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

LAURI FITZ-PEGADO

Interviewed by: Mark Tauber
Initial interview date: January 31, 2017
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INTERVIEW

Q: Where were you born and raised?

FITZ-PEGADO: I was born in Washington, D.C., so I am a rare Washingtonian. I started school in New York at P.S. 140 in Jamaica, Queens, New York, and actually we moved back to Washington, D.C. when I was in second grade. I went to Anne Beers Elementary School in southeast Washington, D.C. Then I moved to Silver Spring, Maryland when I was in the seventh grade. I attended public schools through high school.

Q: What year was that?

FITZ-PEGADO: 1966. During desegregation. I integrated during my junior high and high school years.

Q: Good. You were born in Washington, D.C. and now you're already moving around a lot. Tell me a bit about your immediate family.

FITZ-PEGADO: Okay. My father and mother met at Howard University.

Q: So, were they also Washingtonians?

FITZ-PEGADO: My dad, Norman Fitz, was born in New York City, but grew up primarily in North Carolina. He went to Howard University on a track scholarship. My mom, Joyce Mayes Fitz, is from the area, Prince George's County. They met at Howard University, a Historically Black University [HBCU]. Both were first generation to go to college. My dad is kind of a renaissance man. He's still alive and well. He learned to play tennis in college and got quite good at it and was a ranked amateur tennis player most of his life into his seventies. That's not his profession. It is one of his passions. He also was an actor; he has a deep bass voice like James Earl Jones. He acted with the Howard Players, and specifically with Toni Morrison. I think in those days he decided early that this was not a profession in which he was going to be able to earn a living and support a family. In those days, there were few Black actors like Sydney Poitier who could make it in the acting field.

He actually went to medical school for two years in Europe, in Switzerland and in Germany. There were few schools in the United States that accepted Black people for medical school and the spots were limited at the HBCUs that had medical schools. Unfortunately, he was not able to complete his studies, came back to the U.S. and began working in labs at Mount Sinai Hospital in New York and at the University of Maryland. He spent many years in government at the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration in Fisheries and the Weather Service, part of the Department of Commerce. He stayed in government and he actually retired just a couple of years before I was sworn in as a presidential appointee, assistant secretary and director general of the United States and foreign commercial service. That was quite a moment for us.

Q: Interesting. And how about your mother?

FITZ-PEGADO: My mom was a public school teacher her entire career. She taught seventh grade English. That was her favorite grade to teach. I think she taught eighth or ninth grade at a couple of schools, but she never really liked teaching other grade levels that much. After she retired from teaching seventh grade English at Eastern Jr. High School in Silver Spring, Maryland, she also taught in several schools in Washington, D.C. She went back as a regular substitute teacher for little ones in an elementary school only a few blocks from our house. She never thought she'd like it, but she loved it, so she taught kindergarten as a substitute teacher for several years. I always thought that she resembled the Italian actress, Sophia Loren, when she was young. My dad was quite attractive as well. I always thought they made a striking couple. So, those are my parents.

Q: Okay. Brothers and sisters?

FITZ-PEGADO: Two brothers, Neal and Bruce Fitz. Both live in the area. One has taught special needs children for over twenty years, and the other one is a certified pro tennis teacher. I'm the oldest and the only girl.

Q: Just one thing makes me curious about your father's tennis: Was it also a means of earning money? In other words, once you get up to a certain level in tennis, as I understand it, there are purses.

FITZ-PEGADO: I don't think there is any or much money awarded at amateur tournaments. My dad did accumulate dozens of trophies, silver cups, trays and sometimes nice new tennis gear. They were all displayed in our family home where dusting and cleaning the tarnished silver ones was a chore I never welcomed.

Q: Okay. So, now, why did the family move to New York City for two years?

FITZ-PEGADO: It's a good question. I was so young. We had family there, and we lived with family in Jamaica, Queens, New York, for the first year or so and then in our own apartment. I think my dad worked at a hospital, at Mount Sinai Hospital in New York. I think working in the lab or something like that. My mom taught at a school on Long

Island at the time. So, probably opportunity and family and that kind of thing was the reason we lived in New York for a few years when I was young.

Q: But then they moved back, first to Washington, D.C. and then Silver Spring, Maryland. And that was when you mentioned integration. So, what did that mean exactly for you?

FITZ-PEGADO: That meant that most of the time I was the only one in the room. The only African-American in most of my classes. I actually took a bus to my high school with the Black kids from a neighborhood close to mine. I should say that we were "bussed" to the prestigious Bethesda-Chevy Chase High School. But I was the only African-American child in my class, or one of few. My graduating class had over 500 students and I doubt we were twenty—but that was during the time when integration was just starting to take hold in Montgomery County.

Q: The other interesting thing about that moment for Silver Spring, Maryland was that it was growing as a town outside of Washington, D.C., if I remember right.

FITZ-PEGADO: Absolutely. My neighborhood was an all-white neighborhood. We were the only Black family on the street. A family across the street used to stare at us. People change and grow, which is a great thing to happen—but I remember that the children were afraid to look at us so they used to hide behind trees to peek around the trunk to get a look at us. I'm not sure what their parents had told them, but not something good. They had instilled some fear or some trepidation in them, so it took a while before those kids would play with us. It was a weird experience.

Q: Given all the red-lining and the difficulties that African-Americans had in getting homes in white areas, did your parents ever talk about that? Did they feel that they had had unusual difficulty in getting the house they were interested in?

