

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

**MARY A. BYRON**

*Interviewed by: Mark Tauber*  
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**INTERVIEW**

*Q: Today is April 7, 2021, and we are beginning our interview with Mary Byron. Mary, where were you born? When were you born?*

BYRON: I was born in Worthington, Minnesota in 1963, and shortly after my father moved us to northern Minnesota where I spent my childhood years. I grew up in the Red River Valley, in northwestern Minnesota with seven siblings, and several dogs and cats. After graduating college, I moved to Minneapolis to start my career.

*Q: The Red River in Minnesota, I think there's this river in Oklahoma as well.*

BYRON: Yes, there is. This is the Red River of the north; a river that flows north, bordering North Dakota and Minnesota. Many are familiar with the Fargo/Moorhead community thanks to the popular film *Fargo*. We lived in Moorhead, Minnesota, across the river from Fargo and not far from the Canadian border.

*Q: Tell me a bit about your hometown. What was it like?*

BYRON: It was a relatively small community, with a sugar beet plant on the northside and farms outside of the city center. My father was a mortician working at the local funeral home and fifteen years later when we moved even further north where he owned and managed his own funeral home. Moorhead was the type of community where neighbors watched out for each other, there were welcome wagon hosting and neighborhood potluck dinners. It was also a sports community, and long winters with hockey, skating, snowmobiling, and ice fishing. Seriously. And you could fish all year around on one of the ten thousand plus lakes! My father taught us all to respect and appreciate the outdoors, and we spent a lot of time in the lake country.

*Q: Go back a little bit, how did your parents meet?*

BYRON: How did they meet? They met in southeast Minnesota, in a small town named Waseca. They were childhood sweethearts. My father went off to the Korean War and when he returned, they were married. At that time, my mother worked as a telephone operator. After marriage they started their family. My mother was an amazing mother, I

cannot imagine how hard she worked raising eight children, each one year apart in age. My mother was a homemaker, and a mother and friend to all of her children. My mother recently passed at the age of eighty-nine years.

*Q: Have you done a little bit of ancestry investigation?*

BYRON: Yes, and I love doing the research. It is like putting a puzzle together. My father's grandparents are most likely related to the British Byron's and my mother's grandparents came over during the potato famine in Ireland. They entered the U.S. through Ellis Island, and eventually made their way to Minnesota.

My great uncle, on my father's side, a priest who studied in Dublin, did much research on the family genealogy. And my brother is working on updating. My mother's family name is McLoone, and her father's side hailed from County Donegal in Ireland. And there is also a little German and Finnish heritage from the maternal grandparents, but mostly Irish.

*Q: Interesting. Of course, they arrived in New York. If they ever mentioned, what drew them to Minnesota because that is a little far away?*

BYRON: In those years, they were probably homesteaders who went there for farming yet could have had bigger plans. They settled in Waseca in southern Minnesota, where they found good land for farming potato and wheat, like in the old country.

Each side of the family helped build their communities in the towns of Byron and Waseca. Many were farmers, some worked in businesses, or as attorneys or became doctors. My father's family lived next to a funeral home in Waseca, and as a child my father's curiosity would take him next door to the funeral home where he wanted to learn. The mortician became his friend, maybe a mentor. After the Korean War, he studied at the University of Minnesota and became a mortician.

*Q: The first fifteen to sixteen years in southern Minnesota, are their recollections from that part of your life that really stand out? You know, in terms of where you would end up eventually in international service.*

BYRON: I recall that my grandfather worked with General Mills, a flour milling company in that area. He also worked at Malt-O-Meal and Bird's Eye in the town of Waseca and was one of the youngest in his position to manage. Along the way he helped develop a new way to package vegetables, called vacuum packing. He worked his way up the ladder to executive level and was a consultant to other countries to discuss the food processing industry. I remember my grandparents traveled overseas to Beirut, China, and other places that piqued my curiosity. When they returned, he would tell stories about the people and the culture. I was fascinated and suppose that had some impact on my interest in international travel. Those experiences opened my mind to the world and sparked an interest to discover places and cultures.

My father was also curious and adventurous. He liked exploring, and took camping trips, mostly to the western states or Canada. And imagine the planning that went into those camping trips! Can you visualize traveling and camping out with eight kids! We would head off to the national parks with a camper van; one huge tent and our dog. My father was quite an adventurer. He truly loved the outdoors and taught us to appreciate it as well. We had terrific nature hikes, and fishing and lake adventures. They were very fun years!

*Q: In addition to all that, were you involved in sports, or other extracurricular activities that related to music?*

BYRON: Yes, I participated in organized sports, from basketball, track to volleyball. Also, my mother encouraged us four girls to join Bluebirds and Girl Scouts and I played piano. I loved jazz and big band music and constantly listened to my parents' albums, and later worked at the college radio station as a DJ [disc jockey].

