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MARGARET (MARGE) BONNER

*Interviewed by: Carol Peasley
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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Childhood, Family, Education, and Early Background	
Pre-USAID Employment	
Growing Up in New Jersey	
Rutgers University, B.A.	
Peace Corps Volunteer in Ethiopia	1967 - 1969
Secondary School Teacher in Uganda	1970 - 1972
University of Illinois, PhD in Economics	
USAID – Hired as International Development Intern/Economist in 1975	
USAID/Ethiopia, Program Economist and Program Officer	1975 - 1979
Early Days of the Derg and Mengistu Haile Mariam	
Declining Development Program; Increasing Drought Relief Program	
Relief and Rehabilitation Commission and Early Warning Efforts	
Ethiopian USAID Staff	
Reduced U.S. Presence and Program in Response to Derg	
USAID/Tanzania, Program Officer	1980 - 1983
Nyerere and an Economy in Stress	
Rural Development and Participant Training	
Beginning of Tandem Couple Careers	
USAID/Indonesia, Deputy Program Officer	1983 - 1988
Policy Dialogue and Private Sector Development	
Local Civil Society Development	
Demand-driven Technical Assistance	

Staff Cohesion and Development -- Indonesian and American
Importance of Mission Director Communication

AID/W, Asia/NE Bureau, Deputy Director, Office of Egypt and European Affairs
1988 - 1989

Family Adaptation to the U.S.
Egypt-Israel Cooperation

AID/W, Coordinator, Eastern European Taskforce 1989 - 1990
Building a Program in Eastern Europe and the Support for Eastern European
Democracies (SEED) Act
Privatization
Washington vs. Field Management
Inter-agency Coordination

AID/W, Africa Bureau, Director, Office of Development Planning 1990 - 1993
Development Fund for Africa and Performance-based Budgeting
GAO Audit
South Africa Post-Mandela Election -- Resource Challenge
Transition to New Administration and Challenges for Career Staff
Mission Closure Criteria/Planning
Re-opening USAID/Ethiopia -- Focus on Humanitarian Assistance
Food Aid: Title II and Policy-based Title III

USAID/Ethiopia, Mission Director 1993 - 1997
Growing the Development Program
Developing Relations and New USAID Strategy with New Ethiopian Government
Agricultural Strategy -- Equity and Decentralization
Pre-emptive Food Aid Planning -- Avoiding Disaster
President Meles and Other Senior Ethiopian Officials
Senior Women's Discussion Group
Security Incidents and Office Move
Democracy/Governance Programming: Elections, Justice, Constitution
Child Mortality and Family Planning
Eritrea: Starting a New USAID Program
Greater Horn of Africa Initiative
Senior Washington Staff Engagement on Ethiopia
Re-engineering, New Management System, and Staff Cuts
Tandem Couple Challenges

Retirement from USAID, Consulting, and Concluding Thoughts
Importance of Washington Assignments
Building Relationships and Opportunities
Retrospective Thoughts on Ethiopia

INTERVIEW

Q: This is Carol Peasley and it is March 10, 2022. This is interview number one with Marge Bonner, and Marge we're delighted to have this chance to talk with you. Could you please start with telling us a bit about where you were born, your childhood, and where you grew up, perhaps highlighting anything that may have influenced you to join AID [Agency for International Development].

Childhood, Family, Education, and Early Background Pre-USAID Employment

BONNER: Okay, Carol, thank you. I really appreciate the opportunity to be part of the foreign service oral history group and to meet with you again. I was born Margaret Isabel Purdie, on January 18, 1946 in Jersey City, New Jersey. Though born in a hospital in Jersey City, I lived in Kearny, New Jersey, on Schuyler Avenue, a street which bordered a swampy expanse called the meadows, with a view of the New York City skyline. I lived there till I went off to college 17 years later. My parents were lower/middle class; both my mother and father were factory workers. I was the first of my immediate (and extended) family to go to college. My mother came to the United States from Hungary when she was ten months old. My grandmother emigrated from the country with four children, ages seven to ten months. Thanks to the records on Ellis Island, where they landed, I found out she was twenty-eight years old, traveling with four children, to meet her husband who was already in the U.S. and living in New Jersey.

Q: And this was from Hungary?

BONNER: Yes, from Hungary, but since my mother was only ten months old, she grew up as an American. She attended school, but given family circumstances, only went as far as the seventh or eighth grade. My father also arrived at Ellis Island, but at an older age. He was a coal miner in Scotland and came to the United States, by himself, when he was twenty-one. He started in the mines when he was sixteen—so he also didn't have much schooling. He moved to Kearny, New Jersey where his sister lived. At that time, Kearny had the largest population of Scots in the country. The demographics have changed now, but we had fish and chip shops on many corners just like other towns now have McDonald's or Starbucks.

Q: I don't know New Jersey, is this across from New York City?

BONNER: Yes. We used to joke that Kearny was in the armpit of Newark, New Jersey, and New York City. The section of town where I lived was in the lower part of the town, both physically and economically. The upper echelon was at the top of the hill, those with less education and lower economic means lived lower. And so we were at the very bottom that stretched out to what is now called the Meadowlands, an area that borders Jersey and New York City.

Q: Oh, where the stadium is now!

BONNER: Yeah, where the football stadium is now. At that time, there was a small soccer field across my street where the meadows began. I would climb out of my bedroom window on the third floor and sit on the roof, where I could see the Empire State Building and the rest of the NYC skyline. Since we were so close to NYC, we easily could hop on public transportation and get off on 42nd street. We could go to Broadway matinees for three dollars and sixty cents, visit Central Park and frequent the museums. It made being in the armpit not so bad, but at times a bit stinky.

I was independent as a child because both of my parents worked long days at their factories. So, at five years old, when other children had their mothers taking them to kindergarten, I walked down the one block to school by myself. In the afternoons, I stayed with the neighbor till my parents would get home. As I got older, and moved on to higher grades, the walk to school got longer and longer, until I finally entered high school. Up to that point, the schools I attended drew from a population that was lower/middle class. There was only one high school, Kearny High, which drew from the two junior highs. When I walked into my assigned homeroom class on the first day, I looked around and only recognized one other person in my classroom. He and I had been valedictorian/salutatorian from junior high and we were the only ones chosen to participate in this “special” homeroom.

Each year there was a “special” homeroom, whose teacher was the leader for guiding that year’s “special” students. Because of this, she was able to choose who she wanted in her class. I only mention this because, as a result of being chosen to be in this classroom, I was now among the “elite” group for my year. This was the “college prep” classroom, as opposed to the vocational and commercial groups. Fortunately, going to college was something my parents expected of me as well.

Q: Did you have siblings, also?

BONNER: My mother and father had both been married before. So, I had a half-brother and a half sister. My half-brother lived in Kearny, but with his mother. My half-sister lived with us, but she was fifteen years older. She was more of a second mother, than a sibling.

Q: Okay, but your parents definitely set you on the path to go to college and have a different life.

BONNER: Definitely right. When they would come home from work, the first question was, "did you do your homework?" I knew this was expected of me, and I took studying seriously. They had a savings account set aside to pay for my college tuition. The biggest help however, was that I ended up with a group of kids that was now very academically oriented. And that was the whole expectation. Had I been put in another class, that sort of support system wouldn't have been there. Most others in my junior high, ended up in the secretarial or technical stream. It was in high school that I first met Ron, my future husband. He was two years ahead of me. We started going out when I was a sophomore,

and he was a senior. My mother enjoyed telling the story of how I asked her, “May I go to the movies with Ronnie?” I wasn’t dating at the time (still too young), so she thought Ronnie was a girl. When he showed up, it was too late to do anything about it. So, our relationship was a long time in the making.

Q: And his name is Scottish? Since you were saying it's one of the most Scottish places in the United States, since his first name is Cameron, I assume that he has Scottish heritage as well.

BONNER: Partly, but he’s a much broader mix. Also, his family moved to Kearny later in his life; they weren’t part of the Scottish enclave. To continue I started working part time fairly early. My sister, who I mentioned, was fifteen years older and was a legal secretary. Looking for a change from living at home, she applied to the State Department to become a foreign service secretary. She was accepted, but while in training in Washington DC, she met someone, got married, and moved to California. This became my opportunity to broaden my horizons: when I was thirteen, I flew to California to stay with her and work on their large-scale poultry farm. I enjoyed the outdoor work, collecting the eggs and just enjoying being out in the open. I did this for three summers. Little did I know at that time, I would join the foreign service and enter into a path she had earlier pursued.

Q: And where was that? Was that in Southern California? I'm trying to think of the big chicken places; Petaluma is one, but there are a lot near Riverside as well.

BONNER: Initially it was; an area called Japatul Valley, but after a few years, they moved to Lemon Grove. Both were east of San Diego. When I turned sixteen and could get my working papers, I stayed in New Jersey and worked at a bus company, checking bus receipts – a boring job. I looked at the middle-aged women at the desks around me, and knew this wasn’t how I wanted to spend my life. As a teenager, I always had a job one way or the other. I liked keeping busy and the independence having my own money gave me. During college, I worked part-time in department stores, doing clerical work and gift wrapping; for some reason they never put me in sales.

I finished high school in 1963 and went on to college, the first year, out to California. I started by majoring in math, just like you. You were in mathematics, also?

Q: Only my freshman year.

BONNER: I don’t remember giving a lot of thought to where I would go to college. I never visited campuses or applied to a lot of schools. I looked for a school near my sister and one where I could major in math, it was a combination math-physics program. Given that I wasn’t a California resident, I didn’t apply to any of the State schools. I ended up at California Western University, which overlooked the Pacific Ocean.

Q: On Point Loma.

BONNER: Yes, you know it! I don't think it exists anymore. Going to California was also a test to see how well Ron and I could be apart. I lasted one year, and came back to Kearny. In addition, they didn't have a rigorous math program, they only offered a combined math-physics program, and physics didn't have the same appeal for me. I came back for my sophomore year and went to Rutgers University in Newark, as opposed to the main New Brunswick campus. Maybe the fact that Ron was going to the same college had some influence on my decision. I was also able to commute back and forth from home, sometimes even getting Ron to drive me in his MG roadster so I wouldn't need to take the bus.

Q: And is that in Newark, or near Newark?

BONNER: Yes. As I said, Kearny, where we grew up, was in between Newark and New York City. I used my summers when I was back in New Jersey, to start traveling. My parents, even though they weren't very rich, enjoyed traveling. Each year, during their two-week vacations, they would hop in the car and drive somewhere across the US or to Canada; a few overseas trips were in there as well. Once my sister moved to California, that was the place to go, sometimes driving, sometimes flying. I picked up the travel bug. After my sophomore year, I had saved up enough money from my part time jobs to go to Bermuda with a girlfriend. The next year, the same girlfriend and I toured Europe in a rented Renault (a "*Deux Chevaux*"), staying at youth hostels along the way. I still remember renting the car in Paris and my girlfriend telling me she didn't know how to drive a stick shift so I had to do it. I had two weeks practice on Ron's MG, so off I went into the Paris traffic. We had a fabulous time, met a lot of fellow travelers our own age, and it made me realize that there is a whole big world out there, just waiting to be experienced.

Upon my return, I finished up my undergraduate work in mathematics. At the same time, Ron finished his master's degree, also in mathematics. The obvious next step was to save on gas driving between our two houses and to get married. My parents were waiting for me to finish college; when I did, they retired and moved to California to be near my sister and their grandchildren. Ron's parents were doing something similar, moving out of Kearny and to the Catskills in New York. There was really nothing to keep us in the New Jersey area. This time period coincided with the initial years of the Peace Corps, which to us sounded intriguing and like a good way to move forward. So why not get married and join the Peace Corps? It was a lot easier than trying to each get jobs and figure out where we wanted to live. Decision made; Peace Corps here we come.

Let me backup, because one thing I did forget to mention was that within my family there was little attention paid to politics, or what was going on in the world. While I had good basic moral values instilled in me, the focus of our life was to step back, and not to get involved. However, when I met Ron, it was much different. His father was a protestant minister in Kearny, and got heavily involved in the Civil Rights movement and Anti-Vietnam War movement. And Ron followed in his father's footsteps on these societal concerns. When I started dating him, I became much more concerned about these issues than I had been, and I started becoming more involved in what was going on at that

period. It was thanks to him and his parents that I started paying attention to the bigger picture. This meant not only attending demonstrations, but looking at how I could help in the world. Peace Corps was an obvious choice for us. We were ready to go. We were assigned to Nigeria. We scheduled our wedding so we could get married, go on a honeymoon, and then enter the Peace Corps headed for Nigeria. Due to the war in Biafra, Peace Corps pulled out of Nigeria, just before we were ready to go. They said, "Okay, you're going somewhere else. You're going to Ethiopia. And by the way, you're getting married on the seventeenth; we want you to start training on the nineteenth." We ended up with a fabulous honeymoon weekend at the Plaza Hotel in New York City.

Q: So, your honeymoon was Peace Corps training?

BONNER: It was. We had our own tent pitched in an apple orchard in Massachusetts. We were assigned to be teachers. Most of the training was language training (Amharic), but also teacher training. After three months, we transferred to Addis Ababa, Ethiopia for the remainder of our language and teacher training.

Q: But, at this point, what year was this?

BONNER: 1967. I remember the shock of my first day in Ethiopia. I had traveled in Europe and been to Canada and Mexico. I'd seen different levels of poverty, different levels of how people lived, but I wasn't set for the first morning. I looked out of my hotel window. Peace Corps had put us in a big, modern hotel, and I looked out at the scenes below. And one of the things—I mean, you've been out there—one of the things about Ethiopia is you have real mixtures and contrasts. You didn't have segregated neighborhoods. You have a beautiful building right next to little mud-plaster shanties. And I remember looking out the window, and just seeing all these small huts, and corrugated tin houses; and donkeys out in the streets; and people on foot, overloaded with heavy, heavy bundles. And it was just such a shock that this was going on right below this high-rise hotel. It was such a juxtaposition of the two parts of the economy: everything all mixed.

Q: And this was in Addis that you arrived first?

BONNER: Yes, we did the rest of our training in Addis, which was a good introduction to the country. It was a slow easing into the life we would eventually be living. We enjoyed our time in Addis; it was great. You could walk around, even alone at night without any problem. Although the altitude (7,700 feet) and the hills could wear you out, you could get a *Seicento*—little Fiat taxis—, which along with whoever else could fit in the vehicle, would take you to your destination for twenty-five cents Ethiopian (about 10 cents US).

Q: But, at this period, in 1967, Haile Selassie was still in charge. So, he was still the emperor?

BONNER: Yes. He was still the emperor, and when he drove down the streets, everybody

stopped and paid homage; you bowed down. He was still well-regarded, well-loved. His palace in town was not far from Haile Selassie I (now Addis Ababa) University. He kept his “extra” lions at a small zoo outside the university, those that weren’t roaming inside the palace grounds. One of his many titles was “Conquering Lion of Judah”

After we finished our training in Addis Ababa, we were assigned to a town called Asbe Tefari, (“Remember the Emperor”) where we taught at the local school. The school served the surrounding areas and covered grades seven to twelve. There were a lot of contracted teachers from India; they were hired to help supplement the Ethiopian teachers in middle and high schools. When we got out to the town we were stationed in, a number of the Indian teachers were already teaching math, so I ended up teaching English and running the library, not really my forte. But I took on the challenge and for the first time, allowed students to actually borrow books from the library.

Q: Now, the town where you were teaching, what part of Ethiopia was it in? Was it in the Highlands, or Lowlands?

BONNER: It was the Highlands; east of Addis Ababa, towards Djibouti. About half way between the capitol and the Somali border. It was the area where the Oromo people lived, and they dominated. But also, many of our students were Amharas, (lowland) Afars and Ethnic Somalis. The country’s ruling class, the Amhara, mainly lived in the center of the country and in the highlands around Addis Ababa. They had most of the money, ran the businesses, the government, and the military. They were primarily Coptic Christian. The Oromos were more likely to be Moslem, though many were Christian due to missionary influence. The school itself served a large surrounding area, not just the town itself. Many of the students lived in small rooms in town as it was too far to commute to their homes. Most of the teachers had one or two students living with them, often in adjacent rooms, as we did also.

We loved it. We had no electricity, no water source (a boy would come by every few days with donkeys loaded with water from a nearby stream to fill up our 50-gallon drum. The students were eager to learn and like students everywhere, varied tremendously in their personalities and abilities. Because of the difficulty in getting to school, there was a large disparity in ages. There were some children in my 7th and 8th grade classes, who were twelve or thirteen and others that were eighteen years old. But everybody that was there really wanted to study, really wanted to learn. So, it was a very rewarding experience. And again, it started to give you a feel, I think which helped later with USAID [United States Agency for International Development] of being on the ground and seeing how people were living, and how they were trying to cope and make do with what they had. But at the same time, you were still seeing the friction that existed between different ethnic and economic groups. Even within this small town, you had the merchants, and you had the Indian teachers, and you had the American teachers. You had different groups who had their own priorities and interests. Among the Ethiopians themselves, you had people of different standings and received different treatment. And even though there wasn't a caste system, there were still differences, depending on whether you were the person who delivered the water, or you were the person who gave the order.

Q: I know in many parts of East Africa, there were many Asian Indian shopkeepers. Was that the case in Ethiopia as well? Or were these Ethiopian shopkeepers?

BONNER: Not as much. Most of the shopkeepers were Ethiopian, though some were Arabic (I want to say Lebanese) and some leftover Italians from the earlier occupation. So, it wasn't the same as in Uganda and Kenya. I know when we lived in Uganda, I remember all the shopkeepers were Asian Indian. No, the Indians that were here were teaching.

Q: And had they come from India, or did they come from Uganda and Kenya?

BONNER: India.

Q: India, okay. So, there was some agreement between the Ethiopian government and the Indian government to provide teachers.

BONNER: And then we also had one French volunteer who was teaching French for some reason. So, it was a real mixture. We were there for one year only, and then Peace Corps/Addis said to us, "Both of you have math backgrounds, and were trained in the 'new math' approach and as a couple are not making use of it. We'd like you to come to Addis and help out there." The Ministry of Education was in the process of developing a new set of books for middle school math education, based on a series developed in Uganda, called "Entebbe Mathematics." Rather than utilize the Ugandan series, the Ministry was trying to make the text, examples, and illustrations culturally appropriate. In addition to working on adapting the books themselves, we wrote scripts for an educational TV series, which was broadcast in the capitol and nearby towns. We were also asked to supervise math teachers who were introducing the new curriculum. I oversaw the schools in Addis Ababa and Ron was responsible for the schools in the province that surrounded the capital, Shewa.

Q: That's very interesting. That same period in Nepal there were Peace Corps volunteers doing similar work on math and science curricula and textbooks.

BONNER: Okay, so we finished with Peace Corps. We loved being overseas and were not ready to go back to the U.S.

Q: And so, this would be 1969, was it two years as a volunteer?

BONNER: Yes. Our view was, "Okay, we really would like to stay overseas, what can we do?" Peace Corps put out something which was called a Green Sheet, which listed available jobs primarily overseas. They must have known the overseas experience would entice the volunteers and this was a way to help them out. Most of them were with USAID, primarily in Vietnam. This was the period that the USAID program in Vietnam was just starting. We were a little skeptical of taking a job with USAID, especially in Vietnam given our feelings about the war, and speculating they were really jobs with an

alternative agenda. Fortunately, Ron qualified for a USAID-funded job in Uganda at an all-girls secondary school. This boarding school was established to be the country's premier institution for girls' education.

Q: And this was a position as a contractor?

BONNER: Yes, USAID had a contract with the University of Massachusetts—so he would be working directly for them as head of the math department. It also seemed that I could get hired on locally. We really wanted to stay overseas. Our conversation went something like "Okay, so what can we get by on? What's the least we can accept and still make it?" I mean, we had been Peace Corps volunteers, as such you don't spend very much money, especially out in Asbe Tefari, where you can get a bottle of so-so wine for fifty cents. So, we thought, "Okay, so what can we get by on?" I think we figured, "Well, if we could get 5,000 dollars a year, we probably could swing it." He applied and they sent the US-based project director to interview him. We met in her hotel room where she said, "Okay, you look very good. We'd love to have you work with us. Let's talk about salary." We're sitting there, eyeing each other. And then she said, "Well, since you're just starting, we can really only offer you \$15,000 a year. We were speechless. She must have thought, at that point we weren't interested. She said, "But, you know, of course, there's a lot of other benefits that go along with this. We'll ship your household effects out; you get a chance to go on R&R [Rest and Recuperation]. We'll give you a consumables allowance, and of course, it's tax free. She's going on and on, finally she left to let us discuss it. We grabbed each other, hugged each other, and had to contain our laughter. "Yeah, we think we'll take it." we said when she returned. It was an introduction into a different segment of overseas life.

Q: Just one second, before we leave Peace Corps Ethiopia, did you have any inklings of what might ultimately be happening politically in Ethiopia? Did you get any sense of that during your time there?

BONNER: No, it appeared peaceful to the outsider. The emperor was in power. If anything was going on, it was very low-key, under the radar, and principally ethnically based. Even when we were in Asbe Tefari, an Oromo enclave, you never outwardly disagreed with the emperor. Maybe there was some dissatisfaction, but we wouldn't have known about it. The press was not free and tightly controlled by the government. We sensed the same thing when we were in Addis: the university and schools were operating and functioning normally except for the occasional student strike. No doubt, Ethiopia had suffered from past famine, but these would not have made the news. The widespread and devastating famine of the early 1970s was still in the future when we left. If there were food shortages in the countryside, you didn't hear about it. Conditions, at least overtly, seemed normal, at least to outsiders like us. There was a process called "Shum Sheer," where government officials were moved (organizationally and geographically) around frequently, so no one ever got too powerful. That may have helped calm any stirrings of discontent

Q: Okay, so then you guys go off to this cushy job. Was it in Kampala?

BONNER: No, it was in a place called Tororo, which is right on the Kenya–Uganda border, which made it very easy for traveling around the region. One of the benefits of the British education system was the academic calendar. Students would go to school for three months, and then be off for a month. So, we would work for three months, and then go on vacation for a month, and work for three months, and go on vacation for a month. Which when you are in Tororo, means you run over the border, go to Kenya, go to the game parks, go to the Mombasa coast—you have all of East Africa at the end of the gas pedal.

Q: And who was the head of state of Uganda during this period?

BONNER: Yes, the next chapter. Milton Obote was in power when we arrived in 1969. It was hard to judge his popularity. There was a lot of tension between the ethnic groups, so it depended on who you talked to. Early in 1971 he was overthrown in a coup by Idi Amin, a military general. The initial reaction was one of jubilation. But then things started to turn. Since we were on the border with Kenya, there was a military camp stationed in the town. The military were much more prominent than before; it became very difficult to travel. Whenever you went outside of Tororo, say to Kampala there were roadblocks along the way; you know, sort of shake downs like, "what can we get from you?" The Ugandan teachers were becoming very, very nervous. Several of the American teachers were becoming nervous, —a few had their cars packed to be able to go over the border at a moment's notice. One side note. Idi Amin liked our school; it had an excellent reputation and was considered a prestigious school. One day, he flew to Tororo with his entertainment dance troupe; he took them out by helicopter, landed in a nearby field and put on a performance for the whole school; with his midget dancing ensemble and wild flailing dancers. I shook hands with Idi Amin. I don't know if that's something I want to brag about or hide. He made things uncomfortable enough that—we were there for about two and a half years—we felt that was long enough for us to stay. A few of our Ugandan colleagues ended up being “disappeared” during his reign of terror.

Q: As I recall, one of the other things he did was to basically expel the Asians. Did you see that?

BONNER: A lot of the shopkeepers were Asian. He expelled them to move Ugandans into merchant positions. It was just starting to happen around the time period we were leaving. They were being forced to leave, but there really wasn't anybody there to take over, Ugandan staff hadn't been trained. Businesses were up for sale, or just being abandoned. Ugandans couldn't automatically assume management responsibility. It was a rough transition, resulting in several shortages and black-market trade.

Q: Yeah. I suspect that the supply chains were all probably Asian supply chains, too, that they wouldn't have had access to. Was there a Peace Corps in Uganda during that period, as well?

BONNER: Yes, I think so, but we didn't have any interaction with them. Having decided

to leave Uganda, we needed to figure out what to do next. Ron was thinking about returning to graduate school to get his PhD, and applied to a few colleges, but didn't make any commitments. I wasn't sure what I wanted to do, but a further degree in pure mathematics didn't appeal to me. He would start in September '72. Our contract finished winter of '72, so we had eight months with nothing further planned. Earlier in the previous year, a few Europeans came by our school looking for a place to camp. They were driving across Africa and needed a place to stop for the night. We invited them for dinner, along with another couple who was teaching at the school. Listening to their tales, both of us couples started thinking, "We have some time off with no plans—why don't we drive across Africa!" We bought an old Land Rover, and over the next few months, converted it into a camper. Amazingly we set it up so we could sleep inside, as well as use it for cooking and storage. Ron installed roof racks so we could carry sand ladders, gas and water tanks and an enormous supply of spare parts for the vehicle. We did a trial run, driving from Kampala north into Ethiopia. It was a good test, a lot of the roads in Southern Ethiopia were more like riverbeds, than roads. We reached 100,000 miles on that jaunt and the living arrangements turned out to be great. The four of us, each in our own vehicles, departed Uganda, in early 1972 to drive across Africa with our trusty Michelin maps and compass. We traveled together with the other couple through Burundi, but in Rwanda they decided to stay longer with the gorillas than we wanted to. So, we split up and crossed into Zaire (now Democratic Republic of the Congo). Around the same time, we met a Swiss couple who were driving from South Africa.