FITZ-PEGADO: You know, I didn't know then that it was called red-lining. But I did walk across an old wooden bridge above the railroad tracks that divided our white neighborhood from the Black neighborhood, where I caught the bus with the other Black kids. We didn't talk about it much. My father particularly was a trailblazer. I can imagine that if there had been some objection to us moving into the neighborhood, he wasn't going to accept it. The people from whom we bought the house were very open and welcoming people. There was no issue with them selling the house to us. The neighbors, generally speaking, were very friendly, with the exception of that family across the street. More than any grand racism, I think it was just unfamiliarity. My parents lived in that house until my mother died in 2014, for over fifty years.

Q: Okay. So, let's go back to junior high school in Silver Spring, Maryland, and you're the oldest in your family, and your brothers are all following you at some point. But how did you feel in school?

FITZ-PEGADO: Well, I should have mentioned that at Anne Beers Elementary School, a life-forming thing that happened to me—a couple of things. One was that we were

offered the opportunity in third grade, as eight or nine-year-old children, to study Spanish.

Q: Very interesting. Because at that time it would have been rare to start a foreign language that early.

FITZ-PEGADO: Exactly. So, I remember we had a visiting Spanish teacher. I don't know if it was two times a week or three times a week. I was very excited about studying Spanish. And my mother was a Spanish minor in college. She was always very interested in Spanish, travel, and other cultures. She didn't speak it terribly well—since she was really focused on learning to read and comprehend the language—but she was somewhat conversant and she always liked the language. She went to Mexico with some colleagues, teachers on a summer trip, and I remember being impressed by that and by the photos, postcards, and things she brought home from Mexico. You know, the few trinkets that she was able to buy for us in Taxco, and the pictures from Xochimilco. She was so thrilled with that trip.

And that was about the time I was studying Spanish for the first time. She met a Mexican woman on the trip, who was also a teacher, and they became friends and occasional pen-pals. One day, this woman came to Washington, D.C. for a course that she was taking and she came to our home when we lived in southeast, D.C. She was very friendly. Her name was Alma Equiluz. And Alma told my mother that I could come for the summer to Mexico and stay with her. That's another story. We'll come back to what happened with that. But this was part of what influenced my interest in language and foreign culture—my mother, the Mexico trip, and the fact that I was taking Spanish in elementary school. And I was pretty good at it. So, it became something that I enjoyed and looked forward to.

Q: Did it continue beyond third grade?

FITZ-PEGADO: I took Spanish from third grade through college. I majored in Hispanic Studies at Vassar College. It became an interest, a passion—learning about the cultures, speaking the language well, having inspiring teachers who appreciated the fact that when you learn a language that early, if you study hard and you emulate the pronunciation of your teachers, you don't end up with an "American" accent. I think my teachers really appreciated that as I grew up and continued to study, that my accent was very good. I had teachers from different countries—a Peruvian teacher, a Spaniard, and a Colombian. I didn't have, really, an identifiable accent.

Q: And you're right, all of those three will have somewhat or very different accents. And of course, the other great thing is, you started so young that your ear was already attuned to the sounds of Spanish, so it would be easier for you to pick them up beginning as an elementary school student, through secondary and then college.

FITZ-PEGADO: Exactly.

Q: Well, let's stay in elementary school for a minute then, since it's in Washington, D.C. Was it in other ways an interesting formative experience?

FITZ-PEGADO: Absolutely. It was a very good public school in southeast D.C., "on the other side of the river," the way predominantly Black neighborhoods on the other shore of the dividing line, the Anacostia River, were referred to. It was probably the only time in my entire academic career when I was in a predominantly Black environment. There were Black students and only a few white students. Oddly, I never had a Black teacher, from second grade through sixth grade. Our church, St. Timothy's Episcopal Church, one block from my school, was very integrated.

Q: Had that been the result, the recent result of Brown [v. Board of Education] and the subsequent decisions? Because Washington, D.C. was one of the jurisdictions that were required to desegregate based on court order.

FITZ-PEGADO: Well, I think it was because of the location of the area that our school was not very integrated yet– it was southeast Washington, D.C.—between Alabama Avenue and Southern Avenue, near Fort DuPont Park, near the D.C.–Maryland dividing line, part of Prince George's County. I benefited from a very good primary education. I think it instilled some sense of confidence and pride. When I think of going into seventh grade and the rest of my education, had I not had that degree of cultural confidence from being around other Black students and having a support network of families, I'm not sure I would have been successful as I was often the only Black child in my classes from seventh grade pretty much through twelfth grade. I mean, there might have been one or two others, but very few.

The other thing that I think helped to formulate who I am and how I think and function, was the fact that I studied ballet. I started ballet class when I was in New York, when I was four or five, but it was just recreational, a once-a-week type of thing where many mothers took their daughters. During that time, in the late 1950s and 1960s, not many Black mothers did, however. My mother was a woman, way before her time, who had a passion for Spanish as well as ballet.

When we moved back to Washington, D.C., I went to a school that is legendary. It's called the Jones-Haywood School of Ballet. It's still at the corner of Georgia Avenue and Delafield Place Northwest on an historic D.C. trail. The school was founded in 1941 by Doris Jones and Claire Haywood, two Black women determined to establish a school for children of color to train in classical ballet. I entered that school, enrolled there probably when I was about eight or nine, when we moved back to D.C. And it became a very serious pursuit for me. My mother used to take me on the bus, two or three times a week, from southeast D.C. all the way up to northwest D.C., which took two buses and at least an hour or hour and a half in rain, sleet or snow, sometimes.