*Q: Of course, the wonderful thing is you could be active in sports because by then, girls were at least, participating in intramural sports.*

BYRON: True. And our family of eight had each other to play with and against. We had our own basketball net attached to the garage, and the girls would play pig or horse against the guys. We played croquet in the backyard and flag football. In the winter months, my father would run the water and make a mini lake that froze, so we had our own skating rink and learned how to play broomball. We could not afford eight hockey sticks, yet old brooms worked just fine.

*Q: You mentioned traveling to Canada. Were they trips for touring or business?*

BYRON: My first international trip was with my family driving to Canada. I was a teen. It did not seem international as it was just three hours north and very similar in culture. Back then one did not need a passport, just a driver's license for identification. I always loved a road trip, and at the time it was going to the big city of Winnipeg, Manitoba, and it was very exciting. My second out-of-country trip was to Mexico with my oldest sister. We crossed into Mexico just south of San Diego, where she lived. We spent a day in Tijuana, and that was a cultural explosion of sights, sounds, and scents. We had street tacos, bought piñatas and sombreros from the local vendors, and returned to San Diego before dark.

*Q: In school, were there any other academics that also played a role, which helped you get a better understanding of the world outside the U.S.?*

BYRON: I enjoyed Spanish classes and learning about Latin culture and the history of music classes provided a look into other cultures.

*Q: Yes. While you were in high school, did you also work?*

BYRON: Yes, I worked while attending high school. At age sixteen, I started in a restaurant job then at the grocery store. My parents encouraged it and helped me set up my own checking account at that time. I wanted to be independent and balance my own checkbook.

*Q: As you are getting closer to graduating from high school, are you thinking about college or your parents thinking about it? How did that go?*

BYRON: Oh yes. I was super excited to go to college. With six siblings ahead of me, I wasn't sure where to apply. My parents were open to whatever I wanted to do yet highly encouraged a college education. It was nice not to have the pressure that some of my friends experienced. I went to a nearby college and studied marketing and mass communications.

My goal was to have a career in public relations and marketing. After graduating I interned at the Fargo-Moorhead Tourism office, then took a summer job in hospitality and made enough money to move to Minneapolis.

*Q: You are in Minneapolis, and what was it like at that time to work in the PR [public relations] industry, particularly in hospitality?*

BYRON: It was competitive. I realized it truly is “who you know” to get a foot in the door. My first job was at a small ad agency where I worked on all kinds of projects. After a visit from my father, things changed. He invited me to his funeral home convention and showed me around the trade show and we attended receptions at this beautiful luxurious hotel. I ended up meeting with the manager and started working at that hotel. After a year, a competing luxury brand manager invited me for an interview. We connected and I worked for this worldwide company, Carlson Companies, for the following five years. I started as a concierge, then to director of guest services, then elevated to the public relations role in Washington.

*Q: Did you meet your husband in the course of your work? What's that story?*

BYRON: Pat and I met during an advance meeting of the incoming Chinese government delegation. As diplomatic security agent in charge, we reviewed the arrival, the flow, and overall needs of the delegation. We spent much time together that week. I coordinated with my team, based on the needs of the group. Pat managed overall security from the State Department side. It was my first Asian delegation, and I had much to learn. I studied cultural differences—etiquette, protocol, gestures, and greetings.

After the delegation departed, we stayed connected. I was surprised to receive beautiful flowers and lovely messages. The following month I learned my brother was in DC, in training for his new role with the State Department. It was during my visit to see him that Pat and I connected again. We started a long-distance friendship. Shortly after my company had a PR position available in the DC office. I interviewed and was offered the job and started a few months later, January of 1988.

*Q: With all of the public relations and management of movements of officials, resources, and logistics, you learned skills that are transferable to the Department of State.*

BYRON: After working on hospitality arrangements for high-level delegations from King Gustaf of Sweden and President Gorbachev of Russia, I continued to study protocol, cultural relations, etiquette, and so on. I hoped to work in the international area in the future.

*Q: All right, now, let's just go back one moment. Did you consider, while dating or married, taking the Foreign Service test?*

BYRON: Not at the time. I was hopeful I would continue with my line of work and expertise and find a role on each assignment. It seemed my business and public relations background would easily transfer to a U.S. Information Service (USIS) job or community affairs position.

*Q: It's one thing before we begin following you in the Foreign Service, what year did you get married?*

BYRON: Pat invited me into his life, and we were married on July 4, 1992, in Minneapolis, Minnesota, where we first met. After the wedding ceremony, we had a reception and sort of a bon-voyage party, as we cruised down the Mississippi River and celebrated under fireworks.

*Q: Once you're married, as a spouse, are you given any training, or what do you learn initially about the Foreign Service?*

BYRON: I was advised to go to the State Department library, a great resource, to research potential country assignments. While Patrick was working, I spent hours reviewing countries that we were bidding on—looking at housing, education, health, and so on. It was fabulous to have all this information at your fingertips.

I also registered and attended security classes provided to spouses. There were instructors and video training provided. For me, the big takeaway was learning how to handle potential threats, and how to handle them. It was quite helpful. We were in South Africa; it was a volatile period during the end of apartheid and civil unrest.