Q: They were heading North and you were heading South?

BONNER: They had driven north from South Africa and were continuing when we met them, as we too were heading west, then north. It was safer to journey in tandem. We traveled together through Zaire, and on to the Central African Republic, Cameroon, and Nigeria (in the aftermath of the Biafra War. We had some exciting experiences. I remember a great scene in a village of pygmies, who all gathered around our cars as we stopped for a day to fix a broken spring on one of our vehicles. And some more hair-raising ones as armed soldiers tried to flag us down to see what they could get from us; I would act naïve and just smile and wave hello as we went along, gulping silently under my breath. We had the leader of a local militia attempt to commandeer our vehicle. That's a long story in and of itself, but we all survived intact. We normally would camp at Missions along the way—when we could find them—but sometimes had to sleep along the roadside. Lagos was particularly memorable. We parked our vehicles on the beach. All along the beachfront were small evangelical churches. They were set along the beach, so they could perform baptisms in the ocean. We would peek out of our car window in the morning and watch the ministers dipping people into the water while parishioners sang. It was quite a scene. Nigeria was switching their driving system while we were in Lagos. As a former British colony, they drove on the left-hand side and were now switching to the right. Talk about pandemonium as confused drivers were moving in all directions. We continued through Benin (then Dahomey), and Togo to Ghana. The other couple wanted to visit longer with some Swiss acquaintances living north of Accra; we wanted to continue our journey, so we split up. Not the wisest

decision, just before entering the desert.

Q: Which desert? This was across the Sahara?

BONNER: The Sahara, yeah.

Q: So, from where to where?

BONNER: After arriving in Accra, we headed north through Ghana, then through what was Upper Volta at the time, and then on to Niger, Mali, Algeria, and Morocco. The desert was breathtaking, and it was so, so quiet. When we would stop at night, there were no sounds, not even insects. There were no roads or road signs. You followed the tracks in the sand, searching to sight to next pile of sticks, tires or stones left by others along the way to help guide you. Sometimes the tracks would split and we'd have to decide which one to take; we made some wrong guesses. I remember standing on top of the hood of our Land Rover with my binoculars scanning the sand to try and see some protrusion in the ground. We were planning to drive through Europe and then to England. But in Algeria, after the grueling crossing, the car needed some major repairs, so we decided not to drive all that way. We had a lot of spares available to be able to do repairs (Ron is very mechanically oriented), but whatever we did, it wasn't an easy fix in the middle of the desert. Luck was with us; we found a large farm that was raising tomatoes for France (planes flew in everyday for pickups). The owners of the plantation were able to help us get the car repaired enough so that we could get to Morocco. We took a ferry from Tangiers to England and had a lovely elderly British couple as our dinner companions. When we drove off the ship, the customs people pulled us over and had us unload almost everything; needless to say, our dinner companions smiled compassionately as they drove on through the checkpoint. We drove to London, sold the car, and got enough money to get tickets home.

Q: Okay, so the car got left in Morocco then.

BONNER: No, we got all the way to England, with the car on the ferry.

Q: Oh, you put the car on the ferry. So, the Land Rover did return to its homeland.

BONNER: Yes, it returned. And then somebody bought it from us at first sight, hopped in, fixed it, and back it went to Africa. It had 100,000 miles on it when we left Ethiopia, so I don't know what it had by that time, likely over 120,000.

Q: How long was this journey? You had nine months to kill—was these six or seven months?

BONNER: No, it wasn't that long. It was only about three months.

Q: What an adventure!

BONNER: It was. We ended up back in the US with a few months to spare before Ron would go back to school. What to do now? Ron's father, as I had mentioned before, was very involved in the civil rights and peace movements. His congregation in our hometown of Kearny was not at all receptive to his involvement in these efforts, and asked him to leave. He got a job up in the town we're presently living in now: Kerhonkson, at a place called World Fellowship, which was an adult camp that focused on social issues. The main clientele were socially minded people from New York City. They would come for weekends, or extended periods during the summers. In addition to fresh air and good food, there were various political discussions on issues of the time. During that period, Ron chose the University of Illinois to continue his studies and was accepted with a research assistantship. The plan was for me to get a job as I wasn't interested in going back to graduate school, nor did we have the money. But when you go to a big college town, especially when you're competing for jobs with other married students and their spouses, at that time usually women, while the other is going to school. The only jobs were at McDonald's or a local department store. I said, "I'm not doing this. Maybe I should go back to school." I didn't want to go back into math, but discussions I had with the economics teacher at the girl's school in Uganda, stirred my interest in that field. So, I cold walked into the economics department, found one of the professors to talk to. I said, "I would like to go back to school and I would like to go into economics. I've never taken an economics course in my life, but this is why I'm interested." I explained my interactions and discussions with the economics teacher in Uganda and why I was interested in learning more. I said I had a strong math background. He said, "That's great. We have a lot of people who have the economics. You can pick that up very quickly. What we don't have are the people with math fundamentals". This was a time when econometrics was just gaining prominence in the field, and the faculty were really looking for people with solid math skills. He said, "Well, let me talk to some of the other professors." He got back to me in quick order and said, "We'll take you on and give you a teaching fellowship to teach statistics." So, they paid my tuition, paid me for teaching a basic statistics course, as well as helping with some research on the side. Looking back, I wonder how I had the audacity to do that, but I guess after driving across Africa, this was less threatening.

Q: Did you have to then do a few basic prerequisites?

BONNER: "Economics 101" and other foundation courses at the very beginning. I took a lot of econometrics classes, staying in the mathematics domain, but it was the development economics area that started to draw my interest. I had some great professors. I remember one, Dr. Jean Due. I called her one day at home and said "May I speak to Dr. Due. She said "Which one?" It was an eyeopener, I could get my Doctorate as well and when someone called and asked for Dr. Bonner, I could say, "Which one?". I told myself, I didn't have to stop at my Masters. My second year I got a full fellowship, so I didn't have other responsibilities at the college. We both just plowed ahead. I was able to get my Masters in a year and finished up my Doctorate in the next two.

Q: Wow, that's amazing, to do it that quickly.

BONNER: All we were doing was going to school. Ron finished his Doctorate in two years as well. My advisor at the time was Julian Simon. He was a bit of a gadfly in the field. During this period people were worrying a lot about the population explosion and overpopulation. He took a different view saying, "Things will work out. We don't have to worry about population growth, we'll figure out a way to make this work." He was looking at population and how it affected economic growth. Working with him, I piggy backed onto his approach and looked at investments in health and economic growth. For my Master's thesis, I started investigating these relationships, and then I was able to just continue to build on my initial work for my Doctoral research and thesis. I had a lot of the preliminary work done. Ron finished his studies and got his dissertation done while we were still out in Urbana. I used that second year to complete my classwork and fortunately completed my data analysis. At this point, I needed the capabilities of the university's computers. This was still the days of typing out computer code, submitting your data on IBM punch cards, waiting a few days to get the results back and then finding out you had a typo and the analysis didn't calculate. I had pages and pages of analysis; these were physical paper pages, not digital media. Now I needed to analyze the data, draw conclusions, and write it up. It turned out that Dr. Simon, my major adviser, was leaving for a sabbatical in Israel for a year. I was going to have to figure out how to communicate with him virtually; remember this was 1974. No Internet, no Facetime, and phone calls are prohibitively expensive. There was no reason for us to stay in Illinois since all interactions had to be done remotely.

Right around that time, my father-in-law who was still working at World Fellowship in Kerhonkson, saw a piece of property come up for sale nearby. He got in touch with Ron and Ron's sister and brother and raved about it. We drove back from Illinois and along with the other siblings fell in love with the place. As a family, four couples, we bought our fifteen acre "Camelot." With no reason to stay in Illinois, we moved back to Kerhonkson, thinking we would have the house to ourselves, as the others already had their own homes. Unbeknownst to us, one of Ron's sisters, brother-in-law, and their two kids decided to leave France, where they were living, and surprise us. We adopted a "homesteading" mentality (recall this was the '70s) and all six of us moved in together to an unwinterized three-bedroom house. We chipped in twenty-five dollars a week to the common budget and made do. Ron started raising albino guinea pigs and selling them to local labs, just so we would have some money coming in; probably not what he expected to be doing with his new doctorate. In the meantime, I finished up my dissertation and got pregnant along the way. With the birth of our son, we were now seven in the house. Fortunately, we all got along.

Q: What was your dissertation topic?

BONNER: It was looking at investments in health as a contributing factor of economic development. Does it make sense for countries, when they're at a lower economic scale, as LDCs [Less Developed Countries], or a little bit above that, to invest heavily in health, rather than sectors like education or agriculture?

Q: And obviously, you used a lot of econometrics, probably, to demonstrate this.

BONNER: Yes. It really was a data-driven study rather than field-based empirical research, which is why I was able to complete it in such a short time.

Q: Now, you must give us the bottom line here—does it make sense to invest in health?

BONNER: It does! At the very lower end, it makes a little more sense to invest in education and in capital. But then as the countries develop further, they reach a stage where health investments make more developmental sense. Without investments in health, people are dying at an early age, just when they are ready to enter the workforce and be net contributors to the economy. To put it bluntly, the investments made in education and capital don't come to fruition, if you don't have a live workforce.

Q: I didn't want to leave the big question hanging there. Well, that is very impressive how quickly you guys did your PhDs, I must say.

BONNER: That was when we built our house, too.

Q: And you built the house by hand, with probably old Land Rover parts!

BONNER: Not quite. I had my son in January, 1975 and completed my doctorate in the spring when we both went into the job market. It turned out that we wouldn't be employed until September. So, with nothing else to do, we decided to build a house. We had been living together with my in-laws in what was basically a summer residence. We felt we needed more space and more privacy. We chose a spot on our property, across a lake, and started building a house. We cleared the trees, dug the holes for the concrete piers by hand, and put in the foundation. We chose a predesigned "kit" home, which came with all the lumber and windows that you needed and using their design and instructions we put it together. Sort of a large LEGO project. It helped tremendously that Ron had started college as an architectural student as well as being very handy. That summer we got it to the point where the roof was on, the windows and doors were in and it was weatherproof. We could then leave it and come back in a few years to install the electric and plumbing and put up the interior walls.

But prior to the house building, we knew we had to start making some money and wanted to do that overseas. We both went into the job market; Ron would get an offer to teach in Australia. I would get an offer to do something in Bombay. We wanted to be overseas, but we wanted to be together. In addition to seeking jobs overseas, I applied to USAID, the World Bank, and the United Nations (UN). Economists were more in demand than those in the education field. All of them asked me to come for an interview. I went to the United Nations first as it was close by in New York City. I quickly found out that due to nationality quotas, they were mainly hiring internationally; there really were very limited spots for those from the United States. After being interviewed, the message was "you're qualified, but the quota's met for the US." So, down I went to Washington, D.C for an interview with the World Bank and USAID. The differences between the two were striking. At USAID, everyone was very informal and friendly. I felt I was passed from

one person to another who sat and chatted with me about my experiences and my expectations. I went to the World Bank and it was very structured and formal; I felt like I was doing my doctoral orals again. "This is the situation. What would you recommend? What would you tell people what to do?" I guess I got it wrong, because he said, "no, that's not what you do, this is what you do!" I remember coming away feeling, "gee, those people at USAID are sure a lot nicer. It's a much better working environment." Both organizations offered me a position. However, with the World Bank, when you're at the entry level, you don't get assigned overseas. You work in Washington, and you only go overseas for consultancies. That wasn't what we wanted. We wanted to work and live overseas, and we wanted to be overseas with friendly people. Although the World Bank had the prestige, it wasn't for me.

Q: Now, was it hiring for a mid-level position? Or was it the IDI program, the International Development Intern program?

BONNER: For both, it was their intern program. World Bank had a similar intern program.

Q: Yes, the young professionals. Okay, so it was the IDI program you were interviewing for.

BONNER: Yes, and I can't remember the people I met with, maybe Owen Cylke? The main person I remember was the desk officer for Ethiopia. Because I think they were looking, at that point, to assign me to Ethiopia, which again, was also one of the things that weighed in favor of going with USAID rather than World Bank.

USAID -- Hired as International Development Intern/Economist, 1975

Q: And was Ron also looking at USAID positions at that time, or did that happen later?

BONNER: No, he wasn't; his main interest at that time was teaching at the college level. Also, USAID was at that point saying, "we really need to be hiring more minorities and more women." And as a Wasp (white, Anglo-Saxon protestant) male, the only thing he had going for him was being left-handed, and that didn't count! Plus, they were looking more for economists. Ron was in the education field, and they weren't looking for people in that field as much as they were economics. So, a combination of being a woman at the time as well as an economist, gave me the upper hand. The other factor that pushed my decision towards USAID, was it looked like we might be going to Ethiopia. Ron applied to Addis Ababa University, and they offered him a job teaching in the mathematics department. So, if I joined USAID, he would have a job at the same time.

Q: So, you did make the decision to join AID then. And that was 1975?

BONNER: 1975, right.

Q: Okay, so you went in as an IDI. How big was your intern class? You all kind of started

on the same day?

BONNER: I can't remember; it didn't seem like it was that big. I'd say maybe twenty of us. Ron, our son Colin, and I moved down to Washington in the fall. Ron took care of Colin and I started my IDI training.

Q: Do you recall what kind of training that you had, what you did?

BONNER: I think a lot was oriented towards design. I remember going out as an IDI group towards the end of training, where we went out to a local community for, I think, a week or so. And we were trying to help a local apple farmer.

Q: Right, yes, I remember they were doing that. You were supposed to design a project or something to help the apple farmer. Now, were you hired as an economist or a program officer?

BONNER: Economist. And that gets into a whole different aspect. This might be a good point to stop right now.

Q: Hi, this is Carol Peasley and it is March 17 2022 and this is interview number two with Margaret Bonner. So, Marge, when we finished up last time, we were talking about your experience as an international development intern, the training that you'd gone through in Washington. I think that probably included some time on the desk before you went off to work in Ethiopia, and do you want to start there, and tell us about that experience?

BONNER: After the last time we met, I thought back about my training, and I really can't remember that much about it. It seemed like a lot of it was very bureaucratically-oriented: what are the rules and regulations, the operational side of AID. Similarly with the time on the desk. I was on the Ethiopia desk (alongside a desk officer) for maybe a month. It seems like most of it focused on understanding the handbooks, knowing how to prepare cables and get them cleared. It was not oriented towards substance; it was more towards the workings of the bureaucracy; what needs to happen to make things move within the system. Thinking back, we relied so much on cables. We didn't have emails, there wasn't much personal communication, you hardly ever talked on the phone to the Mission, and so I guess understanding the system was necessary. I remember being on the desk and spending an awful lot of time just reading a massive set of cables that would come through each day. One part was classified and the other was unclassified. You learned what was going on by reading cables, but there was no sense of priority of what was important to read and what wasn't. Maybe I was just too new to know. What was most important was that I learned who I would be relying on in Washington. The person that was the desk officer, Dick Hines, gave me a basic grounding of what it was like to be in Washington.

Q: In those days, projects were reviewed and approved back in Washington: were there any kind of project or program reviews during that period, the month you were there, that would have given you any sort of substantive engagement?

BONNER: If there were, I don't remember them. Also, just to touch a little bit on the family situation at that time, I had been hired on by USAID and Ron had not been hired yet; he was taking care of our nine-month-old son during the three months that we were in Washington.

Q: Let me just ask one more question. I think there was a language requirement. Did you fulfill your language requirement for tenure before you left? Did you test in Amharic (official language of Ethiopia), for example?

USAID/Ethiopia, Program Economist and Program Officer, 1975 - 1979

BONNER: Since we had been in the Peace Corps in Ethiopia, we still had our basic Amharic language skills. Since Amharic has a different script, we didn't have to take a written test; just the oral, which we passed; Ron's score was higher than mine, I'm sure. We were able to have Christmas in the US and arrived in Ethiopia, about two days before New Year's, December 1975. I mentioned this because, for the first few weeks, we were put in a tall apartment building with a vast view of the city. I remember standing out on the balcony because there was a midnight curfew in place; we wanted to see whether people, given that it was New Year's Eve, would really adhere to the curfew. And sure enough, around 11:30 pm, we saw a lot of cars rushing down the street to get home.

The political situation prior to 1974 had been calm; US relations with Ethiopia were excellent. Haile Selassie was still in power. We had a military base set up in Asmara in the northern part of the country at Kagnev station. [Kagnev Station U.S. Army installation 1934-77] which served as a Cold War listening station for things in that area. We had a Consulate in Asmara, and the USAID program was flourishing. Much of the program was oriented towards higher education, providing support to Haile Selassie I (now Addis Ababa) University as well as the Agricultural College in Alemeya. US professors taught at the institutions while Ethiopians studied in the U.S. to later replace them. I read somewhere that it was the second largest aid program in sub-Saharan Africa. I don't recall what the first one was. But I was surprised to see that it had been going on that long. Ethiopia was also special because it was the home to the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa, as well as the Organization of African Unity. Because of this, there was a large diplomatic corp. There were probably more embassies in Addis Ababa than any other African country.

Q: And all of that was set up when Haile Selassie was the emperor. It remained so even after he was ousted?

BONNER: Correct. And because of the large number of countries represented, there were several different schools in operation catering to expatriate children. For example, there was a British school, an American school, a French school, and a German school. There

was probably a Russian school as well. There were many donor organizations, representing both governmental and non-governmental organizations. There was a strong international community that existed at the time and the United States played a major diplomatic and assistance role within that community.

However, by the time we arrived, Haile Selassie had been overthrown. He was deposed in '74 and while there were a variety of reasons for this action, including general discontent among the military and the populace, I think the biggest one was the government's non admission and non-response to the major drought of the early 1970s. People were dying, and yet nothing was being done. The drought was the straw that broke the camel's back and the pent-up frustration by students, underpaid teachers and the military finally resulted in his demise. He was overthrown in '74 by a military coup led by Lt. Col. Mengistu Haile Mariam, who was a communist-oriented, pro-Russian leader. Mengistu established the Derg, a committee of about 90 soldiers who ran the country and established "Ethiopian Socialism." Feelings towards the U.S. really started to change by the mid- '70s. I remember walking up the hill past the University on the way to the US Embassy and seeing a large billboard of Uncle Sam being thrown into a ditch, with dollar bills flying out of his pocket.

Q: I assume that after Mengistu took over there were reductions in the aid program. Correct?

BONNER: No not yet.

Q: Not yet, okay.

BONNER: It took a while for that to happen. The US did not support the take-over, as Selassie was a longtime friend of the US. So, when Mengistu established power, he turned to the Eastern Block seeking support from the Soviet Union and Cuba. The director that we had at that time period, Jonathan Winters, was very well connected with a lot of the elite in the country, who had now been overthrown, and did not want to provide support to the new regime. He departed and Princeton Lyman arrived in '76. I only overlapped with Jonathan Winters for a short time period.

Q: Was Princeton the mission director?

BONNER: Yes. With Princeton's arrival things started to change. We were trying to be more proactive and involved. But there was a lack of receptivity on the part of the new government. The technocrats were anxious to cooperate, but you didn't have that same feeling at the top. It became very difficult to expand. The government became enamored with the East and there were large contingents of Cubans replacing Western technical assistance, especially in the health sector. Our existing projects were able to continue. We had had a major malaria eradication program, which was nearing an end. We had a large-scale rural roads project, which we tried to get extended, but we were not successful. That was very unfortunate, as the road system in the rural areas was horrendous. The capital, Addis Ababa, is in the center of the country, and then there's five

roads that go out from that. Few roads go off those five major roads, which themselves were in bad shape. When the Italians were there prior to World War II, they built many bridges. They also brought pasta and wine, but they mainly built bridges. So at least you had bridges that were in good shape along the way, but most of the roads were really in very, very bad shape.

Q: Yeah, I suspect that your ability to continue the roads program might have also been affected by the new directions the US legislation was taking, because I know they started to move away from those kinds of programs as well. Were you doing anything in agriculture at that point? I know, there has been a long history of agricultural work in Ethiopia.

BONNER: Definitely. There had been a big program at Alemaya University, which was an agricultural college in the eastern part of the country. Most of the project was complete, but there were still a few Americans teaching down there. When we were Peace Corps volunteers, we would pass the college on the way to Harar or Dire Dawa, two large towns in the East. It was a major activity at that time, but was now phasing out with no opportunity for continuing assistance. The timing was not right either, land tenure had been abolished and peasants were given land to till under a peasant association setup. College students were being sent to the country-side to help with the process, along with the new influx of Cubans. Our main new efforts were drought oriented.

Q: Did that include food aid as well? That was part of the drought mitigation?

BONNER: Food assistance was major as were projects providing other relief for drought-stricken areas. Let me just deviate from the program a little and mention a bit about mission leadership. I mentioned Jonathan Winters before as my first mission director. I want to go back to it because one of the things that helped me in my career was having strong mission directors as role models. There was such a difference between Dr. Winters and Princeton. Even the fact that I called one Dr. and the other by his first name. I remember walking into Dr. Winters' office—he was always very properly dressed. I was an IDI working in the Program Office at the time and was told to bring the annual budget submission into him for review. I put it down in front of him. Now, this was prior to computers, so we had the original along with a few carbon copies. And he put on his white gloves [laughter]. He very carefully turned each page as he read it, picked it up, handed it back to me, and said, "That's wonderful." That was his input into the presentation. Completely different from Princeton Lyman the next year.

Q: That's a good one [laughter]. What was it like going in as a former Ethiopia volunteer into the aid mission? How was that adaptation? And did folks in the mission have different expectations for you, because of your experience in Ethiopia?

BONNER: Good question. I don't know if it was at this point yet, or a year or so later. When we would fly into the airport in Addis Ababa, after a trip outside Ethiopia, we'd land and feel like we were home. So, it was very easy for us to adapt to being in Ethiopia again. I developed an easy working relationship with the Ethiopian staff, knowing

Amharic and the culture made life comfortable. I could concentrate on learning my job and not feel hindered by social ambiguities.

Both the Ethiopian and American staff were supportive and made me feel at home. When I first started at the mission, I was assigned to the Economics Division, since I had been hired by USAID as an economist. I worked with Larry Saiers, the chief mission economist. After I was there for a little while, I asked Larry, "What's an economist supposed to do? What am I supposed to do?" And he said, "Well, we get the budgets in from the Ethiopian government and we analyze that. But really, you don't have to do that because we have an Ethiopian economist here who is responsible for doing that each year. And you have to write the economic analysis of any project documentation we're sending to Washington." I thought, "that sounds pretty boring." But the economics program fell under the program office. So as a result, I was part of the program office. And slowly I made it known, I really didn't like this, just being stuck in this one cubby hole of having to just do economic cost-benefit projections. I really would like to have a broader role. Also, as an IDI, I was expected to rotate among other offices to better learn Mission operations. That made it much easier to start getting more into the programming work and ease out of the economics channel.

Q: Were you able to do field trips during that period? It probably changed over time; I suspect.

BONNER: We were able to travel within Shoa Province, which was where Addis Ababa was located, and many of the projects were centered. As well, we were able to travel for personal reasons, but the government severely limited those opportunities and destinations. There was a game park, as well as an Embassy owned vacation spot, on Lake Langano that we could visit. If you were going outside of Shoa, you had to get permission from the embassy and sometimes from the Ethiopian government. I was still able to go on several field trips, the most adventurous were when I was assigned to the office that handled drought and relief activities. They would go out to visit some of the areas that were being affected by the drought, both to see the conditions as well as to monitor the food assistance we were providing. As I mentioned before, the roads were really terrible. This was not only a problem for visiting projects but also for distributing food. The food could only be brought to where the roads were, and then people would have to walk a couple of days to be able to get the food. In order to get to some of the places that were out further, you needed to fly. So, the mission not only had a plane but we had a pilot on staff. As a result, I was able to visit a few relief and relocation camps around the country. We had a few bullet holes in the bottom of the plane which fortunately, were not made when I was on it, but where it had been shot through a couple times. The images of those camps, with mothers and children sitting outside the temporary wattle shelters, still stick with me. Most of the offices that I was assigned to were very good in terms of their training, in terms of explaining what their projects were, and then making sure I would get out to the field to witness developments. I think it probably also helped that they had someone who was comfortable with the country itself, and could speak the language.

Q: I'm sure it was an asset to the mission to be able to have you do that. I know that food aid was a big part of the program there for many years. Did you have much exposure to the food aid program?

BONNER: In addition to my rotation to the office which handled the food aid program, I had some exposure when we were putting together a new CDSS [Country Development Strategy Statement] as well as when we were doing budgets.

Q: Yeah, yeah. Okay.

BONNER: It was a problematic program, because as I mentioned before it was difficult to deliver. And we were dealing with a government we didn't trust, and which didn't trust us.

Q: Yeah, I think there were several food-for-work type programs as well.