Q: And she was working.

FITZ-PEGADO: She was teaching every day and I was going to school. Many times, my younger brother Bruce, the one who's closest in age to me, would have to come with us and sit on the steps leading to the dance studio, watching the hour and a half ballet class. Then we took the bus all the way back home. We did that for quite a few years, from the time I was eight or nine until I was eleven or twelve when we moved to Silver Spring, Maryland.

I think on Saturdays, sometimes, my dad would take me, but my mother didn't drive at the time. That's why we were all on the bus. There was only one car anyway. So, I know that it built the core of my sense of discipline, strength, love for the arts, convictions, love of music—classical music, particularly—fortitude, you name it. Rare lessons learned by a Black child through a white, classical art form in the 1960s and early 1970s.

Q: Did the ballet class also offer you a different network or a different group of kids? Did you see them beyond ballet?

FITZ-PEGADO: Yes, I did. I had a core group of friends, girls and boys. Surprisingly there were Black boys in our ballet classes as well. We were very close-knit, and we performed in the Capitol Ballet Company, a pre-professional company established by Miss Jones and Miss Haywood to provide us with performance experience. In addition to our regular dance classes, there were rigorous rehearsals and performances. We traveled to several HBCUs to perform. We traveled outside of D.C. I particularly remember performing at Fisk University, Spelman College, and locally at Howard University. I also remember performing at one of the Nixon inaugural parties! We were also featured in a movie, *Sincerely the Blues*. I auditioned and was selected to perform in the inaugural opera, Beatrix Cenci [by Alberto Ginastera] at the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts in Washington, D.C. when I was sixteen years old. I began teaching the "baby class" after being trained by my teachers when I was fourteen; I taught the younger kids, the four and five-year-olds on Saturdays. I earned a little bit of spending money. I also had a Ford Foundation scholarship, which was awarded by the School of American Ballet [SAB].

I was thinking about this the other day. George Balanchine was really quite a progressive guy. Besides having Arthur Mitchell as the first principal, Black male dancer in a major ballet company in America, the New York City Ballet, he also embraced and mentored my ballet teachers, two Black women. Balanchine visited our dance school and sent Arthur Mitchell to teach us and check our progress as scholarship recipients. Our teachers were trailblazers, opening this ballet school and launching a ballet company in the nation's capital. There are so many notable women and men dancers who benefitted from training at that school—Chita Rivera studied ballet at the Jones-Haywood Dance School. Miss Jones took her to New York City to the School of American Ballet to audition for their summer program where Balanchine saw her audition. Several other Ford Foundation scholarship students attended the SAB summer programs, quite a rare opportunity for kids like us.

So, there are lots of former students of Jones-Haywood Dance School who have achieved stellar professional careers in dance companies, on Broadway, as choreographers, artistic directors, and instructors. The current owner and director of the school is our former classmate and star of the Capitol Ballet, Sandra Fortune-Green, who was the first African American ballerina to compete in the prestigious International Dance Competition in Moscow, Russia and then in Varna, Bulgaria in the 1970s. Eighty years later, the school carries on, still recognized as among the pre-eminent training grounds for dancers of color. I have co-chaired the alumni committee for a decade and I also have taught there for the last four years. Our fundraisers have honored and featured Misty Copeland, Chita Rivera, and young dancers of color now at the New York City Ballet and the Washington Ballet.

Q: As you're talking about ballet, when you were a kid, were you thinking, "Maybe I could be a ballet dancer"?

FITZ-PEGADO: Sure, I was.

Q: I ask because ballet instructors can be very hard on kids, "You're okay, but where's the sweat? You're not really dancing if I don't see the sweat." You know, that kind of thing. Did you persevere and to what extent were you encouraged?

FITZ-PEGADO: Oh, yes, I definitely persevered. All of us did. It wasn't an option for us; it was a way of life. These teachers were that kind of teacher. There was the cane, there was the, "You better sweat, you better be here on time." Oh, yeah. There was major discipline and commitment, which resulted in us becoming very good dancers.

Look. There were so many realities of the time. We're talking about the late 1960s and 1970s, when things were quite different in terms of ballet. There was no Misty Copeland. There was Arthur Mitchell, and there were some extremely talented and deserving Black ballerinas who struggled to have a career in the U.S. and often found more acceptance in Europe. For Black ballerinas, it has only been in the last ten, fifteen, twenty years that ballet has started to evolve, to open its doors slightly. So, it was kind of unheard of to have an African American ballerina. That's why it was all so important—Sandra Fortune-Green's accomplishments at international ballet competitions in Varna, Bulgaria and in Moscow, Russia, and Sylvester Campbell, her partner, who was then with the Royal Danish Ballet, and us actually having those Ford Foundation scholarships from Mr. Balanchine, mentoring our teachers, providing Arthur Mitchell as a visiting teacher on occasion and a role model, and facilitating the funding for us to study at Jones-Haywood Dance School and at the renowned School of American Ballet.

Q: Wow. So, you went?

FITZ-PEGADO: I never went to New York City for a summer session at the School of American Ballet, but several others of my classmates, recipients also of the scholarship did go. I was several years younger than others in our group. My dad also wanted me to

study acting, so I spent one of my summers in acting classes and ironically in a dancing role in the traveling street theater as part of the George Washington University Workshop for Careers in the Arts, the precursor to the Duke Ellington School for the Arts. We performed throughout neighborhoods in D.C. We also performed in New York City on the square outside the Lincoln Center and the School of American Ballet.

