's not functional, which you would design that very differently than if you were working with the government. So, that was a great job, to be able to go out and influence. And during that time, I got a lot of little medals, a lot of little War College medals where they—the soldiers would come—the officers would come into Washington because they all had to do research papers as part of their role and so, I had a lot of follow-up meetings and got to do that twice. So, I thought that was quite an honor, to get to go and discuss that.

As we approached 2014, my Foreign Service Limited status was nearing the end of its limits. I was near the nine-year mark and it would soon come to an end. At that point I was forced to end my direct-hire relationship with USAID in November of 2014.

## **Africa**

Following my official retirement from USAID in 2014, I worked for Pragma Corporation as the Senior Education Advisor for the Africa Bureau's Office of Sustainable Development. I remained under this mechanism for one year until the Bureau awarded a new contract to a small business, Zemitek, with Camris International as its subcontractor. For the next five years, until 2020, I was employed by Camris International. During both of these jobs, I was located in the RRB's Africa Bureau. I backstopped the countries of Ethiopia, Somalia, Malawi, South Africa, and Djibouti. All were engaged in early grade reading despite different strategies used for those countries in crisis. It was a fascinating time to work in Africa. I was able to support strategy development, reading procurement and evaluation.

## **Observations**

In closing, there are a few observations I'd like to share. For me, it was advantageous not joining the career foreign service. A lot has to do with the time frame. It was a time when USAID was not hiring so working through a contract was the only opportunity for years. By the time USAID began hiring career officers in education, I'd grown too cynical to join.

Not entering USAID as a Foreign Service career officer gave me a better education because I began to see that lots of people that had been with USAID for decades really didn't seem to have a great sense of the private sector world or what they went through and disconnects between, like, a request for a proposal of what they want somebody to do and what the real expectations could be. And what it cost, what it might cost. (Laughs) So, I always felt that ultimately it was a great advantage to me to not have been a career officer for my entire period with USAID.

One of the beauties of my job has been that I have been with so many different mechanisms. You learn so much about how companies operate, how USAID deals with organizations and companies, whether you're a consultant or an employee, and how you're treated, that's certainly a factor.

Also, when you work for a small business, you typically get exposed to so many other roles in the company and have access to the owners. In a small business you are doing everything. It is a wonderful way to learn the various steps, and I learned it from the side of the private sector, which I found enormously helpful to me over my career with USAID. I never forgot the hard work that was put in by these organizations and businesses, be they small or even big, what they were doing and how much it cost, as you're learning what it cost to put proposals together. I began doing a lot of that and then moved into learning how to build budgets. It was all about learning and slowly but surely being exposed to some more opportunities. This was very valuable to me.

I believe it takes a new officer about fourteen years to grow into the job. Spend the first few years listening. I learned very early that aside from my technical expertise, academic background, or experience, it was essential for me to learn how USAID operated. The work is mostly about process to some extent so it's important to learn how to move an idea through the system. I worked hard and believed that learning the operations was important to achieving results. It's a recommendation I make for anybody that works with USAID. Embrace the details and practice writing skills. We spend a great deal of our career writing. Learn about other skill sets. Know what a program officer is supposed to do and what they should know. Do the same for contracting officers and others. One will surely fail if one thinks all that's needed is technical expertise.

I saw the first fifteen years or so being really focused on learning, just learning despite my degrees and just really learning how USAID operated, the acronyms, developing projects, learning how to write in an abbreviated manner, learning a lot just about the culture of the organization. And one of the things I discovered very early is that one could be a lot more successful at a technical job if one knew the nuts and bolts of things. I

should not be so dependent upon the program office to tell me how things operate or the contracts office to tell me how they operate or the office of finance to tell me how—that I needed to, not to become an expert, that wasn't the point, but I needed to learn enough so that I could help guide my way through and be able to engage in intelligent conversations with those different components of how the Agency operated. I also observed that USAID staff didn't want to work with individuals who needed lots of help or support. Despite the fact of having a PhD, I went back to school at the University of Virginia's McIntire School of Commerce, to pursue a master's in public administration and business with an emphasis on contract law. I did not get the degree. I really just wanted to study. This paid off. I developed new relationships with contracting officers. And I was very flattered when some of my performance work statements were shared with other missions as good examples.

Learning the nuts and bolts was so helpful because so much of our job depends upon all of those little pieces. I observed how many people didn't know how to move a good idea, or work, or even how to monitor a contract, or the difference between a contract and a cooperative agreement or just a grant. And this still goes on to this day.

Assignments are not typically rational from the perspective of the work. So many other variables take priority. If one gets a manager that can actually manage, consider this a bonus as it's not typically the case.

Despite USAID's many short-comings as a career choice, it's a wonderful environment for individuals who understand that development is a slow dance. A good idea supported with research has a good chance of getting funds to support it.

After thirty-three years of serving USAID's education sector I retired in 2020.

*End of interview*