BONNER: Right. And there were a lot of activities we did to support the drought efforts. When we went to Ethiopia, Ron was not with USAID. He had been hired by Addis Ababa University to teach mathematics. But when we got there, the university was on strike and he no longer had a job. He worked for a little while at the British school, again teaching math; but then a much more challenging opportunity came along. One of the programs that USAID had was with the Relief and Rehabilitation Commission, which was trying to establish an early warning system for drought and famine. They were developing different indicators which could be measured throughout the country to identify drought conditions ahead of time. He was hired and worked there for about a year and a half, analyzing the data and doing a lot of the technical writing. There was one other non-Ethiopian analyst from New Zealand, they were the only two expats, the rest were all Ethiopian staff.

Q: Right. So, they started already trying to get indicators. That's interesting.

BONNER: It was a great program. We had a close working relationship with the Relief and Rehabilitation Commission (RRC) from all our work in famine relief. This was the next step; the Commission realized that they needed to be proactive in recognizing the signals of famine, not just responding once it occurred. With early recognition, they could get food in place and relief programs established. They started monitoring market prices around the country, as well as nutrition indicators to see whether they should start preparing ahead of time.

Q: And then after the early 1980s drought, following that is when USAID started to support the Famine Early Warning System, but it presumably, was based very much on some of this early work in Ethiopia then. Interesting.

BONNER: Definitely. This was the precursor of the FEWS program that continues today on a much wider scale.

Q: Well, were there any parts of the program that you thought were particularly effective? So then when you went back to Ethiopia, several years later as a mission director, you thought, gee, you know, "Such and such was really very effective when I was there earlier," and it had an impact on how you thought about development in Ethiopia.

BONNER: Well, definitely the Early Warning System, which we just discussed. The program was still operating successfully, when I returned to Ethiopia as Mission Director and played a major role in some tough decision-making, but we'll get into that later. As an aside, the head of the Relief and Rehabilitation Commission was still in his same position when I returned which made working with him a definite plus. I (and Ron) had very good relations with him based on our work in the 1970s.

Most of the other programs were much different from those we transitioned into during the 90s. We focused more on infrastructure. We had a rural roads project, an electricity project, and a malaria eradication endeavor. Capacity building was at the University level with our support to Addis Ababa University and Alemeya Agricultural College. The roads were still there, the electric grid was functioning, malaria was under control and lots and lots of people were trained. Ethiopia did not yet have a serious "brain drain" at that time that many other LCDs experienced following political disruptions; people were trained, they returned and they took up positions in their field. But as the brutality of the Derg (the name of the new ruling power) increased, more and more Ethiopians fled the country, creating sizable diasporas in many countries, notably the US. This problem became very evident when we reopened the program in the 1990s.

Q: Right, because participant training had been a very big part of the aid program in Ethiopia historically. Is that correct?

BONNER: Yes. When I was there, they were doing some family planning programs through NGOs, in addition to the other activities I mentioned. But at that point, it was only what we could get through Washington's centrally funded programs. So, it was a real struggle, both between Washington itself saying, "Hey, we really want to continue a program there and not just disaster assistance," and the upper echelons of the Ethiopian government saying "We don't really want the Americans here; we can get Russian assistance." There were also serious restrictions due to the Hickenlooper Amendment, which forbade new bilateral aid in countries which, like Ethiopia, had expropriated US-owned properties and businesses.

There was also a big contingent of Russians and Cubans that entered the breach to assist with Ethiopia development needs. It was interesting because you had this influx of Russians coming in. And then you had this influx of Cubans. And they were both two completely different types of people. The Ethiopians liked the Cubans because they were very down-to-earth, very party-loving, and they were doing on the ground development. The Russians would come in and buy up merchandise that they could get in the stores which they couldn't get in Russia. With a limited supply of commodities, they were taking them away from the Ethiopians. They didn't mix with the community. They were viewed very differently.

Q: Did you have much contact with Ethiopian technocrats and mid-level officials? And they were all supportive people?

BONNER: Yes, because those were the people we had been working with all along and for the most part, they still stayed in their jobs. But they didn't have much influence. In a way, it was like USAID. Your career people could only do so much. And depending on who was in power, depending on what Congress was doing, your hands were tied in terms of choices of programs. Now, luckily, the ramifications for us in the US weren't as bad as they were in Ethiopia. If you spoke out in Ethiopia, you disappeared. One of the downsides of my husband working with the early warning system was he would often experience his colleagues not showing up for work, and he wouldn't know whether they had fled the country, whether they had been killed, or whether they were in prison. You would go out in the morning, and you would see bullet-strewn bodies lying along the road. So, we could continue to have relations with the people that we had been working with, but we weren't able to develop new programs. Except again with the Relief Commission. The man who headed up the Relief and Rehabilitation Commission was wonderful. He was dedicated, he was forward-thinking, he was as truthful as he could be. And I think because the government itself knew they had to have something going on in relief, he was able to work with us and continue with the program.

Q: So, they recognized the importance of having a good technocratically run relief agency.

BONNER: So, it seemed. There were probably limitations, but I think they had a lot more freedom than, say the Ministry of Education, or Planning or Finance; any of the other ones that we were working with.

Q: Yeah, another institution I know that USAID wasn't involved with but I think that Mengistu left alone was Ethiopia Airlines. They continued to operate very professionally as well.

BONNER: They did; it was a good money-maker for the government, which owned and controlled it. However, they were also getting a lot of pressure to cater to other government interests, such as opening routes to the USSR. One of the Ethiopian secretaries in our finance office, and a very good friend of ours, related horrifying tales. Her husband was a pilot for Ethiopian Airlines. They were cutting back on maintenance and support. They were trying to get commodities in so they were loading the planes more than they should. Her husband was killed in a plane crash that was leaving Rome to come to Addis. It was just too overloaded. Thinking of her, reminds me of what a fabulous Ethiopian staff we had; we didn't develop friendships within the government, or with the technocrats, because they were afraid to be seen with us. We were, however, able to do it with the staff, both professional and administrative.

One of the things I learned early on was how important it is to promote growth of your staff, as well as to have social interactions with them. We had a group of us in the

program office, and the finance office that would go out for lunch every Thursday, both the Ethiopian and the American staff. Friday afternoons, after work finished, we used to hang out in the finance office and pull out the *Tej*—a fermented honey-based mead—pull that out and sit around and talk and chat. You had an environment in which you opened to each other and could understand a little bit better what was going on. I had a woman in the program office with me, Alem-Tsehai, who became a wonderful friend. Fortunately, when I went back as director, she was working with USIA (United States Information Agency) within the US Embassy. Although she was no longer with USAID, she became my right-hand person for advice. She had long standing connections within the government and the University. She had been around a long time, and her brother as well had been around in the Ministry of Education a long time.

Q: During this period, were the Ethiopian staff under pressure from the government as well? Do you know if they were being harassed at all?

BONNER: It didn't seem like they were under pressure. I never heard anyone say anything nor did we have staff leave. I guess, where the pressure really came more from was, "Is there a way I can get an American visa to leave?"

Q: Okay.

BONNER: As I mentioned, the personal relations we had with our staff helped enlighten us. One of the programs that the Ethiopian government instituted under Mengistu, was to send the students to the field. Initially they were sent to the countryside during the summer, to help indoctrinate the peasants. To preach what a great socialist system there was and how the farmers were better off. One of the reasons that Haile Selassie was overthrown was because the land was owned by the warlords and many peasants worked as tenant farmers. Unfortunately, when Mengistu took over, the land still didn't go back to the farmers; instead, there was a collective system set up. They really weren't any better off than they were previously. The student program had some positive aspects: they worked on literacy and, since most of them were from urban areas, students learned a little bit about rural life. The summer program turned into a two-year program almost like our military draft used to be. We found out a lot about the program, because the staff's children were part of the group sent to the field.

Q: I assume that during the— because you were there almost four years or two tours, I believe— you probably saw the political space getting more and more constrained and the security situation probably getting difficult. What happened?

BONNER: I mentioned before that Princeton Lyman was there with us for two years. He was wonderful; a wonderful person. He was my tennis partner. He and his wife were our bridge partners. He would interact across the whole range of people. So here, you know, me as this lowly IDI, ends up winning a tennis tournament with Princeton as my partner.

But to get back to the program. He really tried to do as much as he could to continue the program. He returned to the US for home leave, expecting to come back for a second tour

but got offered a job that he couldn't turn down. He never got the chance to say goodbye to everybody in Ethiopia, which bothered him. He was a mentor and role model for many of us. He was super smart but superhuman. He taught me what a mission director should be: how you give responsibility, how you care about your staff, how you tactfully interact with the Embassy, how you interact with the bureaucrats in Ethiopia and in Washington. He was able to pull it all together in a very, very caring manner. He was a perfect role model.

Q: Yeah. It's nice to start with the best. [laughter]

BONNER: It is. Around the time he was finishing his first tour, the Ethiopian government decided the US had to shut down operations in Asmara. This included Kagnew, which was the military base, as well as the Consulate. They also expelled those in MAAG, an Addis-based military assistance group for the Ethiopian government. They were all given about a week to leave the country. A little while later, USACE [United States Army Corps of Engineer] was told that they had to leave as well.

Q: USACE had to leave Asmara?

BONNER: No.

Q: They had to leave Ethiopia generally?

BONNER: Correct, Ethiopia., In addition USIA [United States Information Agency] was given four days to leave and the embassy was told to cut their staff by half. USAID was not touched.

Q: Oh, that must have made relations good.

BONNER: Being the only group not affected, we were pulled into service to help with whatever needed doing. I remember standing in the embassy and just feeding documents into the shredder. It was not only reducing the documents at the embassy but documents from Kagnew and the Consulate in Asmara. There was no other way at that time to get rid of documents. Boxes and boxes of classified and sensitive materials being turned into little bits of paper. As an IDI, my services weren't crucial at USAID, so I got to destroy a lot of official materials.

Q: It was an interagency effort to shred [laughter].

BONNER: At the same time, USIA was trying to pack up their photographic and other office equipment as well as their own personal belongings. Since USAID was not affected, we assisted where we could. At that time USAID was located on the embassy compound. USIA, of course, was outside the embassy compound because their mission was to interact with the general population. Initially, there was a lot of tension as to whether we could enter the offices to remove their belongings. We were able to assist with the removal of their more expensive equipment and photographic materials, but due

to the limited four-day period, a lot of more mundane items were left behind. After they departed, we were still able to enter the building and take what we wanted. USIA had a program which rented or loaned out pictures. These pictures were still in the building, so a few of us junior officers decided to take all the pictures and brought them to the USAID building. We put them up in our bare hallways, and fondly thought of USIA as we walked along. A positive twist to an unfortunate and tense situation.

The situation throughout the town was not any better. The evening curfew went from midnight down to nine o'clock and then down to six o'clock. We lived in a quiet residential Ethiopian neighborhood, but we still heard gunshots most nights.

Q: Wow.

BONNER: My son was just a year old and fortunately was still crawling; I say fortunately, because we had periods when gunfire was going off around the house and bullets coming through the window. The shots weren't aimed at us, we were just in the affected vicinity. Because he crawled below the level of the window, any bullets coming in would go over his head. It was a little harder for us to crawl around, but he didn't seem to pay any attention. It was tense.

Q: I hope you moved from that house.

BONNER: We did, but if you forget about those periods, it was still a great place to live. We had a fenced in yard, where we raised chickens, ducks, and turkeys. Our son would play with our pet goat as well as all the fowl. The neighbors were wonderful. You felt accepted and part of the neighborhood. We could buy homemade *tej* (a local type of mead), from a small shop around the corner. Ethiopian communities were a real mix. I think I mentioned this before about a real mix within communities. You didn't have upper- or middle-class homes in a segregated area as you did in East Africa. Your neighbor could be a politician or the person who delivered your firewood.

When we left this house, we moved to the outskirts of town. Our new next-door neighbors were just in a little makeshift, very small, corrugated tin and wattle-mud hut. I think they had electricity, but not water. We cut a hole in the fence and stuck our hose through so they would get water. They had a cute little girl who was the same age as my son, two by that time. The two of them played all the time chatting back and forth in English and Amharic as much as kids do at that age. They would take baths together and she would wash him and chatter away. Even with all that was going on around politically, the children could still enjoy themselves.

Q: Yeah, that's great.

BONNER: You know, Ethiopians were always very hospitable and generous. Whatever they had was yours to share.

Q: You were talking about the FSN [Foreign Service National] Ethiopian staff in the mission. Just out of curiosity did that group represent the breadth of diversity within Ethiopia in terms of ethnic groups? Or was it dominated by one group? Or was it, you know, relatively representative?

BONNER: I don't think it was representative. I'm just trying to think, maybe in the drought office, there might have been some people from the southern part of the country. But the staff represented, for the most part, the region where we were located, the majority Amhara community.

Q: Was that ever an issue of any kind? The lack of diversity?

BONNER: Not at that time. When I was there later as Mission Director, we tried to expand the staff diversity. My driver (and good friend) was from the west, from Oromo. We also had people from Tigray as a good portion of our program was in that area. During that period, people traveled. At the time we are discussing, people aren't moving around.

Q: Yeah, right. Right.

BONNER: They're staying where they are.

Q: Okay. Yeah, no, that makes sense. Anything else on Ethiopia?

BONNER: I did want to mention what happened with my career then.

Q: That's right because you were an economist, but working in the program office and probably doing more program office work than economics work.

BONNER: After I completed my IDI program in Ethiopia, I had spent more time with regular program activities than within the Economics wing. I knew Program was where I wanted to be. My change of direction wasn't a problem in Washington, nor with the Mission. At that point, Barry Riley was the program officer, John Hicks was the deputy: I told you we had good staff out there [laughter]. John was very understanding and understood my aspirations; he helped me move into that position. When he left, I took over his position as deputy program officer. When Barry left, I became Acting Program Officer. I completed my two years as an IDI and was expected to stay another two years. Rather than look for a new person, Princeton just moved me into that position. A combination of what was happening with the Program and hopefully, how they valued my capabilities.

Given the uncertainties, they couldn't expand the mission, nor did they want to bring out new staff. As a result, my first assignment was heading up the Program Office. Over the next two years, Princeton left, and Ken Sherper became acting director until Ed Hogan was assigned as Mission Director. Their role essentially was to phase out the program without really saying it was being phased out.

Q: Okay, I was going to ask, did the mission close at some point?

BONNER: Departing staff weren't being replaced and aside from relief activities there were no new programs. Then a little-known legislative provision came into effect: the Hickenlooper amendment. It stated that if US property had been expropriated, we could no longer provide any new bilateral assistance. The ongoing programs could continue with funds still in the pipeline, but no new obligations could occur. That ended any future programs. Staffing had been decreasing; when I first went out there, we were probably an American staff of about 20. We went down to 10 when Ron and I were still there. Then they said, "Okay, we're going to drop down to four American staff." We wanted to stay on, but given that Ron was an IDI and I was the program officer, you can't have us two being there when we only had positions for 4 direct hires.

Q: Yes, half the staff are the Bonners [laughter].

BONNER: It would have been cheaper.

Q: I should know this, but, did the mission ever close? Or did we just stop doing development assistance and always had some food aid going?

BONNER: I think it may have gotten down to one or two people.

Q: Yeah. Okay. But it never actually closed.

BONNER: There was still disaster assistance. At that time, our offices were still located on the embassy grounds, we were well protected.

Q: Okay. So, but by the time you left, it was down to a very small staff and basically just humanitarian relief at that point. Right?

BONNER: Right. Fortunately, our FSN staff were excellent. In the finance and administrative offices, the Ethiopian contingent were well-versed in the procedures and had been in place for a long time. A few of them, when I went back as Mission Director, were still there.

Q: And you said that, around this time, Ron had become an IDI. So, sort of towards the end of your time in Ethiopia, Ron had applied to the intern program?

BONNER: He did. It was about halfway through our four years there he was accepted as an IDI. He went to Washington for an abbreviated IDI program. After training, he worked on the desk for a little, returned to the mission and did office rotations for the last year and a half or something like that. Given that staff were not being replaced, the Mission was pleased to have him onboard.

Q: He was an IDI, right. Okay. So, then you're getting ready to leave Ethiopia, and you're looking at options where a tandem couple can go?

USAID/Tanzania, Program Officer, 1980 - 1983

BONNER: Yeah, except we really weren't offered any options [laughter].

Q: They told you where you were going?

BONNER: They said you're getting out of Ethiopia and you're going to Tanzania.

Q: Okay. Well, that's another way to say options. Right?

BONNER: We were being moved out under emergency circumstances, so it was probably easiest to find an assignment in the Africa Bureau.

Q: Yes, absolutely. So, you didn't have to go through the bidding process; then you were reassigned.

BONNER: Right and since we had worked in Uganda before and were familiar with East Africa, a move to Tanzania was easy.

Q: Did you go on a direct transfer? Or did you have anything between?

BONNER: No, we went back for language training.

Q: Ah, so you studied Swahili?

BONNER: We did. We met Ron's family in Europe and traveled for a while before returning for home leave. Then to Washington for language training. Our son, Colin, was four by that time; we would drop him off at a daycare center, go into our language training, and then pick him up. We got to a FSI score of 3 to 3+ in Swahili after 8 weeks of intensive training and left for Tanzania.

Q: So, this is now 1980. You go out to Dar es Salaam, who is the mission director then?

BONNER: Ok, April 1980. It was Howard Steverson at that time.

Q: I don't know that person [laughter].

BONNER: Howard was more interested in the social aspects of being a director than in the program.

Q: Ah, okay. How big was the mission then? Nyerere was the founder of the country and he was focused on a more socialist approach to development. That may have impacted the size of the program.

BONNER: It's spring of 1980. Nyerere [Julius Nyerere, President of Tanzania 1964-85] had been in power for 16 years. He was a very popular president, very charismatic. He promulgated Ujamaa, a socialist ideology which promoted self-reliance or cooperative economics. But when you walked on the streets you saw people waiting in line for basic necessities. His push for collective farming, and having an expanded happy, extended family in the villages wasn't working. It translated into waiting in lines. Everyday people would have to line up to get enough oil and fuel for cooking or enough to eat for the day. If you are waiting in line you aren't working; the economy was not functioning. Our counterparts within the government were waiting rather than working at their jobs. We, as USAID employees, were not in a bad situation, because there was a local commissary where we were able to get our supplies. Unfortunately, our FSNs were not in the same situation. Ujamaa was not working.

Q: Right, right. Do you recall how, you know, big the mission was or the program was? What positions did you go into?

BONNER: I went in as a program officer.

Q: As a program officer, Ron went into the Education Office?

BONNER: No, he was still finishing up his IDI stint, slated to become a General Development Officer.

Q: A General Development Officer. Okay.

BONNER: When he finished his internship, he took over an excellent program called Training for Rural Development. Even though it was difficult to interface with our counterparts, we still had a lot of projects operating. I had an assistant program officer working with me but we didn't have a project development officer; we relied a lot on REDSO. We relied on them for design assistance, contracting and legal assistance.

Q: And that being the regional office in Nairobi.

BONNER: Yes REDSO (Regional Economic Development Support Office), operated out of Nairobi and served the surrounding East African countries. We kept our Dar es Salaam staff small and relied on the nearness of REDSO to serve our less frequent needs. When you're in Dar es Salaam and your regional office is in Nairobi, you can often visit in a day. We had a large program in Arusha, the Arusha Development Program. The Training for Rural Development also had a large presence there as well. Arusha was a province in the northern part of the country; we had a small office with two USAID direct hires and local staff.

As I mentioned, we had the Training for Rural Development Program, which concentrated on in-country training at the local level. At the same time, we had a large U.S.-based participant training components in many of our other projects as well. The

mission director at that time was Howard Steverson who was more worried about his social interactions than running the mission. I can't even remember the second mission director. Ron and I were trying to remember but all we could think was that he had been a former USAID comptroller. Eventually, Art Hanley came in as mission director, who was a nice guy. That's about all I can say. We had programs in health and population as well.

Barry Riley, who I had worked with in Ethiopia, was the deputy mission director. We got along well; our sons were about the same age, so we interacted a lot socially as well as had a good relationship in the office.

Q: And you weren't doing any kind of dialogue with the Government about economic policies, I assume?

BONNER: I strongly doubt it. Nyerere had his vision. He stayed in power until 1984, so he was still active while we were there. He was looked upon by the rest of Africa as a visionary, a founding leader, someone who was looked up to. The USAID directors, who were in place while I was there, were not the type to pursue efforts towards changing economic policies.

Nyerere was successful in unifying the country as well as establishing Swahili as a common language.

Q: So, Tanzania has not been hurt with some of the ethnic tensions that have happened in other countries. Was that talked about at all or recognized during the period you were there?

Ethnic conflict was not evident. Differences were just accepted as the way things were. Having lived in Uganda, where you had strong tribal differences and tensions, as well as in Ethiopia, it was just the way life functioned. When you are in a situation, day to day, you don't look at comparisons or the big picture. You try to function in the situation you are in.

Q: Okay, I was just curious. I assume you were able to travel around quite clearly in a country where you didn't have to worry about getting any permission or anything?

BONNER: No, there were no problems in that regard. There was a lot of travel back and forth to Arusha in the north, where we had major programs. The Training for Rural Development project also operated in the south and west, so there was a lot of travel to oversee these activities. We tried to operate around the country. I think there was even a little bit left of the malaria eradication program in Zanzibar, and we provided some advisory help regarding establishing the new capital in Dodoma.

We relied on several centrally funded African training programs, especially for overseas long-term training. And similarly in family planning. It was much easier to rely on well-established large central programs, than try to initiate a bilateral program in a not

very popular area. Also at that time, earmarks started to raise their ugly heads. We had to program where the money was, not where the need was.

Q: I know at various times; the Tanzania program has included some work on natural resources management related to the national parks and stuff. Was any of that going on when you were there?

BONNER: I think there may have been something very small that was finishing up, but nothing new that was started. And again, you know, at that point, funding wouldn't be available for things like national or game parks.

Q: Right; I think the Tanzania program didn't become large until much later when it became a more market-oriented economy. How were relations with the embassy? Did you all work closely with them or did you have much contact with the embassy?

BONNER: Relations were good but kept at a distance; there was little or no influence on our program. Richard Viets was Ambassador when I arrived—a serious career diplomat. When Reagan was elected in 1980, he was replaced in '81 with David Miller, a political appointee. Quite a change and a delightful one. He invited both embassy and USAID staff to his residence for an initial meeting. He pulled out a piano stool, hopped on top of the piano stool, (we all thought he was going to fall off and kill himself) and started talking. He came from the private sector, and had no pretense about himself. He and his deputy tried to include the whole community in what was going on. And again, since we didn't have any non-developmental agenda that we were pushing with Tanzania, there wasn't much of a reason to be at odds.

Q: Okay.

BONNER: Miller was happy that we were doing stuff. He didn't want to influence our program; he was very supportive. I think there was a good relationship there.

Q: Ultimately, was he the head of the corporate counsel for Africa. Is that where I recognize his name?

BONNER: I don't know. He was still there when we departed.

Q: Yeah. Okay. Just curious. So, anything noteworthy on the Tanzania program that you would like to highlight?

BONNER: Again, it was difficult place to live, in a way, only because it was so easy for us—

Q: And so difficult for them.

BONNER: And so difficult for the Tanzanian staff. We didn't have the same relationship with the FSN staff that we had in Ethiopia. Nor with our counterparts, because there was

such a difference in our economic status and what we could access. I never felt like my counterparts in the planning office or the ministry of finance were friends. It was just business oriented. We didn't have the same interaction that we had in Ethiopia before that, or later in Indonesia, where people were on a closer economic level and you felt like you could interact socially. However, life had its positive side. There were game parks within easy access, we could walk out of our house, shimmy down a ladder and go snorkeling in the Indian Ocean. We had a salt-water fish tank that we kept supplied by stepping outside our front door. But the overall living situation and the dichotomy between our living situation, and how the other people were living was difficult. Even though Ethiopia was a poorer country, it was easier to feel at home.

Q: Right. Was there a Peace Corps in Tanzania?

BONNER: I think there had been.

Q: But you didn't have any specific interaction with them?

BONNER: No.

Q: Very interesting picture of a country that changed a lot after Nyerere left. He left in 1984, was that via election?

BONNER: He passed over power to Mwinyi in 1985 but retained control of the ruling party until 1990 when he passed that over as well. It was a peaceful transition.

Q: And just out of curiosity, by the time he left in 1985, did people know that was going to happen? Or was there discussion that there was going to be a transition?

BONNER: I think there was a feeling that it might be coming. He was getting older, and things weren't working. There was dissatisfaction not only in the countryside, but within the bureaucracy in Dar es Salaam itself. The same ruling party took over, so it was a gradual change. They were also trying to move the capital to the middle of the country to Dodoma, to reduce the influx of population to Dar es Salam. Tanzania presently has two capitals; Dodoma as the federal capital and Dar es Salaam with the government offices and the embassies. The embassies were not willing to move to the middle of the country.

Q: Was that anywhere near—I'm just thinking about one of the big infrastructure projects of Tanzania was the Tanzam Railway. Were the Chinese heavily involved when you were there? I'm just curious, you had talked about the Russians in Ethiopia, and the Cubans. I'm wondering if you saw the Chinese in Tanzania?