My performing days after the Capitol Ballet were at Vassar College, and moonlighting with Ballet Santo Domingo when I was on my first tour as a junior officer in the Foreign Service in Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic.

Q: A more general question: since it never got out of your system, and you're always sort of a part, even on the margins, of ballet, was it that finally positions opened for African-American or dancers of color in traditional ballet, or was it that other kinds of African-American dance kind of broke the mold, like—

FITZ-PEGADO: Many other genres of dance are rooted in African dance—tap, jazz, Afro-fusion, modern dance, hip hop, break dancing, popping, other types of street dance, some Latin dance styles—

Q: And break dancing? Did it then open the way for younger, talented dancers to do traditional ballet to do classical?

FITZ-PEGADO: That's a good question. More than other dance genres, break dancing and hip-hop, I think the creation of the Dance Theatre of Harlem [DTH] in 1968-69 by Arthur Mitchell, a Black classical ballet company, changed the face of ballet being an exclusive, white, elite, European art form. He established a professional ballet company with dancers of color, when much of the Euro-centric ballet world was unwilling to accept and include well-trained capable ballet dancers of color.

But, I trained at the Dance Theatre of Harlem during my winter break from college in 1994-95, which is another story. Mr. Mitchell was teaching a master class and found me in his class, during a visit of DTH to Vassar College, and said, "What are you doing here? Why aren't you dancing?" Because he had taught me at Jones-Haywood when he would come to D.C. to make sure that we still qualified for the School of American Ballet's Ford Foundation scholarships, he recognized me and the Jones-Haywood ballet training. So, he invited me, or better said, ordered me to report to DTH during my time off in December-January at Vassar my sophomore year. My father allowed me to go, but said, "You go during the break, but you're going back to school." I always knew that being a professional dancer was not an option in my family, even if there were more opportunities for me at white companies or to stay at DTH. I will never know; you never really know. I should say that I did have the opportunity, in addition to dancing with the Capitol Ballet as a teenager, to dance with a professional ballet company when I was posted in the Dominican Republic with the Ballet Santo Domingo.

Q: No. So many things go into that.

FITZ-PEGADO: That's right. Injuries, body type, that sort of thing. But when I was there for those months, Mitchell's whole thing with me was, "You need to be thinner," and I was pretty damn thin at the time, "You need this, you need that." So, he really did stick with the traditional. He was, after all, for the first two years of starting DTH still a principal dancer at the New York City Ballet with Balanchine who supported him starting the Dance Theatre of Harlem. Mr. Mitchell helped to change and open things up for dancers of color, and a lot of former DTH dancers continued that vision in other places, and I think that some companies started to be more accepting. I also think it requires the evolution of people's thinking. Mitchell was motivated to start DTH after Martin Luther King, Jr. was shot. It was a time when civil rights laws and desegregation were just getting started. At that time, there were a limited number of classically-trained ballet dancers of color. There was nowhere for Black students to train; they had nowhere to go, unless it was to Jones-Haywood Dance School, a few other Black dance schools or some white schools that were more accepting in the later 1960s and 1970s.

There are many Black ballet dancers now, but the struggle continues for them to land in predominantly white companies, to secure principal roles, to choreograph, direct schools and become artistic directors of ballet companies.

I think that a lot of other dance genres—breakdancing, hip hop, jazz, tap, African dance have been open to African-Americans and people of color but often not without experiencing discrimination, but much less than the struggle of ballet dancers—particularly older tap dancers. Many classically-trained Black ballet students were even directed and encouraged to change over to other dance forms. Has the ballet world changed so much? It is evolving, but has a long way to go.

Q: Oh, you're right, absolutely.

FITZ-PEGADO: You know, whether they say Misty Copeland has too many curves and is too muscular, should not be the question. She just has a little bit of a different body type. The question should be her talent, execution, performance, and ability. Classical ballet has evolved somewhat in what the traditional expectations and practices are.

Q: That's a fascinating aspect of your life, and obviously one that's very formative because of the discipline, because of the commitment and the network you built as a kid with other kids that had the passion for this. Alright, now let's go on to junior high.

FITZ-PEGADO: Okay. Junior high was at Montgomery Hills Junior High School, which has been converted to something else, now, a Hebrew school, I think.

Q: Oh, like a day school?

FITZ-PEGADO: Something like that. But it was in my neighborhood in Silver Spring, Maryland, after we had moved, and a very good school. Very rigorous, academically. I think that truly did prepare me, and some of it was quite an awakening. I had had a good elementary, kindergarten through sixth grade education, but junior high was challenging.

I think that some of the backgrounds of the kids—as I said, I was usually the only African American, in my classes. There were a couple of Latinos and there were some African Americans in the school but few in my classes, so it was challenging, but very interesting. I made some friends, and once again, I think, the fact that I had ballet class, with Black students, made a difference.

Q: Was there ballet at the high school, or did you still go to the ballet school?

FITZ-PEGADO: I still went to the ballet school. So, my whole schedule was going to school, coming home, grabbing a snack, getting on the bus, and going to ballet. Three, four, five times a week. Sometimes six times a week. So, that was really my life. I didn't engage in a lot of other extracurricular activities.

Q: It's not unlike any child engaged in an art or a sport, where seventy-five percent or more of your time, you're devoted to it.

FITZ-PEGADO: Right. And there's not a whole lot of time for other stuff. So, that's what I did. That started at eleven—I was almost twelve—and that's what I did through seventh, eighth, and ninth grade. Now, what other activities? I did run for office.

