

The Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training
Foreign Affairs Oral History Program
Secretary of State Award Series

JERRY CASE

*Interviewed by: Mark Tauber
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INTERVIEW

Q: Today is May 13, 2025. This interview is part of the project between AAFSW [Associates of the American Foreign Service Worldwide] and ADST on the winners of the Secretary of State Award for Outstanding Volunteerism Abroad. And today's interview is with Jerry Case. Jerry, before we go into the award, tell us a little bit about your background. Where were you born and raised?

CASE: I grew up in Michigan, and I had a wonderful childhood. It was a great place to thrive but, I'm not sure I care to ever live there again.

Q: Whereabouts in Michigan?

CASE: In Hubbardston, a small farm village of about four hundred in the middle of the state.

Q: What brought you out of the town? Was it education or work? How did you move on from there?

CASE: While growing up in Hubbardston my experience was that most folks worked in the automobile industry, and after a summer temporary job during college with Oldsmobile I came to the decision that 35 years working in a factory was not for me. I moved on and found a job as a park ranger with the National Park Service (NPS). I worked in ten different locations, from Hawaii and Alaska to Florida and even a remote wilderness island in Lake Superior. I also worked a stint in DC at the Interior Department, for a total of thirty-seven years with the NPS.

Q: Wonderful. Now, during that time, were you involved in activities similar to the volunteerism for which you won the award?

CASE: No, not really. I was employed in a full-time position, and I had little time to volunteer outside of volunteer activities to support my children's school and extracurricular activities.

Q: Your SOSA award relates to bicycling. When did you get into bicycling? Was it just in Ireland, or how did that happen?

CASE: I got into bicycling when I lived in Hawaii, and I participated in several triathlons, biathlons, and various bike races. Since then, it has expanded to my primary mode of transportation. This project in Ireland was a perfect fit for several reasons.

Q: When did you and your family begin in the Foreign Service?

CASE: In 2013, my wife called me at work and said, "You need to sit down because I have something to tell you, I've been offered a job with the Foreign Service. I told her that she should call them back and tell them she will take it. She then asked what will I do? I replied that I would retire.

Q: Was she hired for a specialty

CASE: Yes, it was in IT, computers, radios and the like.

Q: Where did you go first?

CASE: We were first in Lomé, Togo in West Africa.

Q: Was that the first time you went abroad?

CASE: No, I had been abroad several other times before, mostly on bicycle trips and touring. I've been on many bicycle trips in Europe, but this was our first time in Africa.

Q: Okay. Were you able to continue bicycling in Togo?

CASE: Yes, but it wasn't easy. The roads were mostly gravel/dirt and were not compatible with any kind of long-distance road bicycling.

Q: Then were there any other activities you were involved in while you were in Lomé that might have been related to volunteerism.

CASE: Yes, I volunteered for a nonprofit organization that made several items out of recycled plastic water sachets. They made trash cans, purses, bags, all kinds of things, and I helped them translate their website from French to English. I volunteered for them for about a year.

Q: Did you see improvements in their marketing and so on from the time you were there?

CASE: I really couldn't tell, I wasn't involved in that part of the business.

Q: Then moving on, what was the next tour?

CASE: The next tour was in Vienna, Austria.

Q: Well, that would be a place where you could continue your biking interest.

CASE: It was, and it was great, because I did a lot of bicycling, but I also took a job with the State Department while I was there, so it limited the amount of time I could get out on my bike.

Q: What were you doing?

CASE: I worked for the embassy, mostly at the United Nations, as a counter-narcotics specialist.

Q: Oh, interesting.

CASE: It was a very interesting position, and it was my first position with the Department of State.

Q: Interesting, was it difficult to adjust to the State Department?

CASE: Yes, it was a different culture than the NPS.

Q: Okay, how long did you stay in Vienna?

CASE: We were there for two years, then we moved to Zagreb, Croatia.

Q: Then, similarly, what occupied you there?

CASE: Mostly bicycling and sailing. I took sailing lessons, and I sailed most summers with friends and family

Q: So, you did not work while you were in Zagreb?

CASE: Right, I was too busy enjoying retirement.

Q: When did you get to Dublin?

CASE: Following our assignment in Croatia, we moved to Dublin. It was during Covid, and I was looking for things to do to keep myself occupied when I discovered a newspaper article about this bicycle shop that was rehabilitating used bicycles to donate to Ukrainian refugees. I thought, yeah, that is something that interests me in several ways.

Q: Did you have repair skills?

CASE: I had some, yes. Paul, who was the owner of the bike shop and created this bicycle rehabilitation program, The Good Bike Project, Paul was an ex-professional

bicyclist from Ireland and he taught me a number of skills. So, the two of us worked together on this project.

Q: Were there others on the project while you were there?

CASE: On and off, they would come in, work for a few days, leave. But primarily it was the two of us.

Q: How did the program start?