BONNER: No. If they were, there wasn't much interaction. I only recall that the Chinese were engaged in some road and bridge building projects. We didn't have the same type of donor coordination that we had in other countries. It may have been happening at a higher level and I just wasn't involved in it.

Q: Right. I think you would have been aware as a Program Officer. But was there much Tanzanian civil society? Were you doing any work with local organizations?

BONNER: The Training for Rural Development Program focused at the local level e.g., village leadership training, and had relationships with local government and educational institutions, e.g., the Mbeya and Morogoro Agricultural Colleges.

Q: Yes, it could have been cooperatives or something.

BONNER: I don't remember a large NGO program. If there were, it would have been in family planning or health. We did support a small NGO effort in appropriate technology in Arusha

Q: Ok. So, you were in Tanzania for three years, basically and did a home leave?

Yes, we extended for a year. As a tandem couple you tend to stay longer. It's difficult to find an assignment for both of you. And with a child, you've got school to factor in, not only availability but the school year. It was much easier just to stay. Because we extended for a year, we ended up with two R&Rs. Rather than escape to Europe, we took advantage of where we were. We went out to Madagascar and the Seychelles for one R&R and to India for the other. Again, one of the nice benefits of being in Tanzania, even though living there wasn't that rewarding.

Q: Okay, so, as you were beginning to think about leaving Tanzania. Did you go through the formal bidding process this time where both you and Ron bid on things?

BONNER: We did. We had been with the Africa Bureau both in Ethiopia and Tanzania, but there really wasn't much available in Africa, especially since we didn't speak French. Nor did we speak Spanish, so that eliminated Latin America. That left Asia, which also had bigger programs, offering more opportunities for a tandem assignment. We were trying to think, do we know anybody over there? Dick Cobb, who we knew in Ethiopia, had gone to Indonesia but we really didn't have any contacts in the Asia bureau. So, it really was the regular personnel system that took care of us and got us assigned to Indonesia.

Q: So, you did get assigned to Indonesia?

USAID/Indonesia, Deputy Program Officer, 1983 - 1988

BONNER: I was assigned to the program office. It was a large mission. I was now deputy program officer rather than a program officer. And Ron was finally assigned as an education officer, rather than general development. Unlike prior assignments, we did not have any Indonesian language training before we went. But we both felt very strongly that we needed to be able to communicate. The mission was very willing to let us train on our own. We initially studied with a teacher over lunch, but that wasn't very effective.

We finally got 4 weeks, working half time and studying half time at home with an Indonesian tutor. We reached an FSI 3+-3+ level. Later, Ron established an Indonesian training program for the mission within the Education Office, so the mission was able to do all of its own training. Bill Fuller, who was the mission director, ended up taking lessons during the day as well.

Q: Great. That's great. So, Bill Fuller was the mission director when you arrived? Who was the head of the program office if you were the deputy?

BONNER: When I was there it was Jonathan Sperling and he was part of a tandem couple as well: his wife was an agricultural officer. So again, they were a couple trying to both have careers with USAID and with a child as well.

Q: Well, it was good to have another tandem couple there that could offer some wise counsel. And this was a big program in Indonesia, as I recall, in working all over the country and doing just about everything. Including a lot of work on the economic front.

BONNER: Bill Fuller was there when we arrived; he was there from 1983 to 1986. He was a great manager, a good intellect. It was from him that I learned the importance of communication within the mission. We had mission wide staff meetings to share what was happening; in addition, he had biweekly staff meetings with each office. He would always include the program office as part of those operational meetings. Not only was it a way for him to keep abreast of what was going on, but for the program and finance offices to understand what was going on and what was needed. It was a lot of meetings, but kept miscommunication from occurring.

Q: So, he met with each of the other offices, right, on a weekly or biweekly basis.

BONNER: Right. It worked out very well and was a tactic I used when I became mission director. That was also the time that USAID began to get involved in promoting the private sector.

Q: This was early in the Reagan administration.

BONNER: Right. It was a much different approach than dealing with the technical sectors. We worked a lot with the Ministries of Planning and Finance. Interactions with them in the past had been primarily in terms of getting project agreements signed, but now it was venturing into their technical, economic and financial domains. Terry Myers came in as the private sector officer. He was great. He not only set up the office but established tremendous working relationships within the government. He and Bill Fuller worked well together. We were able to work at a couple different levels, both in terms of promoting the private sector itself, but then also in working with the government to get policies into place that would help promote the private sector. We still had all the other normal technical programs going as well, such as a large population program, a large health program, a large education program, a large PL480 program and a big participant training program. When Ron was heading up the Education and Human Resources

Development Office, they celebrated the departure of their 10,000th-participant trainee. USAID had a long-term commitment to both short- and long-term training, and the returnee rate was a staggering 95+%.

The country itself was fascinating and very varied. Suharto [President of Indonesia from 1968-1998] had been in power for around 20 years, and was in power the whole time we were there. He had a fairly stable government. By population, it was the largest Muslim country in the world, but it wasn't radical. You hardly noticed it, especially if you compare it to some of the Moslem countries today, including Indonesia. Except in some remote provinces and areas, there were no differences in dress between the Moslem or Christians, neither men or women. Hijabs were worn, but not commonly in urban areas. If you went to somebody's wedding, you would see cultural and religious differences, but nothing in day to day living. Our FSN staff was a combination of Christian and Muslim. It was a combination of ethnic-Chinese and ethnic-Malay/Indonesian. The Indonesians tended to be Muslim and the Chinese Christian.

Q: And again, I think that was partly because that's what was reflected in Jakarta. Right?

BONNER: Yes, right. Jakarta had a broad mixture of people, as opposed to Ethiopia where it was primarily one ethnic group. When USAID was hiring locally, it had a large multi-ethnic and multicultural group to choose from.

Q: Was the program operating throughout the country and across the many islands?

BONNER: We were all over the place.

Q: Were you able to do field trips? Did you get around?

BONNER: We traveled a lot. I remember when I first met Walter North. He was actually in an office that was a combination of humanitarian relief and private voluntary organizations. We hardly saw him, he was usually traveling, visiting PVOs/NGOs all over the country.

Q: In fact, I think at that period, all the USAID missions in Asia had a big PVO co-financing project. I think that was what they called them. And they were supporting local NGOs.

BONNER: Yes, and we also had a big population program. The education program that Ron was responsible for supported universities throughout the archipelago. He traveled a lot; the roads were in relatively good condition. We drove a couple of times from Jakarta, across Java to Bali. Plane travel was also very easy.

Q: To go back for a minute, do you recall those PVO co-financing projects? I ask if you recall very much about how it operated. Because you know, right now USAID is talking about trying to do more localization work and doing more work with local organizations. And yet, this is something that was done in the early 1980s. The intent was to build local

civil society organizations, is that correct? Local NGOs? And USAID just gave grants and then did some strengthening activities as well?

BONNER: Right, it was a combination of institutional strengthening as well as grants for activities. Later in Ethiopia, giving grants to local organizations raised a lot of financial oversight issues, yet in Indonesia, we were doing it. I'm not sure how that happened.

Q: You weren't as picky then [laughter]. Yes; anyway, it is interesting to see USAID's cyclical approaches to localization.

BONNER: What goes around comes around, right?

Q: Right. Do you recall who the Ambassador was when you were there? You were there for five years. So, I'm sure you had multiple ambassadors.

BONNER: Holdridge [John Herbert Holdridge US Ambassador to Indonesia 1982-85] was there when we first arrived, but I had no interaction with him. Paul Wolfowitz [US Ambassador to Indonesia from 1986-89] arrived after him. He was much more involved in the aid program. He really jumped into being part of the society; was interested in the programs we were doing. I remember seeing him in a lot of activities we hosted, including recognition of the 10,000th participant trainee. He did a lot of traveling, visiting our projects along the way. He was much more interactive than Holdridge.

Q: I know that you had mentioned that they were doing work in the private sector, enabling environment and economic reform work. Were there ever any tensions with the embassy vis-à-vis our dialogue with the government on any of those issues? Do you recall whether there was full support between the embassy and aid?

BONNER: I don't remember any pressures or interference in terms of the types of programs we were doing. Our expansion into the private sector, meshed very much with their interests. But in terms of them trying to insert themselves into whatever we were doing, that wasn't an issue. We were all on the same compound, which made interaction much easier, especially with the traffic in Jakarta. This is like my first time in Ethiopia. In Tanzania, we were off the embassy compound in the downtown area.

Q: I think Indonesia is increasingly being seen as a development success story. And I'm wondering, were there things within the program, or that you saw there, that particularly resonated with you? That were particularly important in helping you achieve that success. Were there things that you think USAID was particularly effective in?

BONNER: The private sector program stands out, possibly because it was so different from the normal sector programming. We were working with the Ministries of Finance and Planning, rather than a technical sector. The program designed itself as it went along. If suddenly, a question arose within the Ministry of Finance as to how to proceed on a specific policy issue, we could bring in technical assistance to help, or send folks off for short-term training, etc. It was very, very flexible.

Q: So, it was very demand-driven.

BONNER: Yes. Terry had a very good relationship with his counterpart in finance. So, it was, "I'm having this kind of problem, what can we do about it?" There were central resources in the private sector office in Washington which could respond in a timely manner. We had the normal components of a project, like training and equipment, etc. but it wasn't specified beforehand. Rather than a "We're going to do step A, B, and C." It was more, "Okay, we need this. Let's get somebody in or go off for this type of training."

Q: Right. A lot of that was probably short-term technical assistance, which probably is in many ways more valuable than the long-term.

BONNER: Correct, you had the typical components, like long-term participant training, but you're also trying to be responsive to the evolving requirements. That aspect of it really ended up influencing the government and gave them the tools they needed to go ahead and start making changes.

Q: I know that the family planning program in Indonesia has been seen to be very successful. Was USAID heavily involved with that as well?

BONNER: Definitely. We had a combined Health and Population Office— we had two strong officers, one at the head of each one— they worked very closely together. David Piet headed up the Population side. Family planning was an integral part of health. Indonesia wasn't a radical Muslim society at that point. There was no problem with family planning being accepted nor them being a component of the health clinics. It was seen as a service that was being provided.

Q: Okay. Was the mission involved at all in East Timor during that period. This was before East Timor gained independence, but was USAID doing anything in East Timor?

BONNER: I should mention that we supported a lot of Private Voluntary Organizations (PVOs). I think some of them were in East Timor. I don't know if one of our universities was there. But at that point, there wasn't turmoil that affected our programming.

Q: Okay, so Walter managing the private voluntary organization project wasn't out generating unrest. (laughter) So, in later years, Indonesia began facing more political issues and some terrorism. But during the period you were there you didn't see any of that begin to develop?

BONNER: No. If it was, it was underground. When the turmoil came in Indonesia, after we left, I looked back and thought, was I missing something? I mean, you did see some tension occasionally between the Muslims and the Christians, or between what might be going on in one island versus another island. But it wasn't overt in Jakarta.

In line with this, I want to mention how both Ron and I felt very strongly about staff development; we felt this was as much a part of our responsibilities as the programs themselves. Both our offices had a mix of Muslims and Christians in support as well as professional positions. Every Christmas, we would have our staff at our house to celebrate. All our Muslim staff and Christian staff, both from Ron's office and my office would come over for a Christmas party and play games and exchange gifts. We would interact socially over lunches or holidays. There was a much stronger cohesion and interaction among the staff than we had in Tanzania. It also helped that our staff were better off economically. We could go out as a group and we could split the bill.

You went to family weddings and other celebrations. One of Ron's participant training officers was instrumental in helping us adopt our daughter, Rima. We adopted a little girl who was three years old while we were living in Indonesia. He was extremely helpful in trying to locate adoption organizations and even going out to the centers ahead of time to check them out. There was a good interaction between the American and the Indonesian staff. And that wasn't just our offices, that was across the board.

Q: Right, just thinking of someone from aid who spent a lot of time in Indonesia at various times and I don't know if he overlapped with you at all, that's Bob Dakin.

BONNER: He was the other one that was out in the field all the time. I think he and Walter just stopped in to visit us once in a while. Bob was very competent in the rural development field.

Q: Right. And his wife, I believe, is Indonesian. so, he was quite well connected, as well. In some countries aid staff can get very close to local staff and other places it is much more difficult. But it sounds like Indonesia was quite ideal. And your Bahasa, did you get comfortable enough with the Bahasa language?

BONNER: Yeah. I think Ron maybe got to a 4-4 level. But he's good at languages. I think I was a 3-3 at one time, but I'm sure it's gone down, way down since then [laughter].

Q: Well, I'm looking at your array of languages, you've got Amharic, Swahili, and Bahasa Indonesia. Very good. That's the USAID language skills [laughter].

BONNER: It doesn't help you at all traveling in Europe [laughter]. Except that people don't know what you're talking about, at least when we talk to each other.

Q: Right. Well, it helps you with taxis here in DC [laughter].

BONNER: Just to step back a little, one of the other things I wanted to mention is what a difference your mission director makes. Bill Fuller was in charge the first three years that we were there, and the tone he set led to how well the staff interacted with each other. The fact that the staff meetings he had with the technical offices always included the program and finance offices allowed for greater communication and understanding. You knew what each other was doing. You knew what was going on. After Bill left, David

Merrill came in. I don't have the same positive feeling about him that I did about Bill Fuller. I know he's made his way up through the ranks. But I just didn't feel like he fostered the mission staff interaction the same way that Bill did. It was a different atmosphere.

Q: Yes. Well, I think that Bill Fuller would be one of the more difficult people to succeed because he is extraordinary in terms of his intellect and his ability to bring people together. But yeah, an important factor. I know during part of this period, there were some real efforts to enhance collaboration among the missions in Thailand, the Philippines, Indonesia, and then Burma, at least, part of this time when David Merrill was the mission director. The four mission directors would meet periodically to share information and ideas. Did you ever get any sense of that collaboration?

BONNER: No. I saw much more of that in the Africa Bureau. Maybe because in Africa we had regional offices that supported the Missions. In Asia there may have been some regional support from the Philippines, but the Missions themselves were very self-reliant with high level delegation authorities.

Q: Right, and you had a lawyer in Indonesia who covered Thailand.

BONNER: Our staff was so big, we had engineers, we had a lawyer, we had a contract officer, we had a procurement officer. We had everything we needed there. We didn't need to rely on the support services of anybody else. Where with the Africa Bureau, the missions were smaller and we had to rely on the regional offices for support. I felt there was a real attempt to get us to talk to each other; the regional office was a gathering point. There were several times, it seemed like almost once a year, we would have something that was taking place for the program officers or for some of the technical staff to get together to exchange ideas. I didn't see that same thing happening in the Asia-Near East Bureau

Q: Okay. I think those Mission Directors did, but I think it didn't filter down. So, anything else on Indonesia that you particularly would like to mention?

BONNER: Just to mention again, in terms of living there as a family. Both of us were working. My son, Colin, went to the Jakarta International School, which had an excellent reputation and was a wonderful way to interact with students from all over the world. We adopted our daughter, Rima, after we were there for about four years. As part of the adoption process, we had to stay on for another year.

Q: Okay. So, there's a two-year limit or a two-year minimum that you have to stay in country after an adoption?

BONNER: One year. We had to stay at least one year after we adopted her. Traveling was easy, getting around was very easy; you didn't have any fear of your safety. The only safety issue you had was trying to drive or walk [laughter]. The traffic in Jakarta was horrendous. It was better outside the capital, but it was the only place I ever had a driver.

Just because you didn't want to go out and try to drive. Having a driver also made it easier for your kids to be able to get around to get to school or to activities. It was a good family post.

Q: You had mentioned that Jonathan Sperling and Nancy Tumavick were there as a tandem couple and then you and Ron. Were there any other tandem couples? Any sort of final thoughts on that and learning how to manage that within a mission? Even in a large mission there probably are sometimes challenges.

BONNER: The only thing— and I guess, Nancy and Jonathan would have had the same thing and then it followed over with us when we went back to Ethiopia— was that you must have a relationship where you may have to disagree on certain things because you're coming from different positions. You must be able to do that in a manner that keeps your marriage together as well as your working relationship. The program office had to ask the hard budget and programming questions which are just part of the job. But I think Jonathan and Nancy were able to handle that; and so did we.

As a tandem couple, we ended up staying in Indonesia for five years, which is a very long time period. We had good jobs. We were happy with what we were doing. The family situation for our kids was fine. When you have kids, the longer you can keep them in the same situation, the better it is. I mean, they're already transferring so often that if they're able to stay someplace for five years where they're getting a good education, that's a real benefit rather than having to move every two or three years.

Q: Right. Now your daughter hadn't started school yet, is that correct?

BONNER: Yes, she didn't start school until we were in the United States.

Q: Yes, that all sounds quite idyllic and nice to have been part of a program that was so successful as well.

BONNER: Yeah, it also was nice to move out of the Africa Bureau. Even though I ended up coming back, it was helpful to see how different bureaus did things. It was also broadening to be exposed to different cultures. There was a real difference between Ethiopia and Tanzania, compared to Indonesia. It also gives you a chance to travel in another part of the world and expand your horizons that way. It's one of the benefits of being in the Foreign Service: you can not only travel within the country you're in and learn what's going on and appreciate different cultures, but the nearness to other places as you go home or you go on R&R is unbeatable. For us, that was one of the real benefits of the Foreign Service.

Q: Yes. Absolutely. Well, we're getting on to two hours so why don't we call it quits for right now. If you think of anything else about Indonesia, we can come back to it.

Q: Hi, this is Carol Peasley. It is March 30, 2022, and this is interview number three with Marge, Margaret Bonner. And, again, Marge, we're delighted to have this opportunity to talk with you. When we finished up the last time, it was summer of 1988, and you were leaving Indonesia for an assignment in Washington, if you could talk a bit about how that transition went, and any special challenges for families, and particularly for tandem couples moving back to Washington.

AID/W, Asia/NE Bureau, Deputy Director, Office of Egypt and European Affairs, 1988 - 1989

BONNER: Sure. Glad to be back. So, we were leaving Indonesia for Washington, not so much because we wanted to, but because they said, okay, you guys really need to come back to the United States. You must see what it's like to be on this side and deal with the Washington bureaucracy, and the State Department and Congress. You need to understand the Washington perspective. We had gone overseas in '75, it's now '88. So, after thirteen years, we're coming back.

When we left for our first USAID posting, Colin was eleven-months-old. He was now ready to go to middle school. We adopted Rima in Indonesia at three, she's now four. We were fortunate enough to be able to bring an Indonesian housekeeper back with us. The regulations were such that if you had someone coming with you, if they continued to work for you, they would have a visa to stay in the U.S. That was useful because we had someone who spoke Indonesian, who could be there with our daughter while we were at work and as she was trying to get acclimated. Having lived overseas for 13 years, and entering the Foreign Service right after having been in the Peace Corps and graduate school, we didn't have any furniture [laughs]. We not only had to come back and get kids in school, we had to find a place to live, and we had to furnish a house. We had lots of decorations because while overseas you gather all sorts of decorations, but because housing is provided, you don't gather furniture. Fortunately, we returned in the summer and had leave. We weren't starting work until the fall when kids would go back to school.

It was a hectic time trying to get that all put together. It also was difficult for my son to fit in at school. Even though he had changed schools when we moved from Ethiopia, to Tanzania, to Indonesia, the school atmosphere was different. When you are overseas, there's a lot of movement, so you have kids coming and going, coming and going. New kids in the classroom are the norm. That wasn't the situation when we got back to the US.; here the kids have been together since kindergarten. They've had friendships the whole way through. Someone from the outside trying to fit in, well it's not so easy. It makes it even more difficult in that his experiences and what he knew, didn't match up with what the kids in Virginia knew. Okay, so he could talk about going on safaris, but he didn't know who the best baseball team was, or who was playing soccer, or who were the football stars. I think that transition was very difficult. Plus coming back in middle school at an age where you're starting to deal with puberty as well as trying to fit in. I mean, he made it and did well; he's still around. He was a good kid and he developed into a wonderful well-adjusted adult. But just as information for others, that kind of a transition, at least at that age is a difficult one.

Q: Can I ask a related question? This would not relate too much to Washington, although I guess a bit as well. But the wife of a former colleague mentioned to me once that she thought it was cruel and unusual punishment for a tandem couple with kids to arrive at post on a Saturday and then on Monday both go off to work. That seems like a not very family-friendly approach. And I'm wondering if you have any thoughts on that?

BONNER: Just two things that I can think of: first, we tried not to transfer that often. If you look at our time in Ethiopia, we were there for four years, then in Tanzania, it was three years, and then in Indonesia, it was five years. We didn't do the normal two-year rotation, so those transitions weren't as often. The other thing I found, and I was going to mention this also in terms of moving to Washington, is each place that we went, we had a support family to help us get adjusted. When possible, the Mission tried to link you with a similar family. In Tanzania we were hooked up with a family who had a son about the same age as Colin. That helped tremendously. And I think it is easier to make friends quickly overseas: you're all working (and frequently socializing) together, you're all having to do the same or similar things together. If you get along, it's fine. Everyone there is or has been in a similar situation. Maybe because we didn't move that often, and maybe the places we went to had a good support system for newcomers, I didn't see it as an issue. And maybe I was being naive and didn't realize what the kids were going through. But I never found that as an issue. And when we arrived in Washington, we had the summer to get ready.

Q: Okay, thanks. That's helpful. Okay, so you got back to Washington, you got sort of settled in Virginia, you had furniture, and a lot of boutique clothes, probably [laugh].

BONNER: [laugh]

Q: And— You started in Washington, that first job was the Deputy Director of the Office for Egypt. Was it European Affairs when you arrived or did it later become European Affairs?

BONNER: It was called Egypt and European Affairs. And that was because there was a small program in Ireland, thanks to Tip O'Neill. Israel was also included.

Q: So, the Israel funding also was part of that office?

BONNER: It was. Egypt, Israel and a really interesting program that was trying to promote cooperation between scientists in Egypt, Israel and any other Middle Eastern country that would like to join. I started there as the Deputy Director. Dick Brown was the Director. He was a wonderful guy to work with, very thoughtful, very calm, which I guess you need to be if you were dealing with the high political visibility of Egypt and Israel. Because of the strategic nature of these countries, we had a very close relationship with our State Department colleagues. The Israel program was simple, it was just a million dollar, sorry, a billion-dollar grant—

Q: [Laugh]

BONNER: That's right, a billion-dollar grant per year, a straight cash transfer. Egypt, was \$800 million a year, but that was projectized with possibly a CIP [Commodity Import Program].

The mission out there, which I visited a couple of times, was huge. I think Marshall Brown was the director at that time. I got a chance to visit there a little bit, but the more interesting trips were to observe the coordinated program between Egypt and Israel. The thought was, if you can get people talking at the lower levels, between technicians or scientists, maybe things will trickle up. It was an attempt to show that common people can get along and help each other. The main coordination endeavor was to introduce drip irrigation. Drip irrigation developed in Israel and was being used on many of the kibbutz farms. The scientists were working together to now introduce it in Egypt. To us now, drip irrigation is commonplace, but that wasn't the case then. To see this initiative, which has revolutionized farming in drought-prone areas as it was starting, made me feel like a part of history.

Q: Was this period when relations were particularly good between Egypt and Israel?

BONNER: I think so. I know, when we were traveling around, we went out to Palestine, places where you don't go now. We were there, looking at the Jordanian border; we visited Jerusalem without any problems, and traveled throughout the country. There was hope that we could get Jordan to be part of this program, but that never happened. The program had been designed to have the three countries involved, but Jordan never participated.

Q: And did you have any involvement with the Ireland program? [laugh]

BONNER: [laugh] No, unfortunately, they never sent me out there.

Q: So then when the Berlin Wall falls—

BONNER: Right.

Q: —And there's discussion of the U.S. government providing assistance, did the wall fall in the fall of 1989?

BONNER: Actually, I had to do some research to refresh my memory. In May of 1989 Hungary opened up the borders; in June, the Polish Solidarity Party won the elections paving the way for Lech Walesa to become president. This, and other developments in the region, led to the fall of the Berlin Wall in November.

Q: Were there discussions of assistance then to Poland and Hungary, again, before the Berlin Wall fell?

AID/W, Coordinator, Eastern European Task Force, 1989 - 1990

BONNER: A lot is taking place at the same time. In 1989 Hungary and Poland, were starting to move away from communism. There was a lot of excitement about the US getting involved, both from State and USAID. They decided to start the European Task Force, initially with State and USAID but it soon branched out to other Departments. Since we were the office that handled Europe, it fell to us to represent USAID. Dick said to me, "Well, I have to handle the office, you take the Task Force." At that point we pulled in those people we had been working with on Egypt and Israel. From the Project Development office, we got Ron Redmond. On the legal side we got Don Pressley, who was a regional legal advisor, now assigned back to Washington. Don and I were IDIs (International Development Interns) and had worked very closely during our training and remained friends. Carol Adelman was the—

Q: Assistant Administrator, right?

BONNER: —And she had just brought on Jerry Hyman to start a Democratic Initiatives Program, so we pulled him into the Task Force. We were assuming that most of the assistance would be focused on democracy and governance issues, as well as privatization and trying to facilitate movement to a market-based economy.

Q: As you were doing this, the focus was on Hungary and Poland initially?