*Q: Now you get—the push that's on you, you go to Cape Town. It's a language designated [post] as far as I recall.*

BYRON: It was not. They encouraged us to learn Afrikaans, which we tried. We practice with the Berlitz tapes every night, learning basic greetings and common sentences.

When we arrived in South Africa, Nelson Mandela was free from prison and was becoming increasingly popular and expected to be the next president. It was suggested we

learn the African language, Xhosa. I tried to learn and it was a challenge. I couldn't get the clicks right. I was glad to know most people spoke English, in addition to Afrikaans and their tribal language.

*Q: When you arrived at the embassy, what were your impressions as you moved on?*

BYRON: On arrival, I was stunned at the beauty of Cape Town with the massive Table Mountain adjacent to the shining sea. As far as the consulate in Cape Town, my first impression was it seemed very secure, with one secure entrance after another. Upon entering I recall large, framed photos of the president and secretary of state hanging in the main entry area. Security was tight, even more so due to the anthrax scare at the time.

*Q: Did they give you any introduction to the work of the consulate?*

BYRON: I was hoping to hit the ground running and start working. There were no jobs available when I arrived. While Pat worked as a regional security officer, I unpacked the few boxes we had thus far. We were still waiting for the main shipment, which was delayed. I had so much time on my hands and made sure to update my resume and start looking for jobs in the area. After learning about a Hollywood filming needing extra cast, I went and applied, was interviewed, and took a cast role in the filming, which started shortly after. I was waiting and hoping an embassy job would come available. I spent time getting to know the apartment maids and gardeners. Then learned of a nearby senior's home, and walked over with my resume, and offered to volunteer. Apparently "volunteer" work was unheard of back then. I tried to fill my time cleaning, grocery shopping, and cooking.

I explored the area, went to the beach across the road, and walked through adjacent neighborhoods. This is when I decided to start journaling and photographing this beautiful country and this important time in South Africa's modern history.

During a spouse lunch, I met some of the embassy staff and learned more about the mission. Finally, a position came available. I was offered two jobs, the community liaison officer and then the USAID [U.S. Agency for International Development] coordinator role. Both were part-time jobs, making a full-time job. It was wonderful to be a part of the embassy community and having a purpose at a very important period in South Africa's modern history, the first democratic elections when Nelson Mandela was elected president.

*Q: During these visits from the delegation from Washington and so on, officially, as CLO [Community Liaison Office], what role did you play?*

BYRON: The consulate had relatively small staff to handle all the Washington requests during this time in the lead up to the elections. The administrative officer asked me to handle certain projects, from managing the hotel roster, review transportation, and suggest outings and tours. Some delegations included spouses that requested tours,

shopping, and museum visits. We were busy and it gave me more of an opportunity to branch out from the traditional community liaison role.

*Q: This is a bit of a newbie question, but back in the early 1990s did you stay in touch with the continents through radios?*

BYRON: In my role, I used the telephone. Yes, there were radios, as well as pagers. The officers used pagers at the consulate, also known as beepers. I do recall in my corporate job they were much more advanced in technology and had mobile phones, they were large, the size of my shoe! I recall my manager saying “Mary, this is the future.” The consulate had pagers available to officers, and we had a landline at our embassy-leased home.

As far as computer technology, in 1992, the consulate was using WANG computer systems. It was a challenge for me to learn the older system. Back in the states in my corporate job we were on PCs [personal computers] with Microsoft software. Later I recall the consulate offered training on Microsoft software. In fact, it was the ambassador’s wife, Helen, who was our instructor. She was wonderful and patient, we learned so much in a short period.

*Q: Things move much more quickly. South Africa was at a historic moment. What were the impressions you took, the changes going on in South Africa? What struck you most vividly on a day-to-day basis?*

BYRON: On arrival I was in awe of the beauty of Cape Town, located on the southern coast of South Africa. But as I came to know the country better, it was a time warp in so many ways. It was the final days of apartheid, so I thought. On one of my daily walks on the promenade, near the beach I saw a sign that said, “Whites only, slegs blankes,” meaning whites only. I was surprised and took another look. It was unbelievable that sign was still there. Never taken down. And, the nearby public bathroom had the same sign. It was shocking, as it was 1992.

Curfews were still in place for domestic workers, maids, and gardeners. They had to leave town at the end of the day and catch their ride, a kombi, or bus back to their homes in the township. There were certainly live-in domestic workers. We were living in a whites only area, and it didn’t sit well with me. The inequality and social injustice were present. It took a decade to unwind the sins of apartheid.

Working on the USAID program helped me gain more knowledge and work through some of the guilt I felt for the country and the people repressed under apartheid. The self-help projects were very important for community development. USAID had standards for applying for grants, vetting, and final approval. I handled the paperwork, as well as site visits. I loved going out to meet with the local coordinator in charge of the project, reviewing the plans for an end result of bringing more jobs and dignity to their communities.

As the election approached, the violence increased, more attacks and bombings. The USAID program was placed on hold. We were no longer allowed to enter the townships during this period.