Q: Wow. I mean, as the only African American kid in the school—

FITZ-PEGADO: Not the only one, but one of very few. I ran on a ticket.

Q: They had tickets in junior high school? Wow.

FITZ-PEGADO: Yes. One of my good friends said, "Come on, Lauri, you can be a parliamentarian," or something. Maybe secretary/parliamentarian. And we won, so I did serve in an official position in junior high school. Other than that, not much. I wasn't a cheerleader—

Q: Well, at the time—

FITZ-PEGADO: Yeah. Right. I remember going to games. I used to like going to basketball games and football games when I could, but I didn't have a lot of time.

Q: No, I imagine. Between homework and ballet, what's left?

FITZ-PEGADO: Right. So that was junior high. And then in high school, as I said, my father didn't take no for an answer and always wanted the best for us, which was great. I was supposed to go to the assigned high school for my area which was Montgomery Blair High School. But the best high school in the county, which was outside of my area, was Bethesda-Chevy Chase High School [B-CC]. So, my dad wanted me to go to B-CC. And, in order to go to B-CC, if you were not in that school district, you had to have a reason. So, he told them that I wanted to take Russian.

Q: Oh my god.

FITZ-PEGADO: And Russian wasn't offered at Blair, but at B-CC, and he argued that I was studying ballet and the Russians and George Balanchine and blah, blah, blah, and that I should be accepted to B-CC. So, that was the argument he used, and it worked.

Q: But then you're stuck with taking Russian?

FITZ-PEGADO: Well, guess what? When I got there, there was no Russian offered. Something happened with the Russian teacher. So, I didn't have to take Russian! I took German instead and continued studying Spanish.

Q: Really? Because you loved Spanish.

FITZ-PEGADO: Yes, I kept taking Spanish classes, but I took German because I was supposed to take Russian to justify my transfer to B-CC. I had to take another language so I said, "Okay, I'll take German." I didn't want to take French, so I took German. That's when I started studying German, in the tenth grade.

Q: Not an easy language.

FITZ-PEGADO: No, but I liked it; I had a great German teacher. I loved her, Barbara English. So, there I was at B-CC taking German, and it so happened that my best friend in junior high school, Bob Kroll, who was a basketball player, also managed to transfer to B-CC. That is when I crossed the bridge at the top of the hill on my street and was bussed to B-CC with other Black kids who lived on the other side of the railroad tracks.

Q: Ah. Athletics?

FITZ-PEGADO: So, that was great. The two of us were there together.

Q: That is so interesting. Okay. Now, go ahead. I'll hold my question for another minute or so.

FITZ-PEGADO: But I learned a lot on that bus. One of the guys said he was a Black Panther. So, he used to talk a lot of rhetoric, or talk a lot of "smack" as they say, on the back of the bus about the Panthers. It was really an education for all of us, because all the Black kids ironically sat in the back of the bus.

Q: Oh, self-segregation.

FITZ-PEGADO: Yes. We sat in the back of the bus, and white kids would get on the bus and wouldn't dare come to the back of the bus where we were. It was just a process, I think, that we all went through in those days, in those times. And then we'd get to school and I'd go off to my classes, they'd go off to theirs, and unfortunately, as I said, I was usually the only Black kid in my classes.

Q: Now, there were other kids of your age in your grade, but you were in a class—were the classes streamed, so that's why you were the only kid?

FITZ-PEGADO: Well, I don't like to say that, but that was unfortunately the truth. You know, I was streamed into the higher-level classes for whatever reason, and they were in different classes. So, I didn't see them except for a few in P.E. [physical education] or until I got back on the bus. Or, no, I shouldn't say that. There was always the issue of lunch.

The lunch issue was always complicated. Where do you sit? Do you sit with the Black kids at the Black table? Do you dare to sit with some of your white friends who you're in class with? In the morning, when I got to school, I'd go to the library and I'd often study with my white classmates.

Q: Naturally.

FITZ-PEGADO: We were in the same classes together; we're trying to do well on tests. I would get off the bus and scurry to the library. I don't know where everybody else went; I didn't see them in the library. So, at lunchtime, here you are. "Lauri, come on over. Why are you sitting over there?" And now that is happening for my daughter in her school. All these years later, I hear kids talking about it now. What do you do? Where do you sit?

Q: Just by contrast, very quickly, I went to an integrated high school because there was only one. It was about maybe thirty, thirty-five percent African American, about fifty percent white, and about fifteen percent other, all different kinds of other. And the tables at lunch were pretty segregated. Most white kids sat with white kids, most Black kids sat with Black kids. The integrated tables were the kids in the band, and the band was big. There were about a hundred kids in the band class. That table, and the table where the athletes sat, those were the only ones that were integrated.

If you were in the band or on one of the teams, you weren't sitting separately. Which was kind of interesting. In other words, there were ways to integrate kids, but it wasn't simply by putting them just in the same school. They needed to have something more to be part of together, otherwise they just sat apart.

FITZ-PEGADO: Yeah.

Q: So, anyway, how did you square that circle?

FITZ-PEGADO: I don't know. I just navigated it. I think that most of the time, I sat with the Black kids, and was in the library with white kids. Whatever it was, I just managed to navigate the waters, which is not always easy for a lot of people, but thank goodness, I was able to do that.

Q: Now, talk a little about the high school itself. How large, and what sort of position did it have in the community, that sort of thing?