BONNER: Initially, as they were the only ones who had taken any overt actions against the Soviets. State took the lead on this as they should. Because we had worked so closely with them on Egypt and Israel, we had a good relationship so it was easy to make this transition.

Q: Which part of the State? Was it the Europe Bureau? Or was it Policy People? Or do you recall where they come from?

BONNER: It was the geographic region because I was working with the same people that we had been working with on the Middle East. Others probably got pulled in as it expanded, just as it did on the USAID side. We got a Task Force started.

Q: This was the Aid Task Force, and then you were liaising with the State Department, and they probably had their own Task Force?

BONNER: We started with State right away. We were able to pull the AID group together quickly as well, which I headed up. Then State established an interagency Task Force where they took the lead. The excitement of what was happening spread throughout the other Departments. We started initially with a small USAID Task Force, and then that became a State USAID Task Force, and then the room got bigger and bigger and bigger. We had labor, energy, agriculture, treasury, commerce, everybody wanted to get in on the action.

Q: Was that after the Berlin Wall fell?

BONNER: No.

Q: No, even before. Okay, and even just—

BONNER: This all took place in a very, very short period.

Q: —Were you the USAID representative on this interagency Task Force or were there multiple aid people?

BONNER: Don and I shared responsibilities.

Q: Yeah, okay.

BONNER: —Because he had the legal side, and I had the programming budget knowledge.

Q: And the Task Force was thinking programmatically, but also thinking legislatively, as well?

BONNER: We started working with Congress quickly because we had to have new funding. There was a feeling early on that this was going to have to be handled differently than any of the other aid programs we had ever had. We didn't have any staff in place. We didn't have any programs in place. And if we wanted to operate quickly, we couldn't be tied to the normal AID regulations. I remember sitting with my State Department colleague putting together what we wanted in terms of flexibility. He would ask me what I wanted and then he would type it out so we could share it with our Congressional colleagues. I figured this was the chance to take away the regulations which hindered quick action, so I asked for it. It was a real joint effort: AID, State and Congress to get the legislation in place. I think at that time, we were working with Ingram.

Q: George Ingram?

BONNER: Yeah. George Ingram was over there; I worked very closely with him. And—

Q: Yeah, he was on the House Foreign Affairs Committee staff.

BONNER: Right. We were able to pull it together and by November of that year, we got legislation in place. Just about the same time the Berlin Wall fell.

*Q: Oh wow! Wow! that was amazing that you all started working so quickly—
And that became the SEED Act, right, the Support for Eastern European Democracies?*

BONNER: Right. When everyone is on the same page and wants to get something done, you can do it. We had a lot going in our favor. The support was in two areas: how to get

the private sector established and how to get democratic processes established. It was a very heady experience.

Q: Was the SEED act—because you started all this work with the intention of working with two countries, Poland and Hungary, but as you were developing the legislation, it was developed to be able to handle—

BONNER: No, at that point, it was still only the two of them—

Q: Oh, okay.

BONNER: —Later as more countries fell, there was legislation for the newly independent states,

Q: Right, but that was for the former Soviet Union countries, right?

BONNER: Right. Right.

Q: But I mean, that fell under East Germany and, you know, Czechoslovakia, those countries fell under the SEED Act.

BONNER: Czechoslovakia did, Eastern Germany wasn't there yet when I was still there. I don't remember the exact wording for the SEED Act in terms of what countries were included.

Q: Well, in fact, we didn't provide any assistance to East Germany. But when the Berlin Wall fell, the legislation could then apply to more Eastern European countries to Czechoslovakia and—

BONNER: —I think we did. We applied it to Czechoslovakia. But as far as other countries—we weren't looking that far out yet. We were still struggling to try to figure out what we were going to do and how we were going to operate, rather than looking at expanding.

Q: Okay.

BONNER: —We were really looking at Poland and Hungary and what we could do there. Then it started to expand a little bit to Czechoslovakia.

One of the nice things about the SEED Act, which in retrospect was similar to what we had with the Development Fund for Africa was lots of flexibility. We had no sector allocations, no country allocations, and procurement was relatively easy. Since we were helping draft the legislation, we could put in what we wanted. We knew where there were programmatic roadblocks and did what we could to make sure they weren't part of this legislation. We programmed in a lot of flexibility so we could start operating quickly. We took several trips to the area since we didn't have any aid missions there. All our field

trips, when we went out to Hungary, Poland, and Czechoslovakia were in cooperation with the State Department, both in Washington and in the field.

Q: Did the SEED Act create the State Department coordinator's office? Was that part of the legislation?

BONNER: It was, because that's what ended up putting State in charge, even though the money was coming to USAID. We had a task force, headed by State, with lots of domestic agencies wanting to be involved, none of which had budgets for working overseas. The agencies themselves didn't want to use their money and Congress felt the same way. This was considered an international program; Energy and Agriculture are domestic programs, none of their money should go to international assistance. So, except for Treasury, which I think got its own funding, all the funding went through USAID.

Q: Yes.

BONNER: Don and I went out a number times to Hungary and Poland, using the State Department as our intermediary. It was a very heady experience, and extremely enlightening. We had a chance to travel around the country, we got a chance to meet people, to try to understand the challenges of moving away from a socialist system. We tried to contemplate a new way of operating. How realistic would it be to try to run an aid program with no boots on the ground, and with operations all coming out of Washington?

Part of what we saw, just in the small time we were out there, was how different this was from USAID's regular development programs. You had a whole system operating, an economy, that was based on a socialist, top-down system that needed to change. We were trying to do privatization in a country where the systems and infrastructure weren't set up to accommodate it. We soon learned it wasn't just a matter of selling a government owned building to a private owner. I remember on one of our field trips, where we traveled to a couple of different factories. We talked with the manager of one of the factories asking what's going to happen if privatization comes in? He said, "It can't; I wouldn't know what I'm supposed to do. We have a five-year plan telling me I'm supposed to produce 2000 yards of blue material. I can't make that kind of decision, to decide what to produce." So, I asked what happens to the material? "Well, now it goes to the next factory, and then that's where they're going to cut it and sew it, and then it goes from there to another factory, and that's where they're going to sell it. And everybody knows, at the end of this process, you're going to have 5000 blue school uniforms that are ready to be sold to the families of the students who must wear these uniforms." There was a mentality of just tell me what to do and I'll do it. Plus, to just try to privatize the factories when all those factories were designed for was to make school uniforms. It was not operating as one unit; it was split up between three or four different factories.

It was a real eye opener, to realize it wasn't just allowing these companies to be purchased by individuals, the factories weren't operating as independent units. The one process was spread throughout, and this was just one example. Don and I went out on a

couple of field trips. We visited Hungary and Poland a couple of times, but you can't start to understand a completely different set of problems with field trips. We had no one on the ground who could take the time to understand the unique and difficult situation we were facing. We didn't have anyone looking at this from the developmental aspect. State was trying to assist, but development wasn't their main interest. Fortunately, the SEED legislation allowed us to make the decisions as to how to operate: should we be running these programs in the country, or should we be running them in Washington with no overseas missions there. It gave us a lot of flexibility in terms of being able to procure things easily. If you found out there was an issue, and you needed to study a certain area, you could quickly get somebody out there to do that.

We also had the flexibility of not needing host country approval. Most of our bilateral projects and programs are part of an overall agreement signed with the government, where you agreed on what you were going to do. Since we didn't have that type of a program there, if there were aspects that we felt needed to be looked at, we had the funding available to do it, without seeking the host government's agreement.

Q: So, we entered directly into all of the agreements with implementing partners and most of those were U.S. entities, at least early on?

BONNER: I think so. Now, I didn't get to stay that far into that process. Carol Adelman, who was the Assistant Administrator for Europe, and I had a disagreement. [Laughter]

Q: Oh. [Laughter]

BONNER: I was trying to think back about what it was. Don and I worked on this for maybe a year and a half. We got along very well and respected each other's opinions. One benefit to these field trips was the amount of time you could devote to the issue. And we did a lot of talking, a lot of strategizing, over dinner, waiting in airports, it was 24/7 work. And we agreed—he and I agreed on pretty much almost everything. But I was probably a little mouthier in saying what I thought should happen, while Don was more politic. The main disagreement was around presence in-country. I felt that we should have representation on the ground. Carol felt no, we can run everything out of Washington. Carol had worked with AID before in a technical position in Washington but had no overseas experience. Her present position as Assistant Administrator was a political appointment. She didn't like being challenged, and so I was asked to leave and probably it was at the right time.

Q: Yeah. I mean, it's interesting, because ultimately, they did decide to open a mission.

BONNER: What was interesting was Don was the one who went out there and he became the first mission director in Poland.

Q: Were there debates programmatically about what the focus of the program should be, or was there a clear understanding from the outset with economic reform and privatization?

BONNER: Well, that's what the legislation said.

Q: The legislation said. Okay.

BONNER: There wasn't much disagreement.

Q: Had the idea of the enterprise funds started while you were still there, or did that emerge later?

BONNER: It sounds familiar, but I don't remember time periods.

Q: Okay. One of the things that always struck me about the approach to the Eastern European program was the extraordinary partnership that developed between the U.S. government and some of the implementing partners that were working on the economic reform front and providing technical assistance. Some of these partners played important roles in all these countries. Did you see that at all?

BONNER: No. Again, because so much of what I was doing was in the formative period, when it was just starting; it was the end of 1989 when we got the legislation. It was the beginning of 1990 when we were trying to figure out what we were going to do there.

Q: But the partnership stuff developed over time?

BONNER: Correct.

Q: There are also stories I've heard that the State Department at the top didn't want AID heavily involved in the Eastern European program. Did you ever perceive that?

BONNER: At the working level, it was not an issue. As I mentioned we worked closely with State to get the legislation in place. There may have been some ruffled feathers at the top, but I was focused on getting a program started. I was happy to have State oversee the Task Force with all the competing agencies. I was happy to have them intervene in-country to get us access to those we needed to see. There was more difficulty with the other agencies that wanted to take advantage of our funding.

Q: They wanted money.

BONNER: Definitely. We would often use them as contractors or bring them in, but the battle then became who's going to decide what happens next? I think AID was looking at it from the point of view, okay, we're the ones who are being asked to implement it, we should decide what's supposed to be done and we may bring you in to help do that. I think those organizations were saying, no, we know this field, let us just go out and decide what needs to get done.

Q: One of the accomplishments that over time has been viewed as one of the most positive accomplishments of the Eastern European program, was entry of the bulk of the countries into the European Union. Was that a goal at the outset?

BONNER: Right. But, again, that was so far in the future. We were still in the beginning stages, so how do you even get those basic things in place that would allow you to be part of it, or eventually part of NATO [North Atlantic Treaty Organization]?

Q: Right. We will talk about NATO, given where we are today.

BONNER: It was fascinating just to see the changes that took place within a year. And not necessarily on the positive side. I remember going to Hungary. Ron and I had visited Hungary before all this happened, maybe sometime in the 70s. I remember it was before my son was born, but after we were married, so maybe in the early 70s. My mother was from Hungary and we were going there to visit. I remembered Budapest as a lovely, quaint, charming town. When Don and I went back the first time, that's what it was like still. We went to the Opera, we went out for great food, you could go out on the street and walk around easily without any problem.

We went back maybe a year later, and I felt uncomfortable walking around. There was graffiti on the walls, restaurants were closing earlier, they were in a transition period. There was no heavy communist rule to keep order. And people were starting to try to figure out who they could become, what they could do, what they could get away with, what legal ambiguities existed. All this within one short period between field trips, things had drastically changed.

Q: It was looking a bit iffy, it wasn't a certain thing, okay now, that's important. One other question: I assume that there was a lot of consultation with the World Bank and the IMF [International Monetary Fund] in those early days. Was that something that you were involved with yourself? Or was it others or the State Department or Treasury took the lead in that?

BONNER: I remember vaguely, if we were in Poland or Hungary and the World Bank or IMF was there, we would meet with them. We may have met back in Washington a bit. But it wasn't the same kind of donor relationship you'd have in a bilateral program in country. There you have your set groups, you know each other, it's easy to coordinate. Those relationships didn't exist. We were all trying to figure out what was going on. And even with the State Department on the ground, those weren't normally the kinds of things they would be involved with, coordinating with the World Bank or IMF.

Q: Are there other important things we should talk about? Any special lessons about the importance of active engagement by administration officials as legislation is being drafted?

BONNER: One of the interesting things was how involved State was. This is down at the desk level we're talking about now. I remember walking into the office of whoever was

the State desk officer for Poland or Hungary. He was carefully poring over the legislation that we were putting together. He was doing all he could to help me make this work with Congress the way we wanted.

Q: Did you also work closely with the USAID Legislative Affairs people on this? And the General Counsel's Office, although Don would have been representing that.

BONNER: True

Q: Was Bob Lester involved?

BONNER: I know Bob very well. It must have been then that we started working together. [Laughter]

Q: Okay.

BONNER: We worked closely with Legislative Affairs. They were the ones that knew who to go to, they knew what to do, they put us together with those in Congress who would be tackling what became known as the SEED Act. They were extremely helpful. We couldn't have done it without them.

Q: Right. No, a huge change working on something so high profile that involved other agencies and the Hill. That was a baptism by fire to Washington. So—

BONNER: Looking back, I realized why AID says, you got to come to Washington for a tour rotation. Because, it gives you a little more patience, a little more understanding as to why things aren't moving as quickly as you expect them to move, or why it can't happen as efficiently as you want. As much as I didn't want to come back, it was worth it.

Q: At the time that you left, it was being run out of Washington. The office was viewed as the mission but based in Washington. When did it morph from being the Eastern European Task Force? Was it still the Task Force when you left? At some point it became an office.

BONNER: I think in the 1990s it became the Office for European Affairs, with Don heading it up.

Q: And then that was the office that was managing the grants and all of that stuff?

BONNER: The office split off from Egypt and Israel became its own office, and then eventually, Don went out as a representative to Poland.

Q: Right.

BONNER: That wasn't until 1993.

Q: So, he was running it from Washington for three years and then went out? At that point, they then started having other people go out. I wonder if it was after the change of administration; it may well have been a political issue as well, that State didn't want the field-level AID offices.

BONNER: That is true. If we start having representatives out there, you don't have to rely on the State Department and the embassy as much. I never thought of that before, but it makes sense.

Q: So, you're in Washington, you are looking for what you're going to do after this? After you were too lippy as you say.

BONNER: I was trying to think back on this. So, what happened? I must have just gone back to the office, again, back to working with Dick Brown. But the personnel system must have been at work. Maybe Carol decided she didn't want me in her Bureau anymore. I don't know if she had anything to do with it, but it worked out well for me. I was now offered two other jobs. Andrew Natsios was the Assistant Administrator for Food and Humanitarian Assistance and he offered me the deputy assistant position.

One thing I forgot to tell you, way back when I left Ethiopia, the first time with USAID, the staff had a farewell party for Ron and me. In my remarks, I said, "you're going to see us back. I'm coming back as mission director, and Ron, if he wants, he can come back as ambassador." And I wasn't kidding. I was kidding about the ambassadorship, but I always had it in my heart that I wanted to go back as mission director.

So, when Andrew offered me the job as his deputy, I thought, well, look at what's going on in Ethiopia now. Changes are taking place, Mengistu had fled the country and there was a good chance we would be starting food assistance again. I'd be well positioned to help out.

But then Walter Bollinger, who was Assistant Administrator for Africa at the time, also called me in. How he knew me, I don't have the faintest idea. Except I think this was the time period where Larry Saiers and John Hicks were up in the office as Deputies, both of whom were my crewmates back in Ethiopia. They're the ones I grew up with in my first assignment. John Hicks had been Deputy Program Officer, so I was working for him. Larry Saiers, had been the economist so I was working for him. We were all good buddies. Anyway, Walter Bollinger called me and offered me the DP [Development Program] job, head of AFR/DP. And I thought, this is really where I want to be. I really want to get back into development. And as much as it might be a high-profile job working over in the Bureau for Humanitarian Affairs, that's not really where my heart is. I really want to get back into development. I thanked Andrew, but said I must follow my heart. I think Lois Richards took the Deputy position in Food and Humanitarian Assistance after that. I went back to the Africa Bureau. I was very nervous. My predecessor was John Wesley, who had a fabulous reputation, a real intellect. How was I ever going to follow in his footsteps?

AID/W, Africa Bureau, Director, Office of Development Planning, 1990 - 1993

Q: By this time, this was sort of late 1990 in the calendar year.

BONNER: Right, right. I knew Jim Govan was there. He knew the budget operations and how DP ran, he was an institution. Emmy Simmons was still around. I knew I had good support and strong staff. It sounded like a great job. And again, I'm still expecting something positive is going to happen in Ethiopia, and this job would put me in a nice position to get my dream job. It was a great time to be in DP. We had the Development Fund for Africa, which gave us a lot of flexibility and a large budget. We were not tied to earmarks for specific sectors or specific countries. We were expanding into the democracy and governance areas in addition to the standard fields of agricultural, health, population, and education.

DP was overseeing country development strategies where we could reward country programs that were performing, both programmatically as well as developmentally. Funds weren't allocated because they were earmarked for a country or because we needed to put more funds into a specific sector. Funds, and eventually staff, were allocated where there were results. If one needed to be in Washington, this was a good time.

Q: Could you maybe talk a little bit more about the Development Fund for Africa, I know, one of the main principles was to look at country performance as being a criterion for budget allocations. At that point, was Jerry Wolgin in the program office? I know he played a key role in its development.

BONNER: Jerry Wolgin was originally in DP, but I don't think he was still there when I returned to the Africa Bureau. I talked to Ron because I was trying to remember what happened. When we arrived in Washington, Ron was assigned to what was then Africa TR or technical resources. He started as division head for education and training, which eventually merged into a combined education and health division. When the Development Fund for Africa (DFA) came into place, TR started to change its role. It moved from being solely project oriented, and providing technical expertise and field support to looking at the broader picture. How was the country itself performing? That's when Jerry Wolgan took over. They cut the technical field support staff in TR in order to bring on-board more analytic depth, relying more on the central bureau for technical assistance. Overall country performance started to play a larger role, rather than just looking at the specific project level. It transitioned into the ARTS office [Analysis, Research and Technical Services] under Jerry's leadership. Ron then served as Jerry's deputy.

Q: Okay.

BONNER: With Jerry in charge, ARTS focused on the economic policy issues and DP focused on evaluating how well the projects, program and country were doing. Each country program was expected to develop a country development strategy statement or

CDSS. This was a 5-year plan for what the Mission hoped to accomplish, what sectors it would emphasize and what resources, funding, and staff it needed. During the review, ARTS took the lead on the policy side, especially the economic policy side, looking at how the country itself was progressing. Are we happy with the environment we are working in, what policy changes are necessary for us to be successful? DP took the lead on reviewing what the Mission proposed to do, how they expected to do it, how they would evaluate success and what resources were needed. With the Development Fund for Africa, we had the ability to not only undertake projects but to provide budgetary support for countries we believed were progressing well. Usually in exchange for agreed upon policy changes. What I can't remember was how that all came together to decide on budget and staffing.

Q: I believe there was some kind of like, quote formula but there was also a black box. I think it was a combination of formula and black box.

BONNER: It's a gut feeling.

Q: Yes, I think it was probably a little bit of both. I know that the Africa Bureau Program Office also focused a lot on evaluation, led by Emmy Simmons and Cindy Clapp-Wincek. Was any of that during your time leading the AFR program office

BONNER: I think by the time I got there; a lot of that had already transpired, Emmy was only there for a short period when I headed up the office. While I was there the GAO undertook an audit of the program.

Q: Of the Development Fund for Africa?

BONNER: Yes; they were looking at how well it achieved what Congress was asking it to achieve. And it got pretty good marks. There were two weak areas: one was on procurement, and the other was on evaluation. Procurement was a two-edged sword. On the one hand the GAO criticized us because we weren't using our flexibility to speed up procurement, but at the same time we had members of Congress wondering if they had given us too much flexibility so that we were not adhering to the normal "Buy America" regulations. I worked closely with our legal counsel, Ed Spriggs, to put in place a new policy for procurement. The GAO recommendation on evaluation was fair. They recognized it was too early to indicate how things had changed as a result of the flexibility we had, but they felt we were not setting up any system to be able to measure that in the future. I don't remember how we addressed that.

Q: Yes; that's a tough question. It's a very process-oriented question that I suspect is a little bit like trying to prove the negative.

BONNER: Right.

Q: That's interesting. Do you recall any—during the period you were in Africa/DP any interesting or problematic country development strategies that might have been particularly contentious or exciting?

BONNER: What stands out in my mind was the role that South Africa was starting to play. On the one hand, the Development Fund for Africa took away country and sector earmarks, so we had no pressure on allocating funds. But then there is the elephant in the room, South Africa. Congress had given us flexibility, but we had pressure within USAID to allocate funds to South Africa, over and above what had been promised. Brian Atwood was the Administrator at the time, and we were expected to use the DFA to come up with additional funding.

Q: Right. This would have been—because Mandela was released from prison, I think in 1992 or 1993. Even though the election was not until 1994, they were beginning to plan for a post-apartheid program.

BONNER: The other thing that was tough during that period was the downsizing of staff which was starting to take place. Brian Atwood was in place and he brought in..... Amazing how we block out these people's names.

Q: Larry Byrne. He came in the spring of 1993.

BONNER: Right, right. As an aside. One of the things that I did when I moved into DP was pull together a group of the other geographic bureau DP heads. We used to get together, I don't remember how often it was, maybe once a month, once every two weeks, something like that. We would all get together, compare notes, see how things were going. It was a nice little *ad-hoc* working group. When Bush left, and Clinton was coming in, we saw this as a real opportunity for changes to take place from within. I remember getting together with the other DPs and working very, very hard to put together a list of recommendations for change to present to the new Administration. As relatively senior members of USAID, who had been working within the present system, we thought we had something to offer. We brought it in to Atwood, he listened, and essentially said “Thank you for all your work, but we have our own ideas”.

Q: Wow!

BONNER: I just felt like I was physically slapped in the face. It was not what we were expecting.

Q: Do you recall any of the recommendations that you all had made?

BONNER: No, too long ago. We expected a much more receptive group, considering ourselves like-minded with the new Administration. But we realized we were considered the amorphous career people who were not cognizant of what changes at the top meant. It was a rude awakening.

Q: Right. I do recall that they were very suspicious of career staff because we had been working for 12 years under Republican presidents. It was a difficult transition, as I recall.

BONNER: Good point, they didn't realize how excited we were to have a change and help shape that change given our experience on the inside. One of the hardest changes was having to downsize, not just staff within a mission but to eliminate entire USAID missions. Since DP handled the budget and strategy reviews, we took the lead in developing the African Bureau position on how to proceed. How to fairly determine what countries would get cut, and which countries wouldn't get cut. We attempted to establish developmental and political criteria to make those decisions. The Africa Bureau was commended by the agency as a whole for our thoughtful approach, which a number of the other bureaus also adopted. The hard part was turning it into reality.

Q: I'm wondering whether you identified any countries or just a process by which—

BONNER: It was a process, trying to set out the parameters to be considered. Once the approach was accepted, we worked closely with the geographic bureaus in terms of which countries to keep and which to drop. In these discussions, we tried as much as possible to include all those who had a good understanding of each country. Where I think we failed was not being able to get the actual missions themselves involved. It really was a very Washington oriented exercise.

Q: Did the bureau then make recommendations on those missions that you had to significantly downsize and or close? Did we make specific recommendations?

BONNER: I think we did.

Q: Were they the ones that ultimately—

BONNER: I don't know. I was gone.

Q: What I recall is just getting a list of the country missions to be closed. I thought we were a bit shocked when we saw it, so I'm trying to understand how the list was developed.

BONNER: From what I remember, DP came up with an approach, maybe a set of criteria to look at. We then had each of the geographic offices, for example for Southern Africa, or for East Africa, apply these criteria, and recommend how to proceed for their countries.

Q: Within the geographic office, okay.

BONNER: I don't know what happened with the recommendations, but I don't think the missions were made aware of the results.

Q: Did we ever present anything to Larry Byrne or to the Policy Bureau, with our recommendations?

BONNER: I don't know whether we did that or we just kept it internal to the Bureau.

Q: Okay. I see.

BONNER: I don't know where it went. But I sort of remember that we ended up with a list of countries that would be first to go. In some cases, it wasn't too difficult to make a choice.

Q: Okay. Interesting.

BONNER: Now you know where it came from. [laughter]

Q: Oh, Marge's list. [laughter]

BONNER: No, it wasn't just mine.

Q: Also, during this period, the Inspector General's Office was very aggressive in investigating lots of people. The IG even made a comment about the crime rate and AID being worse than urban Detroit or something like that. Do you recall very much about that period? Ronald Roskens was Administrator. Morale was very poor, and it was a difficult environment.

BONNER: It was because of not knowing what was going to happen with budgets, especially the operating expense budget, right?

Q: Yes.

BONNER: And so, cutting operating expenses means what? Operating expenses mean, people. And that's going to translate into some sort of rifts across the board. I'm trying to remember when the actual rifts came, it must have been during the same time period that we were looking at eliminating missions, because that's all operating expense related.

Q: Right.

BONNER: You're worried personally about your own position, and job wise you are having to deliver bad news. You are going to be telling missions their programs were going to end. Thinking back now, that was not a pleasant period.