*Q: Did the ambassador's self-help program resume, or was it still too risky?*

BYRON: Too risky? Indeed. Prior to the elections, there were so many stops and starts in the negotiations. U.S. Ambassador Lyman tried to bring the three top leaders to the table to negotiate terms and set the election date. There were constant negotiations between President F.W. de Klerk, Nelson Mandela, and Mangosuthu Buthelezi. I recall territory wars and continued violent attacks, including the horrific Boipatong Massacre. In our area, Cape Town, there were random bombings including a local restaurant and a church. There were gangs' turf wars in the townships.

On one occasion, I was to meet with the coordinator of a sewing project, in Khayelitsha, a township outside of Cape Town. The embassy driver was from there and spoke Xhosa. I recall we drove in, and we couldn't find her home at first as there was one corrugated metal shack after another, and no road signs. The driver asked for directions along the way. I sat in the back seat and received many stares, then covered up my blond hair under my cap and put on sunglasses until we reached the coordinator's home.

On arrival, kids were gathering about staring into the van, and I recall the driver speaking Xhosa. Something like—"She is American, here to meet—here to help." That seemed to settle them down. They were scared initially as they thought I was an Afrikaner or "Boer."

They were fearful and angry at first, then started backing off as they realized I was hoping to help with the project. I understood where their fear was coming from. Can you imagine being oppressed all these years by the Afrikaners, the racism, social injustice, and their constant struggles.

*Q: Well, how was election day and how much longer after the elections did you stay?*

BYRON: I couldn't believe we made it to election day without a full-blown civil war. There was continued violence, threats, and another bombing.

I felt quite honored to be an IEC [Independent Electoral Commission] election observer. We also had the U.S. presidential delegation in, led by Jesse Jackson and others. We organized in advance the transportation and routes to the various voting stations around the area, starting with the township of Gugulethu. I'll never forget the dark line, which snaked for 1-2 blocks leading up to the building. These were people lined up overnight, in the rain, in the cold, waiting to cast their ballot for the very first time ever. As we approached, I saw young and old, men, women and children, a man at a grill barbecuing, people helping each other and all very happy. As we approached the ballot box, as people cast their ballot—I saw tears of joy, then dancing—the Toyi-toyi. I can picture it all right now, so vivid. The long-awaited day had come when ALL had the right to vote. I cried



with them. It was a historic day in April 1994, when Nelson Mandela was elected the country's first black president.

After the inauguration of Nelson Mandela, we worked for a few more months then departed back to the U.S. for our onward assignment. I return to South Africa as much as possible. After over twenty years of holding on to this story, I have recently published the book, *No Ordinary Life: Awakenings in the Final days of Apartheid*. The reviews have been wonderful, which has led to writing the feature script to one day show on screen for a larger audience.

*Q: Do you remember back then what your assignment considerations were?*

BYRON: There were so many options for an onward assignment. At the time of selecting coincidentally, we had the Artists for a New South Africa visiting from the States, led by actor Danny Glover and his wife Asami. They were living in Russian Hill, San Francisco and highly recommended we give it a try. We put it on the list of the top six assignments, and that is where we ultimately headed—San Francisco.

*Q: Well, now let's go ahead then and follow you to San Francisco. It's summer of 1994?*

BYRON: Yes. Late August 1994.

*Q: Is this the first time there?*

BYRON: I had visited there once before, visiting a girlfriend. At the time of the assignment confirmation, I wasn't aware of the business climate, job opportunities nor housing. We did quite a bit of research before arrival.

*Q: Now, where did you end up in terms of, you know, housing and so on?*

BYRON: We started in long-term rental over by the airport and then drove around to get to know the neighborhoods. We found a very small apartment in the Marina area, which reminded me of Cape Town. That made the transition a little easier. As you know, coming back to the States isn't easy. The one-bedroom apartment was within our budget, I was not yet working. Pat's office was downtown, in the financial district, an easy cable car ride or bus ride.

I was ready to work. My resumes were up to date, and I sent to a few travel and tourism companies, in addition to hotels. And, because of my love for African arts and crafts, I considered starting an import business and supporting the ladies I met there.

I was offered a position as public relations director for a luxury hotel collection and decided that was it. The staff was wonderful, diverse, and it was an exciting time in San Francisco. I often took the cable car to work. Pat's office was nearby so we would meet for lunch and take a walk.

*Q: How long did you work with that company?*

BYRON: I stayed on with the PR position three and a half years until we had to move on to another assignment. We made wonderful friendships along the way. Yet time to move again. Perhaps I was getting used to the process, and you just sort of go with it and recreate yourself on every move.

*Q: By your own judgment, were you successful in—sort of the brand becoming better known?*

BYRON: The PR role was a good fit. We built much brand awareness, good will, and community partnerships. My role also allowed me to continue reaching out to the international community and diplomatic corps in the Bay Area. In addition, we launched community fundraising programs such as the At-Risk Youth program, where kids handmade holiday Christmas cards and the programs helped keep kids safe and off the streets.