CASE: Paul was asked by a local if he could provide used bicycles to a couple of Ukrainian refugees. When Paul delivered the bicycles, he was so impressed with the impact these donated bicycles offered that he said, "I need to keep this up," and so he did. I honestly don't know how he survived financially, but he provided a lot of good will and "freedom" for those from Ukraine seeking shelter from the war.

Q: Okay, where did the bicycles come from? Principally, people donated them in Ireland, or were you beginning to get some from other places as well?

CASE: Totally from Ireland. Once word spread folks started dropping them off by the dozens. The bikes came from garages, from attics, from backyards, from folks who upgraded to new bicycles. People were very generous.

Q: And I imagine most of them were three speed or one speed, or were they racing bikes?

CASE: Donations ran the whole gamut. Many of the bicycles we gave away were for kids and ranged from the Strider bikes to multi-speed road bikes, and their condition when they were donated was all over the map as well.

Q: And all of them were donated?

CASE: All of them were donated. We didn't buy a single bike. We did buy some parts and materials, and the Red Cross for Ireland donated funds to purchase parts, helmets, and other safety equipment. Pirelli Tire Company, out of Italy, donated hundreds of tires for the bikes. We also received many donations of money and parts. People who brought in bicycles to donate would often throw sixty, eighty euros at Paul and say this is for spare parts.

Q: To continue, how did you find other sponsors?

CASE: Word of mouth, primarily. The project took some time to germinate, but Ireland is a small country, and so word traveled fast. After a year or so a program was set up at the local jail, where a group of inmates worked on bicycles after intensive training from Paul. We sent to this prison program some of our donated bikes that were the worst of the worst and they returned them looking as if they were new. This program is still going.

Q: Oh, so it has sustainability?

CASE: Yes, and it has been expanded to include all refugees and those in need of transportation.

Q: Did it expand beyond just your one colleague in terms of workers?

CASE: Yes, prior to my departure a Ukrainian refugee came on board, and the occasional volunteer will stop in to help out.

Q: Oh, I see.

CASE: When I left, there was a Ukrainian refugee who was working with us, and he's been there for quite a while, so he's giving back to his country from afar.

Q: Then you were in Ireland for two years, three years?

CASE: Three years.

Q: And during that whole period, you were working on the bicycle project?

CASE: I worked with this program for about 2 years.

Q: Do you know how someone got the idea of nominating you for this award?

CASE: I don't know. I received an email with the subject title of something like, "you won" and of course I immediately thought it was spam because you never really win anything, so I was ready to delete it. Fortunately, I didn't.

Q: Did you receive the news that you had won the award while you were in Ireland?

CASE: At the time, we were in Islamabad, Pakistan.

Q: Oh, so you had already moved on.

CASE: Yes, we had moved on.

Q: Now, so you're nominated. You go to Pakistan, and then you go back to the State Department to receive the award. What was the ceremony like? There were other winners, so on. How did that work?

CASE: The ceremony took place at State Department headquarters. It was impressive.

Q: Did they ask you to speak?

CASE: They did, and I struggled with putting together something meaningful. On the flight to DC I was gathering my thoughts when I took a break to watch again an old movie called, "The Bucket List", with Jack Nicholson and Morgan Freeman. There was a scene where Jack and Morgan were on top of the one of the pyramids in Egypt, and Morgan said something like, "Before you get to heaven, or as you approach heaven, you're asked by the gods two questions before they let you in, and one was, have you found joy in your life, and the second one, has your life brought joy to others?" And I thought that was so profound, and it fits perfectly. So, I trashed my draft speech, and that's what I shared during the ceremony.

Q: That's wonderful. After the ceremony, were there any other activities?

CASE: We had a luncheon at a local nonprofit.

Q: That's fine. Then you take your award back with you. Have you stayed in touch with the founder of the organization?

CASE: I did. I am very close to Paul, who still runs The Good Bike Project. When I got back to Islamabad, I sent my award check to The Good Bike Project.

Q: How much was it, if I could ask?

CASE: I think it was close to \$3,000.

Q: Are you still in the Foreign Service now?

CASE: We are, right now we're in Santiago, Chile.

Q: That's quite a nice place. But have you been able to continue any of your bicycling or any of your bike repair?

CASE: Not the bike repair stuff, but I do bicycle often. Instead of bike repair I'm volunteering now for Habitat for Humanity.

Q: All right, in conclusion, are there any recommendations you would give to people about your experience, if they were interested in volunteering, and so on.

CASE: I think you need to find something you're interested in doing or learning how to do and donate your time to making someone's life just a bit better.

Q: Sure, have you thought about nominating someone?

CASE: I thought about it, but I haven't taken any action to date.

Q: Any other parting thoughts?

CASE: No, I am just surprised and pleased that I was recognized for possibly having brought joy to someone's life.

Q: That's fabulous. Then I thank you on behalf of AAFSW and ADST for recording your experience with the SOSA Award.

End of interview