Q: On the positive side, there were changes in Ethiopia. Mengistu had left, and USAID began to relook at Ethiopia, and what it was doing, and I'm wondering if you could talk a little bit about how Washington was looking at change in Ethiopia?

BONNER: Sure. Mengistu fled the country in the spring of '91. Meles didn't take over right away. The program in Ethiopia had completely stopped. There wasn't any food assistance going in, there was no emergency assistance. But once—

Q: Was there still an AID mission, though, technically?

BONNER: The USAID mission was completely closed.

Q: Oh, it was completely closed. Okay.

BONNER: It was completely closed. The first step was to go in with an emergency program to test the waters. Bill Pearson got sent in as AID Rep, with that mandate. The mission had to develop a strategic plan, it wasn't a full country development program, but something to identify how they wanted to proceed. I was in DP when they presented their strategy. Needless to say, this presented a little bit of a dilemma, in that I was all hot for USAID to go into Ethiopia. I wanted to think of restarting a major program again. And yet in reality, that wasn't really where we should be at that point. There was agreement to move slowly, to see if we could start building a relationship with the new regime beginning with a humanitarian assistance program. This was how we re-started the early warning system in Ethiopia, the program that Ron worked to establish before joining USAID. It was a way to do a development project under humanitarian auspices. They were looking at what systems to put in place throughout the country, so you're able to predict that food-related disasters are on the horizon. You're not really trying to take care of something that's there, which is normally disaster relief, instead it was a way to start making inroads to prevent disasters. The mission came in with a program that started off in that way, with the expectation that eventually, if things got better, they could move from this sort of limited humanitarian disaster relief program into something that was larger, but not quite a full program. Their proposal was approved.

Q: Do you recall whether there were any debates between State and AID about what would be appropriate?

BONNER: You know, even when I was out there as mission director, there was never much intrusion into what the AID program should be. I don't remember anything during that period, where they were saying either yes, we should be doing a specific type of program or no, we should stay out of an area. We had our areas of expertise and they had theirs.

Q: Okay. I was just curious because obviously, it was an important foreign policy decision at the same time. That also reminds me one of the other responsibilities of DP, of the Development Planning office, was food aid. Do you recall very much about how the African Bureau strategically used food aid during that period?

BONNER: It was also part of the DFA. There was an expectation that we would use all our resources to deal with development issues. Food aid should be used the same way. There were some programs, when you were looking at policy reform, that were a

combination of food aid and cash. I know we did that later in Ethiopia. There was a movement away from Title One, where we provided food on a loan basis. USAID and Congress finally realized we really shouldn't be saddling these countries with loans that they're going to have to repay. With the advent of Title III, we were able to provide non-disaster food to a country to meet general food needs. This was often done in conjunction with policy reform, similar to cash-based program assistance. To answer your question, we allocated Title III food assistance just like we did cash, it was part of the strategic package for the country.

Q: Actually, the mention of the word loan also reminds me, I think it was during this period, that started the program of debt relief; there was something called HIPC [Heavily Indebted Poor Countries]. Do you recall any of that discussion because that would have been a very much interagency discussion about which countries would be eligible? Also, I believe some development resources had to be used to write off the debt.

BONNER: It may have taken place earlier. During this period. I remember more of a switch between the Title I and the Title III. Starting to phase from one to the other. And again, Title II was a resource not only for disaster assistance but to support programs being run by non-governmental organizations (NGOs), both indigenous, as well as our counterparts in the US such as Save the Children and Catholic Relief Service. These organizations and others were an important part of our programs in Africa. We were able to combine Title II food with development funds in a lot of our programs. When we looked at country strategies, we looked across the board. It wasn't just what are you going to do with the money? It was what are you going to do with all the resources that you have? Including all phases of the food program. We allocated food the same way we did cash: it needed to be incorporated in the strategy and allocated in the budget.

Q: I think that whole process of budget allocation was really quite sophisticated, and then quite integrated. There was, I think, at this point, very little Economic Support Funds (ESF) in Africa. Is that correct?

BONNER: Yes.

Q: Right. There was also major activity in Somalia in 1992/1993. Do you recall anything about the deliberations there? Troops went in, and there was also, I think, massive humanitarian assistance?

BONNER: Right, right. US support went back and forth between Ethiopia and Somalia. Originally, the U.S. was supporting Ethiopia and the Communists were supporting Somalia. And then the Communists came into Ethiopia so we went into Somalia.

Q: Okay. That's right, long history of—

BONNER: Back and forth of who's my friend today? And what kind of assistance to provide?

Q: Right. Are there other things on your work in Africa DP that you'd like to highlight?

BONNER: Yes, not programmatically but rather organizationally. If DP was going to function well, the staff had to be motivated and coordination with those around us was crucial. If we were to serve our role, it was critical to coordinate with those outside of DP; with the other regional DPs, with the regional offices, with the legal department, and with those at the top. I saw DP as an alter ego of the assistant administrator's office, I served in the AA's office for three months and I didn't notice my job was that much different. I was doing a lot of the same things. Maybe I had a little more communication with Congress or got more into the personnel issues, but I think so much of DP's role was really how you kept things flowing throughout the bureau and making sure people were informed about what was going on. And if there were tough things that had to get done you brought it out in the open, you figured out together how to do that.

My other big concern was keeping staff motivated and challenged. It was my honor to be working with all of them. I had a good group of people, they knew their jobs; they knew their jobs much, much better than I did. And for me it was, how do you learn from them? And how do you be supportive of them as they're trying to move ahead? You're not trying to make yourself look good, but you're trying to see how you're going to promote your staff and how they're going to be able to move ahead. I think that made for a very comfortable setting within the office. Liz Cheney worked in the DP office for a while, and I jokingly say that she's where she is today, because of me.

Q: I didn't know that.

BONNER: Yes, yes, yes. Her father, who was Secretary of Defense at the time, got her into the position, but she was treated just the same as everybody else. She was expected to perform, she was expected to undertake tasks assigned to her no matter how difficult or how menial. And she did. I think so much of a manager's job, especially when you're overseas, is to make sure your staff are motivated and are challenged. And to feel like they are making a difference.

Q: Absolutely. And you had a fantastic staff as well. I recall. One of the things that just occurred to me is during this period, the African Bureau did a reorganization. And they abolished the office of project development. Do you recall that? Tim Bork had been the director, and then he went upstairs and was one of the DAAs [Deputy Assistant Administrators] and they reallocated all of the project development officers, I think, to the geographic offices and units within the geographic offices. Do you recall that there were any discussions about the decision to do that?

BONNER: I wonder how much of that was the Africa Bureau or if it was agency wide? Thinking back to when I was in the Near East and European affairs office, we had a project development officer assigned there rather than in a separate office. So, whether this was something that the Africa Bureau was doing that other bureaus already did or whether this was happening agency-wide, I don't know.

Q: I don't think it happened agency wide, because certainly the Latin American Bureau didn't do it. But anyway, I was just curious. Somehow, when you mentioned upstairs that reminded me of Tim and that reminded me of the changes. I was always curious about how much dialogue took place. I know that there were very strong geographic office directors during that period and I always thought that might have been part of the reason.

BONNER: I also wonder if part of it was the move to program assistance (NPA—Non-Project Assistance) and giving more authority to the field, so a separate office for project development was no longer needed. Also, much of the project development support was housed in the regional offices, REDSO/E and REDSO/W.

Q: In the field? Yes. So, there were fewer reviews back in Washington.

BONNER: Right. The reviews in Washington were now at the country strategy level rather than the project level. I'm sure that varied from country to country, but it may have just been one of the ramifications of getting into more program (NPA) assistance.

Q: Right. Do you want to talk now about how you moved from this position to become the mission director in Ethiopia? I don't know if you want to talk about that change now.

BONNER: Let me mention it now because I was following what was going on in Ethiopia very carefully, as were those heading up the Africa Bureau. During that period, both John Hicks and Larry Saiers were in the front office. Both were early colleagues in Ethiopia, when I started my career with USAID. We were good friends so I had no problem letting them know what I wanted. I wanted to return to Ethiopia but I didn't want Bill Pearson's job. I didn't want a humanitarian program, I wanted to go out and I wanted to do a development program. I wanted to get it up and started; I wanted it to grow. I saw promise and hope in where Ethiopia was going and I wanted to oversee a program that would help Ethiopia move ahead. I felt comfortable enough in the country to believe I could do that.

Q: When the decision was made, it was still a humanitarian relief program but you saw enough signs that there was potential and did you get some sort of at least informal commitments?

USAID/Ethiopia, Mission Director, 1993 - 1997

BONNER: I think there was expectation that it was going to grow. Meles Zenawi was in place as the Prime Minister of the Transitional Government of Ethiopia, and people were feeling comfortable with his leadership and the direction he was taking. When I went out there was a very small staff, but I felt I had gotten the commitment to grow. As we discussed, this was a tough time period in AID. Budgets were being reduced, we were downsizing, we were cutting missions. But I had the promise for increased staff and additional staff were already assigned. My deputy, Walter North, was out there during

that time period. Funny story about Walter. I knew he had been assigned and was going to be in place when I arrived. I was a little reluctant because my memories of Walter from our time in Indonesia were as this guy who spent his time traveling around the country visiting NGO projects. I was a little bit nervous about having him as my deputy, but I very fortunately was proven greatly wrong.

Q: Lesson learned there.

BONNER: Yes. Bill Pearson had left and Walter, along with a few others were in place.

Q: You went out with the clear understanding that it would grow to be a development program—

BONNER: Unless something strange happened.

Q: Right. Was it challenging then given this to identify the position for Ron, given the staff size?

BONNER: No, again, because there was the expectation that we were going to end up in the normal sectors. We would have programs in health, in education, in agriculture, etc. as a follow on to humanitarian disaster relief. Even though we had flexibility under the Development Fund for Africa, we still had certain sectors where we were expected to work. Ron was working as deputy to Jerry Wolgin in the ARTS office so had an excellent understanding of what was happening in the Africa Bureau and programming options. Ron went out and took over the development of our education and health portfolio.

Q: Okay. I think that's right. I think everybody in the bureau recognized that it was going to be a major development program. Unless there's some other lessons about how you get leadership to sign in blood on informal agreements. You have some lessons on how to do that.

BONNER: No, I think we all understood each other—these were people I trusted.

Q: Well, that's good. Well, why don't we stop for now and then when we reconvene, we'll cover Ethiopia, which I'm really looking forward to. Since you were there at a very exciting time.

Q: Okay, this is April 13, 2022. And I'm Carol Peasley, and this is interview number three with Marge, Margaret Bonner. And Marge, thanks again, we look forward to chatting some more today. And as I recall, we finished up with your work as the Director of the Office of Development Planning in the Africa Bureau in Washington. And you were going off to become mission director in Ethiopia, as the whole program there was restarting and moving from a humanitarian assistance program to a real development program. So

maybe you could talk a little bit about the transfer and how it went with you being part of a tandem couple and the whole family moving off to Addis Ababa.

BONNER: Okay. Well, first, I'm very excited to finally talk about my time in Ethiopia. Knowing this was coming up, I started to think back and remember things I forgot. And one of the things I realized, which I don't think I realized when I was in Ethiopia, was how fortunate it was that I had the position in DP before I went off. It really gave me a good understanding of what was happening on the Washington side, what you had to try to deal with, while we were out in the field. And knowing the people who were in place, both in DP and in the administration, really was useful, not only in terms of support, but in understanding what was going on.

Let me set the stage a little bit. The last time I had been in Ethiopia, I left because Mengistu Haile Mariam came into power. The program was cut back, and eventually reduced to a humanitarian program—and I think maybe even stopped for a while. There was no longer an ambassador there, there was a chargé who did remain during the whole time period. But then in early 1991, the forces who had been fighting against Mengistu Haile Mariam gained ground. This was the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front, better known as EPRDF. At the same time, the Eritrean People's Liberation Front was starting to take a foothold in Northern Ethiopia. Eritrea was part of Ethiopia at that time. Both groups were fighting against Mengistu's regime. Isaias was leading the Eritrean forces and Meles the Ethiopians; both were good friends. Maybe it was that friendship that was able to foster an eventual separation of power. Get rid of Mengistu and then we each take over our separate regions. With the downfall of Mengistu, the US established relationships again and the sanctions against Ethiopia were lifted.

This morning I came across an article discussing the Greater Horn of Africa Initiative, which reviewed the actions which had to occur for a country to transition from relief to development. There were fourteen different actions that had to take place for that to happen. It included not only what type of aid could be granted, but negotiations with the Ethiopian government, Paris Club agreements, Congressional actions, etc. Finally, we were able to move forward.

Q: Now, did you have that list when you went out?

BONNER: No, no, I just found it this morning. So, I had no idea all this was going on—and even though I was in DP, and it was happening while I was over there, it really didn't touch us that much. A lot of it was on the outside and with Congress and on the personnel side to some degree. One of the personnel actions that took place was moving from three direct hire staff who focused on the humanitarian side, up to six U.S. direct hires, where the emphasis was more on people with administration and development assistance expertise. And then finally, getting up to 10 U.S. direct hires. It was at that point that I went out as Director.

Q: And the government was still at that point considered a transitional government. Is that correct? The new Constitution was approved in 1995 and there was an election in 1995. So, it was still a transition period when you arrived in late 1993?

BONNER: Right, and part of what our initial assistance—on the democracy governance side—was helping with the elections.

Q: Right. Well, hopefully, we'll talk some more about that.

BONNER: When I arrived, the Ambassador, Mark Baas, had been promoted from chargé. He was a Foreign Service Officer, as opposed to being a political appointee. The two of us got along very well until his departure in 1994. He felt however that we really don't need to expand. His position was: Yes, AID is moving to a development program, but we really don't need to change operations much, let's keep things under control here. Let's not get too carried away.

Q: —just in line with that, when you went out, had there been discussions in Washington about the size of the program? Was there a chance that it would increase significantly?

BONNER: We had 10 U.S. direct hires, which was a pretty good size at the time, especially when cutbacks were going on.

We had a large Title II program, but we hadn't started Title III; There was transitional work taking place, such as the (now regional) Early Warning System. My marching orders were to put together a program with three strategic objectives and keep the staff at 10 US direct hires. The budget, which included food assistance, was between 80 to 100-120 million dollars a year.

Q: Okay.

BONNER: It was helpful to have an ambassador, who was very supportive and had been there, through the transition. He knew how things were, and was happy to see the change taking place. That being said, he still felt that staff wise, we should not grow too quickly.

As I mentioned before we have a son and daughter—my daughter, who we had adopted in Indonesia, was nine years old. My son was just starting college, so he didn't join us. He went on to college instead. Ron was set to head up the Education and Human Resources Office. When we got out there, USAID was the sole occupant of a building near the airport, away from the main part of town. This was a big change from when I was there initially when we were located on the embassy compound. We were now in a remote building, which I felt was much better. It was a lot easier access than the security-intensive embassy compound, we were much more accessible.

Then we set about the process of starting over, again after fourteen years, to get a development assistance program in place. We had ten U.S. direct hire staff, but we needed a lot of good, professional Ethiopian staff. So that was a major part of getting

started: trying to reach out and get staff there that could be supportive and work with the US direct hire.

Q: Did you still have staff from when you were first there?

BONNER: There were a few, but mostly guards or drivers. We were very fortunate that one person, who had been our Executive Officer in the 70s, was still there. Having him helped us immensely in getting logistics and hiring up and operating. Unfortunately, there was one woman, Alem Tsehai, who was a very dear friend and had been in the program office with me was no longer an employee. When USAID cut back, she was let go, but was hired at the US Embassy for a while and then she finally went over to USIA [United States Information Agency]. We were able to get back together again. I mention this because she remained a good friend and resource, and that comes into play later on.

We had to start by building up relations with the government. My predecessor had good relations with the relief commission because that's where most of the work was centered. However, we now needed to work with the technical ministries, as well as at administrative and governing agencies. A whole new government was just getting started and trying to figure out who they were and how they were going to govern. Everyone was starting fresh and trying to figure out how to move ahead when nothing was yet established and there were no working relationships in place. There was also the donor community itself. It seemed like the donors got together, but there really wasn't a good working relationship among them and I thought that was very important to get operational.

Q: Who were the main other donors there at that time?

BONNER: The World Bank was there, the IMF [International Monetary Fund]. You had—

Q: Were there any other big bi-laterals there?

BONNER: Yes. A lot of the Nordic countries were there, and they were big donors. The French were also there, Italians were there, the United Kingdom and the European Union. Because Addis Ababa had both the ECA [Economic Commission for Africa] and the—

Q: The African Union?

BONNER: —Yes, the African Union. If a country was going to have an embassy somewhere in Africa, they would put it in Ethiopia because they had two major international African organizations as well. There was a big donor community. So those donor relations had to be built before we could work on a strategy.

I tried to use the development of the strategy as a team building effort. It was a nice way to get this new group to come together, trying to understand what the problems of the country were and how we as donors might play a role. What were other donors doing?

What was the government doing? Which of the government's priorities matched with our priorities? Which government agencies could we work with? And then, what fits in with AID's agenda. During that period, the agency itself had its strategic objectives, and you had to show how yours fell under that.

Q: When you went out, did they (AID/W) say we want you to come back with a strategy a year from now? Or did they want something sooner?

BONNER: I don't remember. I knew we had to get it done. We did it.

Q: Okay, it wasn't a hurry-up task?

BONNER: No, we had time. There was the realization that we didn't have relationships set up yet, we had a whole new staff, we had a whole new government, we had all these unknowns. And you know, if you're really going to try to make this a strategy that's done with the government, and it is really going to be supportive of what they're doing, while still making it mesh with AID's objective, you need time.

Q: Now what, just in terms of developing relationships, I assume the fact you had been a Peace Corps volunteer in Ethiopia and spoke Amharic was helpful? Was that useful in developing relationships?

BONNER: Definitely. People knew my background when I went to meet them; the word gets around. The U.S. was well-liked; a lot of the people in government had studied in the US or had Peace Corps teachers. They were glad USAID was back. I was well received.

I remember my first meeting with Shimeles Adugna, the head of the relief and rehabilitation commission. He had also been commissioner when I was there before as an intern. During that session, I showed him a newspaper clipping that I had kept which we were both in. I, as a lowly intern, and he as the Commissioner. There had been an agreement signing ceremony and I was able to go along and ended up in the photo. I kept that photo because I admired him so much. It made the moment of our reacquaintance. He just felt so good that I thought that he was so admired. It was nice, it cut the ice. It really helped open doors and paved the way in the future for some very frank discussions. My predecessor also had good relations with Shimeles; his was one of the few agencies we could work with.

Q: You did sort of jokingly say, and which ministries or government agencies would work with us. Were there some that were reluctant to?

BONNER: Not the technical ministries, but once you got into the governance area, it was a little touchy. Trying to work with their justice system wasn't easy. The central government was trying to reach out to local governments, but they weren't quite sure what they were doing and didn't know whether they really wanted other people in there making suggestions, or realizing they were struggling. The Ethiopians are a very proud

people, and we had to respect their wishes. They had to figure out first what they wanted to do. It really was more due to that than anything else

So, in order to develop our strategy, we, the USAID mission, sat down as a group, Americans and Ethiopians. We set up teams, we brainstormed, we worked it out, we hashed out where we were going, what sectors we could work with, and where we needed to tread more carefully. By that time, we had hired several Ethiopian professionals in our technical offices. Several of them were people who had been in those technical ministries. We, unfortunately, ransacked their best people because we could offer more money. We were able to bring into our technical offices people from the health ministry, from the family planning agency, and from education and agriculture ministries. It made it a lot easier to understand the Ethiopian perspective and objectives as we struggled to develop our development strategy.

Well, we couldn't keep to three strategic objectives as we were instructed by Washington. We went to four strategic objectives and then we snuck in something called a Special Objective. First, I had to sell the approach to the Ambassador, who was still trying to go slow and keep things low-key. But my staff had done enough to convince me that that's the way we should go as we worked through the process together. So, I was able to convince him, and then eventually, Washington.

Q: And what were those—so that's four, really five areas that you were going to be working in?

BONNER: Okay, we looked at agriculture, where we were primarily focusing on trying to increase production of specific, domestically produced food grains: staple commodities that can be produced, so that Ethiopians don't continue to be food insecure every year. We looked at primary and preventative health care systems and at primary education. With all of these, the focus was getting to the local levels of government both for implementation as well as decision making; moving away from a strong central government. Part of that decentralization was to focus on quality and equity. Equity was a big part of the government's push to get things decentralized; to spread administrative functions around to the countryside, rather than focusing on the center.

The fourth objective was increased access to and participation in a democratic system. Our special objective was something we called enhanced household food security. It was the transition between humanitarian assistance and development; to determine and assist with what needs to be done to move away from recurring droughts and disasters.

Q: Okay, so, you submitted all this to Washington? They had told you they wanted a more limited program; what was the reaction? Did you get enthusiastic support?

BONNER: Thinking back, I felt we had such a good argument, how could they say no. My time in Washington served me well. I knew you don't just show up for a review in Washington and drop it on people. You start giving hints along the way about what's coming, not only on the program side but on personnel as well. Comments like, “We

really tried to keep to three objectives but how could we not have a program in (fill in the blank). And of course, since we are going to more than three objectives, we need two more people to be able to do this. And one of them needs to be a contracting officer, which was the hardest sell.

I got one more position for agriculture, because that was so important. And then the other was a contracting officer. This was normally a regional position, but I knew it was the bottleneck to making things work quickly. If we had to depend on our regional office or Washington to get contracting done, we weren't going to be able to get the program up and moving. Being able to get a contracting officer really helped to get the approved strategy operational.

Q: Okay, so, one lesson learned was when you're going to present something a little more ambitious to Washington than they might have expected, it's good to keep them well informed in advance, so they're not surprised. It sounds like you all managed that quite effectively and got what you wanted.

BONNER: It also helped that there was a positive feeling about the direction Ethiopia was moving politically. As I said previously, Ethiopians are a proud people and they're going to do things the way they want to do them, but they will listen to reason. I never felt things were stalled because somebody was looking for a payoff. If it wasn't moving, they had valid reasons that it wasn't moving. You may not agree with those reasons. But you could come back and try to present rationale as to why it made more sense to do it a different way. They would take that into consideration and try to blend it in with their ideas and approach.

It was one of the best things about living and working in Ethiopia: we really felt like we were working on an equal basis with our counterparts. In Indonesia, I felt you got a lot of yeses, but then nothing happened. East Africa, Uganda, and Tanzania, it seemed like their former colonization experiences provided difficulties. In Ethiopia, I always felt, okay, after we talk if we disagree, they're going to go home and bang their head against the wall, I'm going to go home and bang my head against the wall, and we're going to both figure out how we're going to make this work. Yeah, so it really was wonderful, yet frustrating, often—

Q: Yes, but it's much more of an equal partnership there than in many other countries—

BONNER: —much more rewarding when you finally both agreed on something where you both felt you had done your best.

Q: I know that I remember, being in Washington at that time, hearing a lot about you all developing an agricultural program, and that that involved lots and lots of discussion with the government. And I'm wondering if you could talk a bit more about the ag program specifically?

BONNER: You're right, it was our hardest one. The education program got up and off the ground fairly smoothly. With health and family planning, there were some problems with where and how NGOs would be involved. But the ag program was a really tough one. We were trying with all our strategic objectives, except governance, to combine project and program assistance. It was difficult to agree on the logical steps forward on the policy side. We worked those out in health and education, but in agriculture, the real roadblock was the government wanted equity; they wanted everything to be spread out throughout the country. We felt that spreading that thinly was not going to achieve food security in a reasonable amount of time and that food assistance would have to continue for an extended period.

I had this vivid picture in my mind of driving in Ethiopia. I know you've been there, but someone who may not have been, may not be aware it's very mountainous; there are huge mountains all over the place. In some places farming is like growing in rock. Other places, you do have regular fields and pastures where farming can be productive. But other places, not so. I remember seeing this one poor farmer up on the hillside, a steep rock hillside. He was trying to dig out a little place in the rock, to be able to plant his teff or—well not even teff because it wasn't fertile enough—so sorghum. We felt it didn't make sense to treat all farmers equally; that you really had to pay more attention to those farmers that were in a place where they were going to be able to get better production and be able to contribute to feeding the country. We could understand the government's desire to reach out to the countryside and provide resources to those who had been neglected for so long. It was one of those “go home and hit your head against the wall, then come back and try again.” That was really the biggest logjam that we had. They eventually changed their policy, but not due to any conditions we had in place.

Q: Yeah. They see the wisdom of the argument, ultimately.

BONNER: Not necessarily the wisdom of the argument, more that circumstances changed. We held off on program assistance but moved ahead on other fronts. When we were initially discussing conditions for Title III program assistance, domestic production seemed to be improving. There was optimism that food assistance was a thing of the past, and so they had no real need to worry about food imports. It was logical thinking on their part. They could move ahead with their equality objective since they believed they didn't need to worry about food insecurity.

However, the indications we were getting on expected production were different. As I mentioned earlier, when we were in Ethiopia with USAID the first time, Ron was working with a government program to establish an Early Warning System that was trying to forecast what was happening with production, prices and nutrition nationwide. It was looking at indicators, such as local commodity prices, that were monitored around the country to tell, early on, if there was going to be a food problem.