*Q: Of course, the remarkable thing about some of these programs is, this is exactly what USIS does overseas.*

BYRON: Yes, that's right.

*Q: You're definitely picking up transferable skills. Sounds like you enjoyed your time in San Francisco.*

BYRON: I really enjoyed the cosmopolitan and scenic city by the bay. Yet I thought of South Africa often. While there I wanted to do some outreach to the South African communities and got in touch with the consul general, F.W. de Klerk's cousin was the consul general in Los Angeles. Together we hosted an event promoting tourism and fundraising events.

Cape Town is similar to San Francisco in many ways. The nearby wine country, even the prisons—Alcatraz in San Francisco and Robben Island in Cape Town. Interesting that our homes in both locations faced out into the bay, facing each of them.

While living in San Francisco, in addition to my PR job, I worked with and launched an organization in which we planned high-level diplomatic events, including the United Nations Fiftieth Anniversary. I wanted to keep involved, educate myself in hopes it would help on each assignment going forward.

*Q: So, as you're approaching the end of this assignment, you and your husband are talking about what's going to happen next. What was that like?*

BYRON: Here comes the bid list. Pat circled the assignments available, and then we whittled it down. We had hoped for Denver, as Pat's family lived there and the Diplomat Security Office had recently opened there. At that time, Secretary of State Madeleine

Albright was in office, and the G8 [Group of 8] Summit had just taken place in Denver. We moved to Denver in 1998, and bought a house. After six months, State asked Pat to take on another assignment to work at the U.S. embassy in Bujumbura, Burundi. It was a solo assignment. As it was an unaccompanied post, I stayed behind. We adopted a puppy, I set up the house and looked for a job.

*Q: Regarding Pat's job, was it meant to be a temporary short term?*

BYRON: It was a one-year assignment during a civil war, Hutus and Tutsis. State kept the embassy open during that strife with limited staff, only essential employees were there. There was continued fighting, and some very frightening situations when I received a call during a lockdown.

We both downloaded the Skype program to keep in touch. It's like Zoom, yet twenty years earlier. Sometimes the connection wasn't good, but we kept trying. It was important to keep Pat engaged about home life and I would often put our pup on my lap for him to see. He was in a highly stressful position with the continued violence and attacks, and there was no military there to secure them. He was the only DS [Bureau of Diplomatic Security] agent to protect the ambassador and the mission. This is when my opinion of the State Department changed.

*Q: Now, you're in Denver, but at any point along the way, have you started thinking about maybe taking the Foreign Service exam or entering in as a specialist in one field or another?*

BYRON: A USIS position might have been more appropriate for me with my public affairs background. Yet, with this last move I decided to launch my own PR business. I also took on a role with a local contractor and the State Department's ECA program.

*Q: ECA [United States Department of State's Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs].*

BYRON: Yes. That was part of contracting through them.

*Q: Wow, alright.*

BYRON: That was a very interesting job and I felt reconnected with the State Department.

*Q: Among all of these international visitors, are there any that stick out in your mind?*

BYRON: Oh, yes, the Afghan women group. We coordinated the entire trip and meetings for this group, which was on and off. In the end, it ended up with close to thirty arriving in Washington then split off into groups going to different regions. Our region hosted eight to ten. They were all Afghans from different professions with incredible stories. We all learned; we learned much about acceptance and mutual understanding.

*Q: I am curious about the Afghan women's delegation, what were their aspirations?*

BYRON: We set up professional meetings and home hospitality. Some of these ladies were teachers starting out in their careers, but they were learning in their homes. They were not allowed to go into training centers at home in Afghanistan. We set up computer training, we did professional exchanges with other women in various careers.

And we explored the Rocky Mountains and went on a hike then a barbecue. I gave a gal my college sweatshirt and she in return showed me how to wrap the scarf over my head and shoulders. There was much interest in the group, due to current events. They were interviewed by the local radio station, actually two, and shared their stories, and that was quite interesting, and some could not speak because they were worried about their family at home, but there were some that were outgoing, leaders of their group.

*Q: This job lasted how long while you were in Denver?*

BYRON: I was also doing other PR projects and events. I took a role at the International Summer Olympics for five weeks, continued to produce corporate events, started writing books, and managed travel and meeting logistics.

*Q: How did business and their business models change as a result of the information revolution, and everything else going on?*

BYRON: Phone calls were less. Email was priority. I know longer used my AOL; Google was the big deal. I was able to work from home and used skype for facetimeing.

There were SOPs [Standard Operating Procedure] mandated that affect the bottom line, and it's all about revenue. Corporations have a hierarchy, like State Department. You have your direct report, you don't jump over. And sometimes there is a need to elevate the situation. In many ways corporate has similar protocol, and hierarchy as government, and revenue driven for sure.

*Q: But the bottom line with State Department isn't always monetary, a bit more intangible.*

BYRON: Right. How do you measure the value of diplomatic relations?

*Q: With the exchange programs that you were working on, were there people who became famous?*

BYRON: There were hundreds of talented people in those programs. I love seeing the collaboration amongst them in meetings with their counterparts from another country. Many participants went on to be captains of industry, prime ministers, presidents, Nobel Peace awardees, and so on.