FITZ-PEGADO: Well, Bethesda-Chevy Chase High School was ranked among the top high schools in the country at that time. Highly competitive, a great school. I don't know what the percentage was of people of color, but there were few of us African Americans and a few Latinos. There were a couple of Africans, but generally speaking, it was a big, white, upper-class high school.

Now, it has been renovated and expanded and still has a very good reputation. It's gone through its ups and downs, but right now I think it's also still ranked pretty high in the country as a public school. I attended the B-CC during its heyday. Sports-wise, very good teams. Excellent football team. *Remember the Titans*, that movie, based on a true story of students at T.C. Williams High School in Alexandria, Virginia, took place at about the same year and the same time that I was at Bethesda-Chevy Chase High School—the football team, relationships between the Black and white kids—those were all the issues we had. I love that movie because it just brings back real memories of high school and of that time.

Q: Okay. And then still, most of the time through high school, your time is gobbled up by school, ballet. Did ballet taper off at some point?

FITZ-PEGADO: No, it never did, not through high school. I loved drama, and I took a drama class. My father was still acting. My father was still playing tennis and acting. He was in a couple of Arena Stage productions [at the Mead Center for American Theater]. He was in Washington Theatre Club plays. He was in Summer Stock at Wellfleet. He did mostly Greek tragedies and Shakespeare. I learned Greek tragedies and Shakespeare through his acting because he took me to ballet when he had rehearsals at the same time. And I would learn the plays when I'd have to cue him his lines in the car as we were driving.

That was kind of the deal. "I'm on my way to rehearsal, you're on your way to ballet. You're gonna have to cue me." So, I learned Shakespeare, I learned Greek tragedy through the plays he was in. Occasionally, I'd have to sit and wait for him to finish rehearsal before I got driven home.

So, I was very much exposed to theater, and I took drama in high school. My drama teacher, P.J. Dalla Santa was very good. He encouraged me a lot.

Q: And of course, learning drama makes you even more valuable as a ballet dancer.

FITZ-PEGADO: That's true. But I remember really loving it. There were so many things I loved. I loved my Spanish teacher, Consuelo Eddy. I loved my German teacher, I loved my drama teacher. I had really good mentors, role models. I had very encouraging teachers, and some that were not as encouraging, but that was probably more of the exception. I remember trying to get into an AP [Advanced Placement] class, and my

parents said, "Try out for AP English." You know, my mother was an English teacher, I loved to read.

They didn't let me in the class. I still to this day don't know why, except that I was told by somebody, "Your IQ [intelligence quotient] isn't high enough." I never quite believed that one, but I didn't have many real examples of blatant prejudice or things that scarred me through my high school years. That was one—thinking I wasn't smart enough to be in an AP class.

But, I took a drama class and even performed in a couple of plays that were a challenge for me because the rehearsals and performances sometimes conflicted with my dance classes. I remember getting in trouble at ballet school. Acting was something I was enjoying, toying with a bit. But after high school, I didn't do anything with it. I now know that it has helped in dance performance and, in general, public speaking.

Q: Okay. Once again, an interesting, useful discipline to try and have a feeling for.

FITZ-PEGADO: Sure. But I never quite thought, "Oh, wow, I'd love to be an actress." I did think, "Oh, I'd like to be a dancer." So, different passions there.

Q: And you also knew that even if you did become a dancer, you would have a relatively limited career.

FITZ-PEGADO: Right.

Q: What did you think would happen after the end of your time as a stage dancer?

FITZ-PEGADO: Well, I didn't ever really entertain that because my dad made it really clear to me, "You're going to college. You are not going to become a professional ballet dancer."

Q: Right. You're not just going to leave high school and—

FITZ-PEGADO: And get an audition somewhere. Right. I mean, he was pretty clear. I knew I was going to college. I had been on a high-level academic track all my life, I was intellectually curious, and I knew the importance of having a degree and all of those things. So, I knew I was going to college, and I knew I wasn't going to major in dance. An interesting and positive change is occuring in the dance world today. More dancers are attending college at universities with superb dance programs. They are studying a wide range of subjects—arts administration, science, psychology, physical therapy—related to dance that will give them optional career opportunities post-professional dance careers. Some are even able to pursue professional dance with companies in commercial dance, in theater after completing a college degree, or get degrees online. That wasn't the case in my time.

Q: Okay. Now, before we leave high school, you had mentioned the visit to Mexico with this Mexican teacher that your mother got to know. Is this a good time?

FITZ-PEGADO: Sure, I can go back to that. I was still living in southeast Washington, D.C., and my mother had been to Mexico. The lady had come the following year. I'd met her, and she'd invited me to visit her at her home in Mexico City. I must have been nine, maybe, and I was supposed to go for the summer. My mother had kind of prepped me and we had gotten my suitcase ready. She explained that I was going to be living with Alma and that she had a son, who was my age, and that she lived with her mother. I was going to improve my Spanish and it was going to be a great experience. I had my pointe shoes. I remember I'd started on pointe, so I had my pointe shoes. I took these with me because, who knows, maybe you'll find something or do something or you might want to dance or whatever. Everything was ready. And I had told my friends in the neighborhood, "I'm going to Mexico."

And they were, "You're going where?"

"Mexico."

I remember one of the parents saying, "You're going to Mexico? Your mother's letting you go to Mexico by yourself?"