All the information that was coming in from the program was saying things weren't going well; production was down. But the government's line at the top was saying, no, no, no, we don't need any food assistance, we don't need it, we don't need anything. They

were trying to promote the notion of even-handedness throughout, but the system was starting to fail. And they weren't realizing sufficient levels of production. They didn't want to admit it. I would meet with Shimeles, who was the head of the relief commission, and he had to give me the line that "No, no, no, we're okay, we're okay." When he would talk, I felt that he didn't believe what he was saying. My staff was telling me, they're not okay; the indicators that were set up under the Early Warning System program, which was collecting data nationwide, were telling a different story. The system was working, but the government still felt hopeful they could pull through the rough patches. They were not asking for food assistance.

I took a very bold step. I decided to ignore the government's line and do what I could to get food assistance in place. We had a meeting of all the major donors once a month. I gave them the information we were getting and let them know that even though the government was not asking for assistance, we needed to act. If we wait until they ask, we are going to be too late to avoid another famine. I told them "I'm going to go back to my people in Washington and request food and I hope you will do the same thing." And I did what I said, I went back to Washington and let them know the government's not asking for it, but this is what we're seeing. If we didn't get our order in ahead of time, it wasn't going to get there in time. Fortunately, I was able to convince several other donors to do the same thing. The Mission had a good reputation and staff, which the other donors appreciated. I had always been forthright with my donor colleagues and shared whatever information we had. I felt we all had the same objective. While I was working with the heads of the donor agencies, my agriculture staff was doing the same thing at their level. So that when the government finally did say, okay, we need help, we had pre-positioned commodities enough that we were able to get it there in record time. I really feel like we kept 1994 from being another '74. It is one of the proudest moments of my career.

Q: Right. So that really then caused the government to rethink its approach and the need to invest more in domestic production in areas where you could, in fact, develop surpluses, and begin to feed the rest of the population. I know that your discussions in agriculture involved Prime Minister Meles at this point. Right?

BONNER: Right, the Ambassador and I met with him.

Q: He was the one who was key to this.

BONNER: The Prime Minister was trying to adhere to their overall objectives of equality and decentralization. That worked nicely for our education and health programs, because it fit with what we were able to do. In both of those programs, while we couldn't assist nationwide, our program assistance was aimed at overall national policy. With both of those sectors, we identified certain regions to work in. We wanted to get out to the countryside, away from the center but not so far that we couldn't monitor the operations.

With both our health/population program and our education program, we ended up down in the Southern Region. We added an additional region in education to have a comparison. We worked in Tigray, which is north, right next to the Eritrean border.

Q: And that's where Prime Minister Meles was from.

BONNER: Yes, ethnically the areas were two very diverse groups. The Southern Region was a big, huge spread-out area and ethnically very diverse. Tigray was a much smaller, concentrated area, much more mountainous and ethnically homogeneous. We were hoping that our education programs would be adopted nationwide, so it was important to try it in two different extremes. With the agricultural program, we weren't focusing in any specific geographic area. It was working at the center and working at the policy level. It was working with them to help with an approach to equity and decentralization.

The objectives were coming from Meles and his advisors at the top, it was then up to the Ministry of Agriculture to translate those into operational terms. I can't remember the Minister of Agriculture, as there may have been a change while I was there. I remember the Minister of Health and the Minister of Education; I had much more interaction with the two of them. I remember the people over in the Justice Ministry, but somehow not agriculture. So it may be that our relationships weren't as good with them.

Q: It's not often that AID directors get involved in meetings with presidents of countries or prime ministers.

BONNER: It really didn't happen that often, but only when necessary.

Q: Well, but the fact it happened at all is interesting, and I was just wondering if you could talk about him as a very much engaged technocrat. What was he like in a meeting? I'm just curious what it was, like, in personal terms to be working—having direct discussions with the leader of the country.

BONNER: Again, I think I only met with him twice, maybe three times. The first time was with the ambassador. Meles had wanted to talk about the aid program. I think that was when Ambassador Hicks was in place. After Mark Baas left, Irvin Hicks came in. He was there from '94 to '96. He was a career FSO [Foreign Service Officer], but not very hands-on. He was very happy to have me accompany him and answer all the questions that needed to be answered. So yes, in that respect, I think Meles was very engaged and looking to know more about what was going on. I had a very close relationship with his two economic advisers. The chief economic advisor was a man; he and I were very good friends. I mean he was the kind of guy I could go up to if something was going wrong and say, "Hey, what's going on?" And he could do the same thing the other way. Neither of us like cocktail parties, which were often a feature of a country's national days, and with all the countries having diplomatic relations with Ethiopia there were a lot of those. When we would be at one together, we would often hang out in the corner and chat rather than make the rounds. He was later joined by a woman who recently returned to Ethiopia after getting her doctorate in economics from the U.S. She and I established a good working relationship as well. It didn't hurt that my background was in economics.

So even though there were only a couple of meetings with Meles, I was finding out a lot that was going on in the Prime Minister's Office just through them. The meetings with him were very pleasant, I was sitting there in awe, but it was very relaxed, very comfortable. He was very interested in our program and not only what we were doing, but what we could do.

Q: And probably just much more engaged than most presidents or prime ministers would be and interested in the real world that his subordinates were having to deal with.

BONNER: Right, right.

Q: Okay.

BONNER: Let me just step back a little. I mentioned how I felt I had good relationships with the Ministers of Education and Health; both were women. As was one of the two economic advisors to the Prime Minister. The push for equality carried over to equality for women and there was no reluctance to placing women into prime positions. I really felt relationships were very worth establishing, which is why I felt it was very important to get the donor group up and operating and talking to each other. I thought, maybe we should get a women's group together. And this is where it goes back to the woman I had mentioned to you early on, Alem Tsehai, who I had worked with when first in Ethiopia with USAID, and then moved over to USIS. She had a lot of connections, both through her own dealings as well as through her deceased husband.

I trusted her instincts; she was like my guiding angel, my muse. I was confident she would give me good advice and not be reluctant to give me her honest opinion. I floated my idea to her that I wanted to get the women in top positions in the government and in the donor circle together on an informal basis. If we want to talk about politics, we would talk about politics. If we want to talk about recipes, we would talk about recipes. If we wanted to talk about our children, we would do so. It was a way to get to know each other, on a more intimate, I don't know if intimate is the right word, but on a—

Q: Just a more personal basis.

BONNER: —yeah, personal level. Alem Tsehai thought it would work. And I said, okay, test it out for me. So, she went through her connections with people in the government to see whether they would be amenable to something like this. I checked it out with some of the women on the international donor side. A couple of the ambassadors were women and I think one of the heads of the other donor agencies was a woman. They seemed amenable. I got everybody together and we met maybe once a month. The other donors didn't participate as much but the Ethiopian side continued to get together and I had Alem Tsehai join us as well. They all came over for a thanksgiving dinner the day after Thanksgiving. We would rotate from house to house, just sitting and talking. Sometimes talking about what was happening in the government but often the discussions were on women's issues and family planning, things that you would have thought they would be

well versed in, but were not. It made relations much closer; it made it a lot easier if there was an issue to be resolved to be able to just give a phone call—

Q: Yeah.

BONNER: —or, you know, as the meeting was ending, and you're leaving to be able to say, hey, what's happening with.... It was a good group, we really made things move a lot smoother.

Q: That's a fantastic initiative.

BONNER: It also helped that there were that many women in the government that I could do something like that.

Q: Interesting. And did these sessions take place in English or a combination?

BONNER: English, their English was much better than my Amharic.

Q: Wow, no, that's fantastic and you're right, those are the relationships that you then can rely upon when there are issues you really want some candid information on.

BONNER: To continue. We've got our strategy approved. We had our program, and it was starting to operate. We were still having a little bit of difficulty but nothing out of the normal hiccups. But within the country itself, there was growing unrest. There were still some forces in place that were not happy with the present government. The southern and western areas, the Oromo areas, still felt like they were not being given an equal share. Meles was Tigrayan, he was from the north. The Amhara were the ruling class under the emperor and lived in the center highlands of the country. They were still around in many of the same central bureaucratic positions they had before. The southern area was feeling they were not getting their fair share. Even though we were operating our Health and Education programs in the Southern Region, we were still seen as supporting mainly the central government.

We had a couple incidents at the office that displayed that feeling. We had a grenade thrown over the fence of the Mission compound one day. It was done on a weekend, so fortunately nobody was there; we thought it was just supposed to be a little scare. And then we had a more dramatic incident. We had two vehicles with diplomatic plates at the office, one was mine and the other was used by the person who ran the governance and democracy program. The two of us used to come in early in the morning, before things were getting started. He arrived one morning before I did and got his car shot at.

Fortunately, he was not hurt, but the bullet holes went through. And whether I was the target but he got there before me that morning, or whether they were aiming for him, we never found out. But we did have that incident. After that we decided we shouldn't be driving in cars with diplomatic plates anymore.

We took diplomatic plates off my car, and we took diplomatic plates off his car. But that was also part of a push to move locations, as we were located quite a way from the center of town. Internally with AID, other changes were happening. It was around the same time that AID was initiating the "New Management System," which started to computerize our operations and required the installation of an external internet system. And as programs started up, we began expanding our Foreign Service National staff and needed more space. We eventually got a new building that we moved over into, both to accommodate the security concerns, as well as the need for more space.

Q: Was the new office closer to the embassy or closer to downtown?

BONNER: It was in the downtown area, and a little closer to the embassy. It was near the UN Economic Commission for Africa and the Organization of African Unity; we were much more centrally located. Then around this same time or a little bit before that, the whole greater Horn of Africa initiative—

Q: Before we leave that, since those were obviously important security scares, did that then create other issues? Did it affect your ability to go out on field trips or anything else or...?

BONNER: No, not to the degree that we were limited during our first USAID posting, back when the Red Terror was rampant. Then we needed permission to go out of the capital. We considered these scares as a one-off kind of thing, from a disgruntled group that was around. There wasn't too much concern with the first incident, when they threw the grenade. The fact they did it on a weekend seemed like they were not trying to hurt anybody. The one with the bullets through the car door, that was scarier. But not enough that it kept us from continuing normal operations; we never had any problems out on field trips. In retrospect, maybe we were a little naive or cavalier, but it was never an issue that impacted our ongoing programs. We always ensured we had two cars on any field trip, but that was more because if one breaks down, you're not likely to get it fixed rather than a security concern.

Q: Yes.

BONNER: We probably did something internally to discuss the incident and handle staff concerns, but I don't remember any major actions other than the license plates and moving. It didn't change operations. We dealt sensitively with any concerns our D&G officer who was shot at may have had, but he was anxious to keep on functioning, and I think he even felt a little proud that the incident signaled he was doing his job.

Q: Somehow or other I keep thinking in today's environment. If bullets were shot at a car, they'd suddenly be having authorized departures for posts and stuff. And it sounds like you guys just handled it.

BONNER: Well, fortunately, at that time, we didn't have emails operating. Probably, by the time they found out about it in Washington, we had moved on. I take things calmly

and usually try to figure out how to proceed rather than retreat. It was probably during the time period when Hicks was the ambassador; he was very, very low key. He had a reputation for being more concerned with his social life than operations. Which reminds me, when he wrote my evaluation, the only negative comment he had was that I didn't attend enough social functions.

Q: Oh, no.

BONNER: Speaking of him, that reminds me of a story about the one time I got to serve as ambassador. Hicks was away for three days and the DCM was not around. Responsibility could fall to either me or the military attaché, and I was assigned the task. The military attaché and I were very good friends, and he had been stationed in Ethiopia before. We were both Ethiopia-philes. I took over for three days. It was calm with the one expectation that the ambassador was supposed to go to a graduation of Ethiopian soldiers who had been trained by the U.S. Army. The ambassador was expected to participate in the celebration to be held quite some distance from Addis.

They asked me to go attend instead. My immediate reaction was sure I'll go—especially since I was good buddies with the military attaché and wanted to see what they had been doing. We get down there, and there are maybe fifty good looking Ethiopian soldiers who had just graduated, and they're having a party. And then there's dancing—well, Ethiopian dancing, you just dance, I mean, you don't have to have a partner, which was good because I was the only female around—we had such a good time. Both the military attaché and I were into it. We had such a good time but being surrounded by fifty men as the only woman, was quite an experience. That's the only thing I remember about my time as ambassador.

Q: Well, no, that's a memorable one.

BONNER: A memorable one.

Q: Can I ask? You'd mentioned that one of your strategic objectives related to, and certainly one of the purposes of the AID program, was to strengthen democratic institutions and to promote good governance. Can you talk at all about what you did on the democracy/governance front? And was AID involved at all with the preparation of a new constitution in 1995? Did we provide any support for the 1995 election?

BONNER: Our program changed as the circumstances changed. Initially, we were involved in the elections, and especially the mechanics of it. How do you undertake elections in such a spread-out country, with minimal infrastructure, that has never done anything like this before? As well as trying to make sure that it's going to be free and fair. A lot of our initial work was on the election side. A group associated with President Carter was involved in the effort. President Carter visited twice, not while he was president, but during this period. He was very well regarded by the Ethiopians officials.

Q: From the Carter Center?

BONNER: The Carter Center, correct. After that, we worked with the justice system, mainly in terms of training. As part of the decentralization, judicial responsibilities were devolving to the countryside. It wasn't just working at the center, it was also getting training out of the center, for newly appointed justices to understand their responsibilities and how to carry them out.

We also did some work with the constitution. In a way it was very similar to the private sector program we had in Indonesia, where we were able to come in and help with specific technical things as they were needed. It was flexible enough that if there was a requirement, we could meet that need. We helped with training for the newly elected legislature in terms of carrying out their responsibilities.

Q: It sounds like it was very much demand driven. If they had specific requests for help on x, y or z, then you could help provide that.

BONNER: Right. But I do remember a lot was in the judicial area. Especially trying to get things decentralized. And also work with the parliament, trying to be responsive as they're trying to take on their new responsibilities. What is it they need? What training can we help out with? What other related commodities we can help out with? Things like that.

Q: When you were there, was there much receptivity on the part of the government for family planning or was there resistance to it? Just curious whether they saw it as being something important to work on given the pressures or was it even too political for them to have to deal with given all the ethnic tensions? Perhaps it was particularly difficult to be promoting family planning in certain areas, because they say you're trying to get rid of my ethnic group or something. I don't know how it would work, but I was just curious if there were any discussions about all that when you were there, especially since ten years later this was very much emphasized by AID Administrator, Andrew Natsios.

BONNER: There was a very strong Ethiopian non-governmental organization called the Family Guidance Association, which carried out most of the family planning activities. At that point this wasn't integrated into the regular health system. I don't think there was a reluctance to incorporate it, but there wasn't a receptive audience. In Ethiopia so many children die early, and your whole existence as an elder depends on having children there to take care of you. With so many children dying, talking about limiting the birth of children wasn't a popular topic. There wasn't a lot of receptivity by most of the population.

Q: Right.

BONNER: The Family Guidance Association was trying to work closely with the health department, so there was a growing receptivity and audience when children's mortality rates started improving. It became a good connection—then working together was

possible. When you have two healthy kids screaming alongside of you, you're more receptive to getting family planning.

Q: Right. In order to really get support for family planning, you needed to deal more with the infant and child mortality issues. Okay. Now, that makes good sense.

BONNER: Remember, you're dealing with a spread-out country with minimal infrastructure and minimal services of any kind, especially in the rural areas. First, you had to get help out to the countryside. You had to get the health clinics out there before you could start delivering any kind of family planning message.

We're still at the stage where a woman has a day and a half walk to get to the nearest health post or clinic. Looking realistically at family planning methods, guys aren't going to use condoms, and so if you're going to get women on pills, they've got to have a way that they can continue to get them, and in many instances, take them surreptitiously. It's not that there was a resistance to doing it nor was it considered an ethnically-based issue. Just plain reality.

Q: Okay. No, that's good. It was just, you know, when you have infinite things to do, it wasn't at the top of the list. There were other things that needed attention early on.

BONNER: Our approach to family planning was through the Family Guidance Association. We followed their lead and supported them. They had been operating for years, maybe decades, had a very good reputation and were well respected. throughout Ethiopia.

Q: Yeah, and then in subsequent years—and I suspect that some of the work that you all did, the Ethiopian Ministry of Health became a very strong ministry and has had an impact globally on health.

BONNER: Right—

Q: One of the other things that happened in 1993 was Eritrea getting its independence and then USAID set up a mission in Eritrea. Did you help with that at all?

BONNER: That's another great story. Eritrea was by then an independent country, no longer linked to Ethiopia but with friendly relations. There was some discussion about whether we should open a mission there or provide any assistance. We decided we would go up and talk with Isaias Afewerki, the president of Eritrea, and see if he and his people were receptive to a USAID program. We got an appointment to meet with Isaias and his cabinet. We walked into his outer office, and were waiting to go in. We entered his office and I looked at his cabinet. Isaias was in a shirt and regular pants. The rest of the guys weren't quite dressed for the part. I thought we were going to battle as they still were in military uniforms, had their guns and bullets across their chests, and hair that was all shaggy.

These poor guys, I felt so sorry for them. They'd been out fighting for years. They knew how to do that job. And now they've got to come in, and they've got to talk about development and finances, and about donor coordination and counterpart funds.

It was a shock on both sides. Me thinking, okay, well, I guess we're not quite ready to establish a program yet. And them trying to figure out how they're going to adapt to a whole new way of thinking and operating.

Q: Wow.

BONNER: Anyway, bottom line, we did come back and recommend that there should be an USAID program, starting with an AID-rep office working out of the embassy. And I think for a short time while I was still there, we were trying to operate it a little bit out of the embassy there. While I was still there, they had not yet opened a mission in Eritrea.

Q: Oh, I see. They hadn't opened it yet, okay.

BONNER: As part of the visit, they drove us around and they took us to what they call the vehicle graveyards. Driving through the hillsides were former military vehicles now laying unused or broken by the wayside. It was heartbreaking, so much money had been spent on armaments, guns and other military equipment.

And you look up the road and you see somebody struggling to dig in the earth to farm, or a woman walking along with so many firewood bundles on her back that she can't even stand up. All those squandered funds. The vehicle graveyards stayed there for a while and may, for a while, have been a help in trying to keep peace. It didn't last for that long, but hopefully it gave people some qualms in terms of fighting again.

Q: Okay.

BONNER: So, that was the experience of going up to Eritrea.

Q: Okay. I couldn't recall how much involvement you all had in that. Interesting.

BONNER: The other area, though, that we had a lot of involvement in was the Greater Horn of Africa Initiative.

Q: Right, could you tell us a little bit about that and how it started, and what you all were doing?

BONNER: Well, I think I got some information from you. When I was looking through, trying to remember what all took place back then, it sounded like maybe a trip you had been out with—

Q: I was not actually on that trip. But yeah, Brian Atwood took a trip to East Africa and Gary Bombardier was on that trip.

BONNER: Oh, okay.

Q: When Brian returned, he came up with the idea of the Greater Horn of Africa Initiative.

BONNER: Right.

Q: And so, it was very much Washington led, and I think Dick McCall, the [USAID] Chief of Staff was heavily involved, and Gayle Smith was heavily involved. And David Shen, who was the director for the State Department's Office for East Africa, I think; he at some point was ambassador to Ethiopia.

BONNER: He was ambassador while I was still there.

Q: It was very much an interagency effort to look at the relief to development continuum, and to perhaps try to do more on conflict prevention and all of that. And you all were right in the middle of it.

BONNER: I looked at it as an opportunity. Here's somebody saying to me, "if you play the game, we're going to give you more resources." And everything that was being preached was what I believed in. So yes, that's what we're trying to do in Ethiopia, we're trying to move from relief to development, and we're trying to do it with better coordination. Not minimal coordination, but across the board. I mean, between countries, between donors, between governments, between NGOs. It very much went along with what we were doing. The other thing I think that was part of it was, or maybe this was part of the new management system, was giving more authority to the missions. That was probably under the new management system.

Q: Yes, I think that was separate from the Greater Horn of Africa Initiative.

BONNER: So, I jumped on board. The taskforce was anchored in Washington, and I acted as a virtual member out in the field. I was being told, "Okay, well, we're getting all the donors on board." Figuring I should play my part, I went to my donor's coordination group and said, "Hey, what do you think about this new Greater Horn of Africa Initiative?" and they looked at me like "What in the world are you talking about woman?" So, I said, "You don't know about it?" I said, "I've been told that this is taking place centrally among donors and we're supposed to be coordinating down here." So, I ended up briefing them on what was going on and then they told their headquarters, rather than the other way around. You had this funnel that was coming from Washington, down to the field, over across to the other donors and then back up to their headquarters. We all saw it was positive, you know, if you can end up getting more resources out to the country, and you're looking at what you really wanted to be doing anyway, why not go ahead and do it. We bought in wholeheartedly.

I remember there was a combination ambassador-mission director conference, or workshop down in Nairobi. And my ambassador, I think was still Hicks at the time, and I

were asked to make a presentation on what was going on in Ethiopia, as a demonstration of what could be done.

Q: I think that's a great way to approach initiatives that are generated by Washington to use them to your advantage. And you certainly did. And that was one that actually made sense.

BONNER: Yeah, hopefully what Atwood conceived was a result of what we were doing. His trip to visit us paid dividends in both camps.

Q: Yeah, absolutely, you were not just a recipient of it, you were an architect of it as well.

BONNER: —without knowing.

And the Ethiopians got on board with the initiative. As I said to them, maybe at one of my women's meetings or chatting with the Economic Advisor in the corner of a cocktail party, "Hey look, this is what you want to do. This is what you're already doing anyway. If we just cooperate and say we're part of the Greater Horn of Africa Initiative only good things can happen." It worked out very well.

I don't know whether it was part of the initiative, or a result of a later trip. but it was a time period when Title III food aid was about to be taken out of the legislature, feeling it was no longer relevant. Title III was very much a part of the program in Ethiopia; recall that we had moved from Title I to Title III. They still needed the food to meet the needs of the general population, but they didn't have the money to pay for it. We could agree on policy changes that would take place to be able to support having a Title III program. It was just a perfect program for Ethiopia. And now Congress wanted to cut it out, period.

Q: Right. And Title III was not just grant food aid, but it was attached to policy reforms. And that made it different than Title I

BONNER: Title I was a loan.

Q: A loan. Right.

BONNER: The government would get the food as a loan, on good terms, but still a loan that they would need to pay back.

Q: And they paid back in local currency? For Title I or—

BONNER: Yeah, I think they did, but they still had to pay it back.

Q: Yeah.

BONNER: With Title III the food went to the government, so the government could distribute it where they wanted including to the local markets. Title II food aid at that

point was not emergency assistance but was going to NGOs who would direct it as food for work programs. For Title III, it went to the government and then the government was able to disperse it where they felt it was needed; it went primarily to the Relief Commission.

I knew I couldn't convince the group that Title III should remain, so I talked with the economic adviser to the prime minister before the group met with Meles. I explained the benefits of Title III and how bad it would be if we lost it. He passed the word on to Meles, who must have made a convincing argument with the group, as Title III was kept in the legislation.

Q: Another important lesson is to make sure that those messages get delivered during VIP visits.

BONNER: Right. And I think he was even able to do it in terms of the Greater Horn of Africa Initiative. Having established those relationships and trust, we could work together...we could coordinate! It wasn't me trying to say this is why we need Title III, it was a representative from the government.

Q: And much more effective. Ethiopia was really important to folks in USAID. The Chief of Staff at the time, Dick McCall, was heavily involved with the program, as was the Administrator. Did you feel special pressure from Washington at all? As the mission director? Or was that interest you saw just a positive?

BONNER: I think what went along with Dick McCall was Gayle Smith. Gayle was critical in terms of our relationship with Eritrea and Ethiopia. In terms of the two leaders, Isais and Meles, she knew both personally, she was out on the battlefields with them. She had a relationship with them from way back. And so—

Q: Yeah, and then just for the record, Gayle was on a contract with Dick McCall, the Chief of Staff, right and she was resident in Ethiopia.

BONNER: —right. This is prior to that—

Q: Okay.

BONNER: Her relationship with Ethiopia and Eritrea went way back and she had their respect. She initially came out as a journalist. And then, I was never quite sure how else she was there. But somehow, she was around. With her contacts, she could get you where you wanted to be. She wanted to make things happen and was a good strategic player. Which was, I assume, why Dick McCall brought her on. He was looking at not only Ethiopia, but the Horn of Africa as a whole, and especially Eritrea, Ethiopia, and Somalia. What could be done to try to get peace in that area? I had no problem with that, it was a valiant objective. Sometimes that started to push over into what I felt were my responsibilities as a mission director. The challenge became how to find that balance

between when I felt Smith and McCall were taking over my job as opposed to trying to help in this broader scheme.

There was a little tension for a while until Gayle and I finally had dinner together over at her house, just the two of us. We talked it through and both understood where the other person was coming from. I think after that, relationships were excellent. But to get back to your initial question. I think once that turf question got solved, I was able to look at her and Dick McCall very positively, because we were all trying to achieve the same objectives, and now respecting where the other side was coming from.

My relationship with the two of them also helped me later, and I can talk about this when we get into the new management stuff. Having Dick in place as somebody I felt had my back helped me in Washington.