*Q: I worked with them on the other side, in public diplomacy and spent time with them. I'm always curious to know how they were understood, and whether they were impressed when they arrived?*

BYRON: All seemed open-minded, curious, and wanting to learn everything about our community, our schools, our churches, the media, to the local diners, and explore the outdoors. A trip to the nearby Red Rocks Park in the foothills was always a hit. They also enjoy the “home hospitality” aspect of the visits, to experience how we live, enjoy a homemade meal, and meet the family, in our case, meet the adopted pets.

*Q: How long were you assigned to Denver?*

BYRON: Pat worked in the Diplomatic Security Field Office for a year then assigned back to Africa, Burundi this time. It was a high threat country during the Hutu and Tutsi civil unrest. It was considered an unaccompanied post, only essential employees allowed, thus no spouses.

*Q: Did he talk about his assignment and what he saw? What was his experience like?*

BYRON: It was a difficult assignment. The fighting between Hutu rebels and the Burundi Tutsi government escalated. The U.S. embassy was based in Bujumbura, Burundi. Pat was the regional security officer, doing his best to protect the embassy and the Americans. There was a marine detachment, yet no military and with continued violence threatening, they were on lockdown often. There was a highly critical moment when their homes were fired upon, round after round. Pat made it over to secure the ambassador and they hunkered down in the safe room. I won't go into details, but I will say I thought that phone call he made that night was his last. It is unbelievable they didn't evacuate the embassy early on. This was definitely the most difficult period in our foreign service career.

Later in December, a cease-fire agreement was signed, and talks took place in Tanzania. An agreement emerged from the talks that incorporated the Hutu rebels into the new national army.

We continue to communicate with his Burundian friends to this day, and his close colleague recently came for a visit. Those are deep friendships.

*Q: But he does get back, and we're now beginning to think about the next assignment.*

BYRON: Yes, he returned home and worked the last two years of his assignment at the Diplomatic Security Field Office. Then 9/11 happened. We watched the tragic incident of planes crashing into the World Trade Center. What a shock. The world was in shock. The State Department advised and launched the local Joint Terrorism Task Force and Pat served in that role for the next two years.

*Q: How did 9/11 affect your work?*

BYRON: It slowed of course. That particular week I had a scheduled ECA group coming in from Washington, and the group was obviously delayed. We reworked everything, and they eventually they made it to Denver. I had heard they were actually on a Pentagon tour when 9/11 happened. Can you imagine? What a tragedy. The decision was made, since they were already in the U.S., we would continue their multi-city program yet redefine the goal. As you know flights were cancelled in addition to future conferences and conventions. We were all just trying to figure it out. Many stayed close to home and their families. Pat worked long hours with the Joint Terrorism Task Force.

Where were you? What assignment were you on during 9/11?

*Q: Oddly enough, I had literally gotten back to the U.S. on September 10, 2001. My plane landed on September 10, in Atlanta, and I was going on home leave. My plan was to drive up the Smoky Mountain Parkway to Washington. I ended up driving rather quickly, in one day. I was on home leave and then to Romanian language training.*

BYRON: At FSI [Foreign Service Institute]?

*Q: Yes. Literally, one day before the flights would have stopped, I don't know where I would have been.*

BYRON: Oh dear. I recall Pat was walking our dog and heard from a neighbor that a plane had crashed in the World Trade Center. He rushed home and I was watching it live on the TV. In disbelief, I switched, going back and forth from channel to channel.

We were horrified thinking, Is this for real? Then as we watched the second plane crashed into the tower. I get chills thinking about it. It's still just so unbelievable. Pat got a call from DS, then wheels went into motion. I called my work, and all staff stayed home. I'm still in shock and wanted to do something to help.

As all of our lives changed, and priorities shifted, we started considering our next assignment.

*Q: Did you move that year and where to?*

BYRON: In 2005, we moved from Denver to Washington where Pat trained in the security role with OBO [Overseas Building Operations]. In 1999, there was the enactment of the Secure Embassy Construction and Counterterrorism Act. Pat was in training for those updated physical security standards to implement for existing or new embassy buildings due to 9/11 and bombings of U.S. embassies in Nairobi and Dar es Salaam.

We lived in Arlington and Pat walked to work, while I worked from my home office. After a year, we received news of our assignment to the U.S. embassy in Bern, Switzerland, where he worked on the new embassy project. Once again, we organized, packed, and moved. I was ready to move abroad and pleased with the location.

*Q: What years were you in Switzerland?*

BYRON: We moved to Bern in 2006 through 2008. At the time, the president was George W. Bush and secretary of state was Condoleezza Rice.

Switzerland is beautiful and our home was in the embassy annex, connected to the embassy near the Aare River. It was a large apartment on the second level. I turned a portion of the dining room into my office. I was hoping to find work at the embassy and was interested in the CLO position yet it was not available. I kept my public relations business going and continued writing. After a few months, I learned of a part-time job in the Commercial section. I applied and started immediately.