I said, "I'm staying with friends." I remember this conversation. So, I had a passport, everything. I was going alone, and Alma was going to pick me up at the other end. The day before I was supposed to be taken to the airport, the next morning, my mother got a phone call from Mexico saying, "Do not send your daughter." That was kind of it. And there was no other explanation. "Don't send your daughter." Turned out that poor Alma was in a car accident and was killed.

Q: Oh my God.

FITZ-PEGADO: The day before I was to arrive, someone had the presence of mind to call my mother and say, "Don't send the child." And to this day, I get chills thinking what would have happened to me if I had arrived in Mexico City, at the airport—

Q: And no one would know anything, because they wouldn't be there to pick you up, and, "Who's this American kid?"

FITZ-PEGADO: Right. It wasn't meant to be. I later went to Mexico for my second foreign service assignment, and I went to meet Alma's mother, and I met her son. It was a tough memory for her mother. I explained to her that I was the little girl who was supposed to come. Just such unbelievable circumstances.

Q: You're right. That was incredible. Well, on to a happier subject. You're proceeding through high school and you're thinking about college. How did you envision the college experience to be? What were you looking for?

FITZ-PEGADO: I don't know what I was looking for. When I think about it now, there was an attraction to going to an Ivy League school, probably because those were allegedly the best schools. You know, the best reputation, the best education. I knew I wasn't going to Howard. It was right here in town. My parents had gone there and they encouraged me to apply to schools outside of D.C., the Ivy League, and the Seven Sister schools. I had a neighbor across the street for whom I babysat, and she went to Vassar.

Q: Okay. And it was still all-girls at the time?

FITZ-PEGADO: No, not quite. It had admitted the first transfer group of guys, but it had not graduated a four-year class yet.

Q: And what year is this?

FITZ-PEGADO: 1973. So, there were men there who would graduate in 1974, as the first class with men who started as first years. So, my neighbor, Claudia Hannah, went to Vassar. I think her father taught at Vassar, and I think she actually lived across the street from the college in Poughkeepsie, New York for part of her life. She used to talk to me about Vassar. "Lauri, you really should apply to Vassar College." And I would listen to her, but it didn't really sink in. She started telling me that when I was babysitting for her, when I was like fourteen, fifteen years old and I wasn't really thinking about college.

Claudia Hannah had planted Vassar in my head. Sometimes when I was walking down the hall at B-CC, there were college recruiters there. B-CC had a really strong college recruitment program. This was a cream of the crop school, so there were eager college recruiters there.

I remember walking down the hall and this guy coming out of a door saying, "Why don't you come in and talk to me for a minute?" He was a recruiter, it wasn't like he was a predator or anything.

And so I said, "Okay." And I went in. His name was George Crowell. He was an associate dean at Vassar, and he talked to me about my grades—I was pretty much an A student—and what I wanted to do and what I liked. I said, "Yeah, I'll think about it." And he was Black.

Oh, I left out the fact that my father basically said to me, from the time I can remember, "If you don't get straight A's, you don't go to ballet."

Q: Wow. That's a major motivation.

FITZ-PEGADO: I remember crying when I got a B. I mean, I got a couple B's here and there, but I didn't get many, so that was kind of the deal. You know, if you can't keep your academics up, you don't go to that ballet school.

Q: Tiger papa.

FITZ-PEGADO: Right. Definitely a tiger papa. So, anyway, it served me well, and I applied to Vassar, Smith, Radcliffe—

Q: The Seven Sisters.

FITZ-PEGADO: Yeah. And Antioch.

Q: How did Antioch get in there?

FITZ-PEGADO: I think my mother had done a little research on Antioch. It was in Ohio then—I don't know why, but I applied to Antioch. I can't remember anywhere else. But, anyway, I ended up at Vassar.

Q: So, now, you got accepted at Vassar, and after all the talking-to's that you'd had, you basically decided, "Okay. I'm gonna go." Had you visited there?

FITZ-PEGADO: Nope.

Q: Okay, so you're going sight-unseen.

FITZ-PEGADO: Sight-unseen. Another factor was how much financial aid I got. Vassar was among the schools where I got the most aid. It was a combination of a loan, mostly a loan, a grant, some grant money, some parents, and work-study. So, that package was what I had. I had to work. I always had a campus job. Four years, I always had a campus job, except for when I went to Spain, I didn't have to work. That was nice.

But, I had never been to Vassar, and I arrived with my parents and my brothers. It was quite an experience. I think the first impression I had was that I had never had so much time on my hands in my life. I was used to school, home, ballet, weekend rehearsals, teaching, performing. I couldn't believe this new reality. I said, "What am I supposed to do?" You know, you didn't have class every day. You had some classes—one class was twice a week, one class was three days. You had all this time. I was completely flabbergasted by the amount of time I had.

Q: Even with the job. Even with a part-time job on campus.

FITZ-PEGADO: The first thing I can remember was thinking, "Wow!" All this freedom, all this time. I don't have to take a bus anywhere. I can walk to classes. The dining hall is right here, the food is all prepared for you, you know? You don't have to come home and scrounge around. My mother did leave me dinner in the oven during the week, for when I came home from ballet class. But at college, there was so much that was done for you.

One of the first issues was, where was I going to live? Once again, dad to the rescue. "You are not living in the Black dorm."

Q: Was it still segregated?

FITZ-PEGADO: No, but there was a Black dorm. It was segregated by choice. The African American students at the school, and there was a powerful group of African American women, oh my goodness. These women are legendary today, and they're all doing fabulous things in the world. But there was a group of African American women who took over the school.