It was a question of how to handle a touchy situation. Can you turn it to your advantage? And if you can do that, it becomes a win-win situation. We all had the same objectives; it was a matter of understanding and respecting each other's turf.

Q: Yes. And ultimately, you were able to do that. No, it was interesting, the amount of attention that was focused on you, I know that it made life more complicated at times.

BONNER: For you as well.

Q: Okay, you've mentioned a couple times the new management system and the fact that AID itself was going through reengineering. And a lot of changes within itself. And some of that took different forms, in different missions. There was also the new management system, which was an effort to try to integrate financial management, procurement, and program management and other systems, and it became very controversial.

And so, one, if maybe you could talk a little bit about the focus of Washington on management, and the kinds of changes that you might have made in the field as part of reengineering. But then talk about the new management systems specifically and the issues with it. And the fact that you ended up being an important dissenter.

BONNER: Alright. The new management system or reengineering, I can't say at this point I remember the distinction. As I remember, the first step was starting to computerize our systems, especially on the financial side. The financial reports would track what was being spent and what was being obligated and they would be transferred directly back to Washington. It was supposed to be a first step to seeing if you were successful. If you're spending money, then you must be having success. If you're not spending your money, then you're not having success.

OK, I didn't buy into the idea that spending money is success theory. But I thought so what can we get out of this. I was very pleased, because computerizing the mission was part of it. I felt these systems would be very useful for our mission. However, we couldn't move to a computerized system in our present building. So that, along with our

security issues and growing staff, forced us to move to a new, bigger building. The building was still under construction so we had lots of flexibility in terms of getting computerized, networked and offices configured to our specifications.

We had set up strategic objective teams, which included not only the technical offices but someone from the controller's office, the program office and possibly somebody from the contracting office. These were dedicated groups operating together. We had representatives from each of the strategic objective teams, on a committee that worked with the setup of the new building. It wasn't just the Executive Office determining how the building was going to be laid out, but groups, who were going to be using it, working on the layout.

We also used that as an opportunity for training. I felt it was important to make all our staff feel needed, wanted, and responsible for what they're supposed to be doing. And so, as part of this whole new management system, or reengineering, or whatever you want to call it, we set up a training plan so that every single person, maybe not the guards, and maybe not the drivers, but every other person got some type of training that was associated with the new management system.

Everybody learned how to use Windows. Everybody had some kind of training. Hopefully, that made them feel more included and responsible for achieving our objectives. We then tried to do what was being asked of us in terms of computerized reporting. We tried to adhere to the reporting requirements under the financial systems, even though we all knew in our hearts that a lot of times the money doesn't get spent right away. It doesn't come in and go out associated with what's happening in the field. It really was not a good indicator of achievements or actions. Obligations may not take place in a timely manner, but that doesn't mean activities have stopped. There is still money from prior obligations. Expenditures may be occurring, but reimbursement requests may not be coming in. We might be computerized, but our counterparts sure weren't. Lots of pencil and paper were still being used, with reports winding their way along. So, even though we felt there was not a lot of validity in what was behind it, we did try to take the positive aspects that were useful to us and make the best of it. We did try to report back the way we were asked.

But the financial reporting was not matching the action in the field. Each week, when I met with the strategic objective teams, I was getting the same message. The controller's office would say, I don't have any increase in expenditures while those in the field were reporting on movement and accomplishments.

So, when you're having each of your teams coming in, and reporting the same kinds of things, why the management system isn't working, you're starting to get a message that it's not just one group that's having a problem. This is a systemic problem across the board. At the same time, you're also hearing rumblings from other missions that they were having problems with the system, but no one wanted to say anything. Remember this is before massive internet communications and widespread use of emails. You can't make quiet rumblings; concerns must be expressed through cables, which unless

classified, get very wide distribution. So I went to the controller, who oversaw sending out the financial reports and I went to the teams and said, okay, give me a cable. Put down what the problems are, put down what we've been trying to do, don't just make this a complaint cable, but put down everything we've been trying to do along with any suggestions for improvement.

They did it. We sent it in. I had no qualms at all sending it and I just figured, you're saving the emperor from embarrassment by telling him he doesn't have any clothes. In hindsight it was almost like going in with our strategy with more objectives than we were supposed to. If you've got a valid case, make it. Fortunately, Dick McCall was over on the other side in Washington. I think he had respect for the mission and what we were doing. But I don't think Mr. Burns, who was the engineer of this endeavor, was very happy about it. But I did get an AFSA award for it; I got the Christian Herder award in 1997, for sending in that cable and for getting a modification in the system after that. And I think part of that was due to Dick McCall being there as an advisor to the Administrator. I don't know this for sure, but I wouldn't be surprised.

Q: Yes. That illustrates the importance of sending in constructive dissent cables when warranted. But it's also good to have a key person in Washington who can be sure to act on it. You guys were very important. And I do vaguely recall that it prompted a lot of discussion back in Washington when your cable came back in. And you're right that Dick McCall was instrumental in making sure that the messages were heard. And that was much more effective than if it had been someone in the African bureau.

There's actually one programmatic thing that I'm going to ask you about. Mainly just because I found it so interesting. And I'd like to see it recorded in your oral history. I accompanied Warren Christopher, when he made his trip to Africa, in the fall of 1996; in Ethiopia, he visited a food aid program in Korea Town. It was all Ethiopian troops who had served in the Ethiopian army in Korea during the Korean War with the UN forces, and Warren Christopher was so moved by this experience because all these guys were wearing their army uniforms, and saluting and it was just such a memorable experience. He was quite taken by these men who had fought with the United Nations and the United States in the Korean War. Do you recall anything about that activity or event?

BONNER: This is the first time I'm hearing this as I didn't go on the trip. Whenever we had visitors, I would try to get them to a smaller activity and we would often try to use one of our NGOs to help out. CARE was there, Save the Children, Catholic Relief Service, we had some good U.S. NGOs that were operating with Title II food for work programs. Very often we would just say to them, okay, what can you show the people that is within a short enough distance that you can get to, and which reflects how you are using Title II, not just as a humanitarian feeding program, but in a developmental way. They were usually very good about coming up with something. Sounds like they must have done a really good job that time.

Q: Yeah, in this case, I think it was some road construction that they were doing with the Title II. Okay, it's just that I was so struck by Christopher's reaction; he was so moved by it.

BONNER: It's nice to know, I never knew that.

Q: Okay. Are there other important things we need to talk about with regard to Ethiopia, we've talked a little bit about the ambassadors and relations were good with the embassy, I gather, because there were several different ambassadors you worked with.

BONNER: Two things I'd like to touch on. First, I'll mention interactions with the ambassadors and then I do want to get into the whole time with reengineering and the subsequent RIF (reduction in force).

Q: Oh, okay. Yes. Okay.

BONNER: I had three different ambassadors, all very different and each requiring me to modify my role to match their personalities. Marc Baas was there when I first came in. He was transitioning between two completely different regimes. It was a tough job but we got along: his concern with the USAID program was more on size than content. Irvin Hicks came in, who was fine, but not engaged—he let me do my job. And if I was doing my job, and things were going well, he was happy. If I needed him to do something, he would do it. Keep the waters smooth. David Shinn came in and he turned out to be a completely different ambassador, having come from the State Department where he was head of the East Africa office. He was already engaged in the programs and knew what was going on, especially regarding the Greater Horn of Africa Initiative. Looking back, trying to remember all the things that happened, I was looking at some of my EERs. And I saw his comment that said, “Marge had to deal with somebody completely different and she did it.” Very true, you have to learn, adapt and move on.

Take donor meetings: there was an Ambassadorial group of donor meetings and another with the heads of the donor agencies. With Hicks, I would go to both and I would handle both of those. When Shinn came in, he really wanted to head up the ambassador's group. I gave him the information he needed to be able to do this and we got the same things accomplished. And it took a little responsibility off my shoulders. And, he had higher access so he was well informed when opportunities arose. You go with the flow and maybe adjust it when you can. It was a change. But one that was not that hard to make.

What was more difficult at that same time period, was what we already discussed: the reengineering that was taking place in Washington. Our Mission was on a roll with its own challenges and opportunities. We were starting a new program with excited and energetic staff; we were building relations within the mission and with those outside. By this time, things were starting to fall into place. We had a program up and operating and, importantly, we had good relations with the government. The donors had worked together on the difficult issues we were all facing. Rather than each just pulling our hair out, we coordinated with the government and got several issues resolved together. Also, we had

good NGO coordination. Some of our offices had their own technical donor groups. The Education Donors Group, led by Ron, was especially engaged in sector policy and programming.

Things were going well; we were starting to see progress. We had good working relationships out in the countryside with the local governments where we were working. Things were starting to move. And then we hit the brick wall—rather than being able to focus on expanding the program and developing relationships, we were spending time on re-engineering mandates and dealing with internal issues

Q: This was because of the operating expense shortage and—

BONNER: Right, as part of the reengineering, money had gone for computers and on top of that, the overall operating expense budget was reduced. Which meant cuts had to come somewhere, so people were the next target.

Q: Yeah.

BONNER: Even when I was in Washington, back in DP, we were looking at how to save operating expense budget through cuts. But now, rather than looking at programs, it seemed to be directed towards individuals as opposed to missions. This does nothing to help morale or enthusiasm for your work. It wasn't just affecting the morale of our US direct hire, but also of the Foreign Service Nationals. They didn't know what it might mean for them, nor did we. We had several of our Foreign Service Nationals, who were some of our prime people leave, just because they weren't sure what was going to happen. I had worked very hard to get good staff, both American and Ethiopian and to promote gender equality. Half of my U.S. direct hire staff were females. I think about a third of the professional Foreign Service Nationals were women. And those are some of the people we were starting to lose.

I really felt bad, but at the same time, when they don't know what's going to happen to their jobs they can't sit around and wait. Unfortunately, that wasn't the case with the U.S. direct hire. This was during the last year of my tour. I had to spend too much time focused inwardly, trying to keep up morale and trying to keep things moving and trying to keep the program going at a time when people don't know if they're going to lose their jobs.

Q: Right. The RIF, as I recall, took place in the summer of 1997.

BONNER: Yeah, it would have been that around then because I left the summer of 1997.

Q: Were any of your staff members RIF'ed?

BONNER: Yeah, one of them.

Q: Did you advise? Because I think what they did was ask the mission directors to advise individuals.

BONNER: Yeah, unfortunately, but it was the one position where we had two US direct hires in place, so the effect on the mission wasn't as bad as it could have been. Ron was expecting to be let go because he was in a similar situation, being a technical officer. He just missed the cut by one slot.

Q: Right.

BONNER: Technical officers. And so that was rough.

Q: You were asked to deliver the news to people that they were being RIF'ed? Did you get much guidance on how to do that?

BONNER: I think there was—there may have been hints of who would be affected, but let's just say I was not surprised at the person that was let go.

Q: Okay.

BONNER: We tried to do what we could to keep up morale. My deputy and I put together a survey for all the staff to see if there was anything else we could be doing, any suggestions they had for how we were operating. We didn't get much out of it; most people felt we were doing what we could. We had always tried to be very inclusive and open with our staff members. We had a party committee, composed of someone from each office, which was responsible for having staff wide parties, usually associated with some holiday. We started casual Fridays, when people could come dressed as they wanted if they had no outside meetings. We started a women's exercise group on Friday afternoons. All the women from the staff would go down and clear all the guys out of the conference room and we would exercise together.

We tried to do some things to keep spirits up and I think it worked to some degree, but it was a rough time. Again, looking back at my EERs (evaluation reports). My last one, I reflected on how badly I felt that my last year was one where I had to worry about internal issues rather than development.

Q: Yeah, it's important to remember it was a difficult time. A question about FSNs: Was it difficult to recruit new staff since they were no longer hired as direct hire employees, but on contracts, often via program funds. Was that a challenge in trying to recruit strong FSNs in Ethiopia? Or perhaps they didn't even recognize that the system had changed?

BONNER: I'm not even sure where we were on that; I think we were still funding some with operating expenses. Some, like my secretary, couldn't be program funded.

Q: Yeah, no, I think they may have been still funded with operating expenses.

BONNER: And I think for some of the others, there may not have been a realization of funding sources or what it meant.

Q: Yeah. Right. Yeah.

BONNER: Plus, working for USAID had a very positive vibe that went with it. And it sure paid more than they could get in the government.

Q: Right, right. Did the government ever say anything to you about hiring away people?

BONNER: Maybe, but since they were still working on programs for Ethiopia, it wasn't as bad as having gone into the private sector. We did get a couple comments.

Q: That's good. There are other things about Ethiopia that you wanted to talk about.

BONNER: I think we went through it. I was very happy when I left to learn that Keith Brown was coming in to replace me.

Q: Right.

BONNER: He had overseen our regional office, REDSO and knew a lot of what was going on; he knew the program. We had a similar management style, so I was comfortable turning operations over to him.

Q: Right. And he had been very much involved with the Greater Horn of Africa Initiative as well. He also knew that coming in. It was a tough last year there because you were having to focus on a lot of internal morale issues, and an agency that was going through some tough times. Did that help drive you to decide you wanted to retire? What prompted you to make that decision?

BONNER: You know, that's interesting. There was a policy that if you didn't get promoted for a certain number of years you would be let go.

Q: Yes; there was time in class within the senior foreign service.

BONNER: And I remember my EXO, saying something like, "I figured this out, EXOs hardly ever get promoted. So, my plan is, I'm not going to get promoted, so they're going to let me go. And then I'm just going to have my nice retirement, and I'm going to do something else."

That started me thinking, okay, so at 50 and 20—I can do the same thing. I'll reach 50 years old around the same time I have 20 years with the US government. I got the job I wanted as mission director in Ethiopia. I didn't want to go back to Washington, even though I was offered some high-level positions. There really weren't any other mission director jobs I wanted. Ron would also be in the same situation. We had been in Peace Corps before, so those years counted towards our government service. Even though Ron

started later, we would both have 20+ years when we finished our tour in Ethiopia. Neither of us had any other place we really wanted to go and serve in. We felt like we had done what we wanted to do. And so really going back to Ethiopia in 1993 we were already leaning towards retiring from AID when we left.

Q: Yes.

BONNER: The Africa Bureau offered me the assistant administrator position, but I said, no, thanks. I've done what I wanted. I'm ready to move on. Also, on the personal side, we were concerned about Ron's mother. The property that we live on had two houses, she was living in one, and the other was our house, with no one living in it. The understanding we had with her was that she would stay there and take care of things, because eventually we would come back. She was reaching an age that taking care of two houses and 15 acres was a lot. We felt it was time for us to do our part; it was time for us to go back. My son was now getting out of college. He was having a few rough spots and could use some support. And our daughter was turning 13, it would be a good time to transition to the United States. She was getting ready to go into

Q: High school.

BONNER: Yeah. It was a good time to come home. We felt that there was another life outside of AID, and that we were ready to move on to something different at that point.

Q: Okay. Before we leave AID, I just wondered if you had any other thoughts about the challenges of tandem couples, and whether you think AID needs to do more to try to support them. I'm just wondering if you have any observations on that?

BONNER: Good question. I think one of the difficulties that we had, and I think it was true of several other couples, was where you have one as a supervisor of the other. Even though you feel you have worked out the relationship, there's always the perceived notion that others believe the spouse is getting preferential treatment. If anything, poor Ron had it the other way, he was held up to a higher standard, he had to do more. I never wrote his EER and that was done by my deputy, and I think reviewed by the Ambassador.

Q: Yeah, I think that's probably correct.

BONNER: Trying to find two jobs together is really difficult. You often end up at larger posts just because that's where it's more likely to have two vacant positions. And you stay longer; once you have joint positions you don't leave after two years, you extend or reup. Once you find a place, especially if you have children, it makes sense to stay unless the circumstances preclude it.

Q: To allow tandems to perhaps stay at post longer?

BONNER: Stay at posts longer and if you have kids be given preference at those posts with schooling opportunities

Q: Yes.

BONNER: It really was the issue though of trying to find a joint posting.

Living overseas is easier as a working couple, because you have a support system. You have help: you have a maid, a cook, and maybe a driver. You have assistance with things you would normally have to do yourself if you were in the U.S.

The other thing that happens, and I guess it's not just with AID, but with couples that work together any place, is you find your conversations at dinner tend to focus on work. So, your poor kids get wrapped up in whatever is going on at work. You have to figure out how to separate work from home, so that it doesn't start taking over your whole existence. You can do that. It's really a personal choice issue.

Retirement from USAID, Consulting, and Concluding Thoughts

Q: Right. Right. Thank you. So, you retired at post and then went into the retirement course at FSI?

BONNER: Yes, we returned to Washington for a short period and took some training to help us with life after AID. They had a very good program in place that allowed you to come back, train you and help you to write resumes, which was helpful if you were going to be in the job market. I was pleased with the program that FSI had.

Q: Good. And then you went up to New York, where you are now?

BONNER: Ron jumped more into the consultancy side than I did.

Q: Yes.

BONNER: It wasn't as though I didn't want to do it, but people were not looking for former AID bosses.

Q: I know, they think that anybody who's been a mission director can't do any work anymore.

BONNER: Right. I mean it's easy on the technical side to get consultancies, but there aren't a lot of calls to fill mission director vacancies. I did a couple of jobs, once where I was team leader for an evaluation team and another in Nepal to help them with their strategy. And I went once to Washington for the review panels.

Q: Yes, promotion panels.

BONNER: But I mean, why pay for somebody to come all the way from New York to be on a promotion panel when there's plenty of you in the Washington area.

Q: Right. Since you did a couple of consulting assignments with USAID afterwards—evaluation, and strategy development—sitting on the other side of the table. Did that experience change your perceptions at all? Any rethink about how you might have done your work?

BONNER: No, not that I can think of. There may have been some instances of, gee I wouldn't have done it like that, or I'm surprised this is happening. But nothing that made me feel I would have done things differently as a mission director. One nice thing about a consultancy is you only need to worry about the task at hand. As a direct hire, you've got the job you think you should be doing, but there also are several other extraneous things that are taking your time. With a consultancy, you go in, do what you must do and when it's finished it's over. It's a nice tidy package.

Q: Right. Well, it's true and this can be very satisfying. To wrap up, any final thoughts about what was a fantastic career and whether you would encourage young people to pursue the sort of the path that you took?

BONNER: I'm just thinking back on what I felt was important. I touched on this before a little bit, but building relationships is so important. And that's across the board. As I said, earlier, as much as I hated coming into Washington, it was really important. And it happened for me at a very critical time. And my assignments were very good. It exposed me to a lot of different programs and approaches different from the Africa Bureau. Rather than dealing with AID and the host government, you now had to deal with the political side. You learned how to deal with the Administrator, how to deal with the White House, how to deal with Congress. It gave you a better understanding of why things weren't working the way you felt things should.

Q: And that probably USAID in its personnel system needs to think more about making sure people have those opportunities and recognize them because some of this happens just by accident.

BONNER: Timing for a Washington assignment is also important. For me it was good that I was in the field, in different countries and different bureaus before I came back.

Q: Right.

BONNER: If I had been in Washington as my second assignment, for example, it wouldn't have been as meaningful nor had the same impact.

Q: Right. Before becoming a mission director? Now, that's an important point.

BONNER: As I was saying, establishing relationships across the board really helps you get things done. It's with your staff, with the other donors, with the government, with the NGOs, and with even people like—I should have mentioned this—Tariku. He was the USAID driver I had and was wonderful as a driver and a person. He became a good

friend. When we go on family trips around Ethiopia, we'd rent a separate car, and he would drive that one. We had two cars, so if anything happened, we were set; my son usually rode with him. We camped together; we did all kinds of things together.

He was wonderful about being able to get to the front of the line when I would come out of cocktail parties. Somehow, he would maneuver in front of all the ambassador's cars and be right there. I asked him one time, Tariku, how do you do this? He said, " I don't wait for your name to be announced and then drive up. I talk to the person that's at the door. They let me know ahead of time when they see you coming out" and then he would sneak his car around while everyone else was waiting in line. Anyway, this man, I thought I knew so well; after I left, he sought asylum in the US because he was part of the Oromo Liberation Front. We still keep in touch.

Q: Wow. Hopefully he didn't throw that bomb over the wall.

BONNER: Anyway, that was an aside but getting into relationships made me think of him. The other thing is making the best of opportunities as they come along. The glass is half full rather than half empty. If something's going to happen that may not be what you want, don't fight it, turn it in your favor as best you can.

I tend to be one who will not immediately go along with the status quo. I'll try to look at other options and ask have you thought about this or have you thought about that. Not that I disagree with the approach, but just to take alternatives into account. But then once you're going along in a specific direction, you might as well jump on the train because it's not going to help you standing on the tracks. So really being able to say, okay, you can offer options, you can offer differing viewpoints, you can grumble, you can grouch, but at the end of it, get on board and move forward.

Q: Right. That's a very good point.

BONNER: Thinking back on our agriculture program, and how change doesn't always happen the way you expect it to. We struggled so hard to get conditions in place that we felt were valid and could be achieved, but it never came to fruition. The program assistance didn't go ahead, and yet later the changes we were pushing for happened. Seeing changes happen, that you wanted to have happen, because you brought in good reasoning and sound arguments is extremely rewarding. Even without the funding being there. There's a nice satisfaction to it. It's not something that shows up when you're doing an evaluation report, or you're trying to say this is what we achieved. There's a lot of other things I think that AID achieves that do not show up in our project reporting, or progress indicators, or evaluations. It would be nice if there's some way that could get captured.

Q: Right. There's a lot that happens just through the dialogue and the relationships that you have. That is important. Before concluding, just kind of go back to Ethiopia. You started your international career as a Peace Corps volunteer in Ethiopia, you went back

to work there, early in your AID career, and then went back as Mission Director, any thoughts about Ethiopia, and the changes that you saw over a long period of time

BONNER: It's disturbing to me to see what's happening in Ethiopia over the past few years. The turmoil and conflict going on internally. It's very disheartening. You see things moving forward, you see indicators of development going up. You keep hoping for continued movement forward, but then there are the ups and downs, I don't think it's just Ethiopia, it's across the world; you've got these valleys and peaks. It's almost like physically being in Ethiopia. There is a big hill you've got to go over, and when you think you are at the top, at a plateau, you see the down slope on the other side. You deal with it and start back up again, and you've got positive hope. And then you're coming back down again. And I guess it's just realizing that at some point, you're getting people better educated. I think you've got more communication going on. I haven't been back to Ethiopia for a while. But what I understand from friends who are still there, is there's a vibrant, functioning, private sector that's doing quite well. We still have colleagues out there that we see occasionally when they come to the U.S., and overall, they still feel positive. But the past year has been particularly chaotic and crisis-laden.

One nice thing was for the whole time that I worked there, I never felt that I had to deal with a dishonest government. Graft was not an issue, who you paid off was not an issue; who got the contract was not an issue. When you look at some of the other countries and what one has to deal with in terms of corruption within the government, or who you have to pay off, I never felt I had that in Ethiopia, which always was positive. Also, what I enjoyed about Ethiopia was working with a group that was a proud group, a group that wanted to work things out and not be overly dependent on anyone else. Even though they were at the bottom 10% economically, and developmentally, it was a comfortable place to be. After a while it was my home.

Q: So many of the country's problems seem to revolve around ethnic differences. Did you have ethnic diversity within the USAID mission? And if so, did everyone get along?

BONNER: Well, I mean, I found out my driver had more diverse interests and viewpoints than I knew. I think the ethnic diversity during my tenure as director was much broader than during my first AID assignment. From what I was able to see, people got along. Within the mission people were assigned based on their capabilities, their skill set. There wasn't something where a certain ethnic group was in a certain set of jobs. I did however, try and get women into key positions.

Q: So, you did have a mix within the mission. Was that a conscious decision?

BONNER: It was just who came along. There were probably more Amharas, because geographically that's where we were located. When we started to work in the Southern Region and up in northern Tigray, we ended up with some of our Foreign Service Nationals coming from those areas, just because it just made sense in terms of knowing the region, the language, and the culture.

Q: But you were able to create an environment in which people recognize that awards were by performance and there weren't tensions. That's a positive sign. There is hope for the country.

BONNER: One other question that you had was would I suggest this as a career for people. I don't know how many people realize the kind of job we had even exists. Usually when I talk to people and tell them where I worked, I first need to explain what USAID is. Usually, they will recognize it if you connect it as a branch of the government which assists when there's a disaster. Then you broaden it to development assistance as well. People know about diplomats and the State Department; they know about the United Nations. But I don't think most people, once you get outside of the Washington beltway, have that much of an understanding that the United States even has an assistance program; a program that focuses on development rather than just helping during disasters.

I think AID needs to do more in terms of recruiting people, and letting people know that jobs like this exist. I found it a very rewarding career, but one I probably wouldn't have known about, had it not been for the Peace Corps. I think the other thing to know and I hope my interview shows, is you don't have to consider this a forever job. You can do other things. At age 50 and 20 years of service, you can stop and go on and do something else. You can choose to make it a lifetime career and something that you keep active in, the whole time through or you can make another decision and say "No, I'm going to look at something else." And there really are people along that whole spectrum.

Q: Right. I think increasingly the latter is what young people are looking towards. Thank you very much Marge, it's been really interesting. I've enjoyed the chance to talk with you and to learn more about your career and I'm going to turn the recording off now.

End of Interview