*Q: Now, given your background in event management and planning, were there trade shows that you were involved in?*

BYRON: We had some involvement in the World Economic Forum in Davos. It's an annual event where leaders from business, government, international organizations, civil society, and academia come together to address critical issues at the start of each year. I was there to support commerce, and Pat was there securing Secretary of State Rice.

*Q: As the years in Bern go by and there is more and more that's done on computers. Have they introduced cell phones for you to stay in contact with the embassy?*

BYRON: In Switzerland, I had my own personal blackberry. The embassy had recently introduced the blackberry phones. We would sit together and have "crackberry" sessions to get to know our phones better.

*Q: The reason I asked is because I had experienced that in Hungary. It was very touch-and-go with the connection. You could learn how to operate the BlackBerry, but you weren't always getting connected. I wonder if the connections and the communications were reliable at that time?*

BYRON: Yes, most everything worked well in Switzerland. I recall that the texting function was not allowed. There was some security issue with that, although the cellphones were reliable in Switzerland.

*Q: Were there other recollections from about changes in the Foreign Service, or in the way spouses were engaging with the service now, that you recall?*

BYRON: There were still the CLO tours and lunches, softball league, hikes, and shopping excursions to the commissary in Germany where we found our American foods, peanut butter, and barbecue sauces, things like that. You know, those comforts from home.

Pat often worked long days. We had our own vehicle, and I was able to come and go. Of course, the transportation there was amazing. Two blocks from where we lived, there was the bus stop. And the trains were nice and clean, and on time of course. It's Switzerland. It was very easy.

I spent a lot of time walking our pup Tayla, through the Tierpark, which is adjacent to the embassy, and taking her down to the little village and having coffee, meet the locals. The Swiss are very pet friendly and having a pup is a good icebreaker. I went downtown almost daily on the bus. Bern is a magical place, a beautiful city.

*Q: Did you need to learn any language? I know most Swiss speak good English, but were you trained, or did you get training for any of the languages?*

BYRON: I studied the German language, yet the Swiss German language is a bit different. I tried to speak it as much as possible and even if it was close, they appreciated the effort.

*Q: Is there anything in particular about living in Switzerland that was really unique, other than what you would expect?*

BYRON: We loved the outdoors! Traveling to the countryside was so enlightening. I loved visiting the farms, spotted with cows. The Swiss were welcoming, inviting us in for a farm meal. We enjoyed the delicious raclettes and Gruyère or Emmental fondues, sitting at long picnic tables with the locals. After we would go on a mountain hike and work off the calories. There were plenty of chairlifts taking us up to the higher elevation for hikes around alpine lakes. We were fortunate to ride one of the five highest gondolas in the world, the Grindelwald-Männlichen gondola, with breathtaking views. And, of course, the skiing was fabulous. Pat grew up skiing in Colorado, so when had free weekends we would drive and or take the train up. While he skied, I would take the pup and snowshoe around the mountain top. We traveled to the popular slopes, St. Moritz, Zermatt, Gstaad to Titlis and Schilthorn, where one of the Bond movies was filmed.

We also enjoyed the little villages and searching out Cuckoo clocks. They say the German Ketterer invented it, recreating the crow of a rooster—but many say the Swiss made it better. It was fun to see all the variations, small and large, from simple design to whimsical to quite ornate. I loved them all.

Closer to home, the adjacent Aare River was popular for visitors to raft. We could see the bridge from our living room window and hear the squeals as people jumped off into the freezing water below. It looked like such fun to be on the Aare, so we ordered wetsuits and a raft from the states and rafted often with our pup.

It was fun to skate nearby, and enjoyed Tierpark with the wooded area adjacent. It was like an outdoor zoo, and very expansive with a variety of wildlife, bears, leopards, and even flamingos, oh my.



Switzerland is a beautiful country, orderly, very clean, and I felt safe. And the country is very pet-friendly from restaurants to transportation. Our pup took the train, bus, and even the chairlift!

*Q: So, it's a two-year tour there. So, you're already thinking of where you're going next by the end of the first year. How did that go with your husband and choosing locations?*

BYRON: We were at the point in our career thinking of retiring. It wasn't until we were talking with another officer who just returned from Malta and he enjoyed the assignment and encouraged us to bid on it. Coincidentally, the Maltese embassy needed an OBO officer, as they were building a new embassy outside of Valletta, which was more inland. Pat had worked with the engineer on the project, in Switzerland. After research we concluded we should bid on it.

After a brief home visit, we were off to Malta. It's an island country that sits in the Mediterranean between Italy and Tunisia. Many of my friends and family were not too familiar with Malta, other than the book and film *Maltese Falcon*. My father was a history buff, was happy for us to get this assignment and hoped to visit. It has an interesting history, first colonized by the Phoenicians, conquered by the French under Napoleon to later become a British colony and finally independent and part of the European Union [EU] in 2004. We arrived four years after.

Our embassy leased home was in Sliema, a coastal town and Pat worked in Valletta on the new embassy project. I was able to work remotely and traveled back and forth to the States. My role and responsibilities with my client were growing, and I interfacing more with executive management. My father was ill at the time, it was a difficult period. I traveled between Malta, Minnesota, and Colorado for two years.

Malta was a fascinating country, and we had our pup and kitty with us. And that was an interesting travel story in itself. I did not work at the embassy, as I had my own PR business and worked from the dining room, facing the sea. I managed the home, the pets, meals, and so on. Pat worked very long days on physical security implementation on the embassy construction. The \$125 million project was completed and the new embassy in Ta' Qali opened in 2011.

*Q: And with your job, the connections, the communications, and so on, were adequate for everything you need to do to stay in touch?*

BYRON: Yes, good question. To keep my business going, I needed the internet and the connection worked most of the time, although it was slow. I set up my virtual office and worked half days, starting later as Malta is eight hours ahead of Denver.

I suspect this is what spouses are doing these days if they do not have an opportunity to work at the embassy or another government office overseas. The downside of not getting a job at the embassy, you feel more isolated and not a part of the community. On the

other hand, most of my new friends were Maltese and made me feel at home. Often we would meet for coffee or a swim in the ocean.

*Q: Your tour in Malta was 2008 until what year?*

BYRON: The tour was through 2009, although I departed early due to family reasons.

*Q: At that time, of course, there was a change in administration, from Bush to Obama. Did that have any effect on your life in Valletta or any aspect of things?*

BYRON: No, it had no effect on us. We did attend an embassy celebration, which was lovely. With a new administration, it takes time for change.

*Q: And then from Malta, did you do a lot of traveling? In either your job or, you know, just taking the opportunity of the location?*

BYRON: We had many visitors to Malta, from my sister and her husband to friends. We opened our home to anyone that was interested in traveling that way. Valletta was also a main port for cruise lines, and I recall meeting friends for a day that came in for a port stop. It was easy to travel by ferry from Malta to Sicily, and Taormina, home of Mt. Etna volcano. We also took visitors to Malta's sister island Gozo. When we needed groceries and supplies, or just to get away from the island, we would also go across for the day trip to shop.

*Q: Well, were there security concerns that limited you at all in Malta?*

BYRON: I was watchful. Security training was ingrained in me, with constant reminders from Pat, my own personal security. Malta has one of the lowest crime rates in the EU, yet there was much theft. My cell phone was stolen, which was annoying, as it had all my information and contacts stored in it. I did feel safe there, and comfortable walking my pup along the boardwalk at night.

*Q: Well, as you are approaching the end of the tour in Malta, what are you and your husband thinking about?*

BYRON: It was time to return to the states and be near aging family. Our final tour was in San Francisco in 2012. The secretary of state in office was Hillary Clinton. Pat worked at the San Francisco Field Office and managed DS agents. We loved the city by the bay yet found housing prices had increased four times from our first assignment in 1994. We finally found a very small one-bedroom in the Marina, which was easy for each of us to get to our jobs.

It was also during that period that one of the junior agents took a short-term assignment in Libya to secure Ambassador Christopher Stevens. They were together in Benghazi, when the ambassador and three others were killed during a coordinated attack on the U.S. mission. This agent came out alive and returned to the San Francisco Field Office. We all

know the story, and there is much controversy over the facts. I will not ever forget the day we attended the memorial for Ambassador Stevens in San Francisco, with the State Department Diplomatic Security agents. It was a dark day for the State Department and the world.

The following year John Kerry was appointed secretary of state. Pat was quite pleased to work under him and have him be his final secretary of state. And that was the end of his career and our life in the Foreign Service.

We moved back to our home in Denver, near family, and celebrated retirement daily. We were invited to the State Department retirement celebration in Washington. Secretary of State John Kerry spoke, and he shared his respect for the commitment of not only the State Department employees, but the families. He thanked all for the sacrifices the whole family made for, and the dedication to represent America abroad. Those words of gratitude make a difference. It was quite a lovely day of celebration with other retirees, in the elegant diplomatic reception room.

*Q: At this point, when you reached the end of your time in the Foreign Service, go back, and reflect on how the treatment of spouses changed over the time you were in the Foreign Service.*

BYRON: Women are underrepresented. I am hopeful there has been an increase in tandem assignments. Early on I was fortunate to have a conversation with Secretary of State Madeleine Albright. She asked me about my first assignment in South Africa, and we spoke openly. I was about to speak on behalf of the spouses, and the possibility of bringing spouses in and allowing them to apply for more positions at the embassy, and possibly FSNs' [Foreign Service nationals] roles. I was thinking outside the box as to how we might be more inclusive, play a bigger role and not be "trailing spouses." They, we, have much to contribute. And, this makes for happier marriages, and less separation.

Thank you for this time together to sort of hash over the past three decades. I was fortunate to have experienced the Foreign Service life and grassroots diplomacy while living abroad with my husband. I cherish those experiences and will continue to write and share the highlights with the next generation and do my small part of opening minds to the world.

*End of interview*

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