You've heard about the sit-ins and the things that have happened including at a lot of the Seven Sisters schools. Well, these women were legendary. They actually took over the college for several days and they demanded having African American professors, an African American studies program, an African American dorm. Those were some of the demands that were made and that the trustees agreed to, eventually.

When I arrived in 1973, there was a dorm, a beautiful building, that housed primarily African-American students. Many, maybe seventy percent of us. The African-American dorm was called the African-American Cultural Center or Kendrick House, and it was across the street from the entrance to the college. There were about one hundred African-American students at Vassar out of about 1,400 students during my time there.

Q: But one hundred is already a pretty sizable number.

FITZ-PEGADO: A pretty sizable number, yeah. During my tenure, I think it got up to 150 at some point. Back to the dorm, my father said, "You are not living there. You have to live in the world with all kinds of people, so you better get started now figuring out how to do it."

I lived in a dorm on campus for all four years at Lathrop House. Never moved. Because you get a bigger room, and better location in the building, every year as you move up the ranks, and I figured, why move when I'm going to get my choice here?

I always had a nice room. I spent a lot of time in the African American dorm, though, hanging out with my friends, and I dated a guy who lived there. He was in the first graduating class with men in 1974 when I arrived as a freshman, so we only overlapped for one year. At Kendrick, we would cook, have barbecues, dance and have parties, as well as have serious meetings about pressing issues on campus and in the world. It was important to have that sense of community.

Vassar provided a great experience about the importance of community, about activism. I continued dancing with Vassar Dance Theatre, but no ballet was available for my first two years—only modern dance. So, I was trained in another dance genre. The performing group was called Vassar Dance Theatre and was directed by our modern dance teacher, Sherrie Dvoretsky. It was an excellent dance education, training and performance program. The dance program was evolving at that time. The first ballet teacher, Jeanne P. Czula, started teaching while I was there. No ballet was offered previously. When she

came, we bonded in a big way. She was great and several of us were extremely supportive of the addition of ballet classes. She stayed at Vassar for several decades, married Roman Czula who coached and taught physical education. I also would take ballet class when I could, when I could afford it, and when I could get a ride, at the local ballet school in Poughkeepsie, New York. That was where a Black friend at Vassar from Poughkeepsie, Myra Morris, had studied ballet. She was a very good dancer who majored in architecture, I think.

We performed often and it was a tremendous creative opportunity—choreographing pieces, dancing. I was thrilled to still have dance in my life and my academics. I majored in Hispanic Studies, continued studying German for two years and took many Black studies classes.

Q: Were there sororities?

FITZ-PEGADO: No. None. No sororities. I did join the Paul Robeson Study Group, where we studied Marxist-Leninist-Mao Tse Tung Thought [MLMTT].

Q: That's a mouthful.

FITZ-PEGADO: I thought I'd never get clearance for the Foreign Service having been part of that group!

Q: But it was a very 1970s thing. It was all over.

FITZ-PEGADO: I guess it was. We used to meet once a week and read, analyze, and discuss. It was a wonderful experience. That group and our very activist Black students protested, marched, wrote manifestos, staged campus anti-apartheid protests—

Q: And it's still the 1970s. Were there anti-war protests, or had that kind of fizzled out by then?

FITZ-PEGADO: That had pretty much fizzled, but the sanctions, the anti-apartheid, the Free Mandela marches. We were constantly engaged in debate and struggle about the curriculum, about the number of Black students, about the number of Black professors. We were haranguing the trustees when they came to meet. We were marching on the house of the president and the vice president. We were real activists. Those one hundred plus Black students, boy were we—

Q: That is what I meant. If you only had fifty, it'd be a little bit harder to just find enough people who were always available, but once you get up to 150, for a small college, you're already approaching critical mass.

FITZ-PEGADO: Right. I think we finally reached about 150. When I first came, it was probably fewer. We had men, too, and they were a force that added to that dynamic and the militancy. This was, of course, Black Panther time, the African Liberation Movement.

I remember coming home every year in May to march in the African Liberation Day Parade here in Washington, D.C. I always came home for that with my boyfriend at the time. I remember marching to make Martin Luther King's birthday a federal holiday.

Q: Oh, right.

FITZ-PEGADO: So, African Liberation Day, Martin Luther King's birthday, and anti-apartheid demonstrations were kind of like the three big protest-focused activities that I was constantly engaged in. I was a big activist.

Q: Okay. I mean, that'll fill your free time. If you needed something else to fill your free time, sure, that'll do it.

FITZ-PEGADO: Right, and those people, the Black student activists, we formed lasting friendships. We still engage in supporting Black and African American students at Vassar. We have a large contingent of Vassar alums here in Washington, D.C., and I'm still very friendly with them and many others in other cities.

Q: Lovely. So, all this stuff is going on, and you're majoring in Hispanic studies. But then you mentioned you had a period of time in Spain. How did that work out? How'd that happen?

FITZ-PEGADO: Junior year, first semester, I should say. You know, everybody's encouraged, at least most people—I don't know about today, but back in those days, I was always interested in doing different things and experiencing new things. So, I told my parents I wanted to go to Spain. There was a program for juniors, particularly if you were a Hispanic Studies major, to study in Madrid. We were encouraged to do that. And I think it was the only overseas program they had at the time. I was in Madrid from August to December 1975. I was there when Franco died in November of 1975.

Q: Wow. That's big.

FITZ-PEGADO: I remember going to school that day, and seeing a note on the door saying in Spanish, "General Francisco Franco is dead. No classes." And Spain really went through a major transition at that time. I didn't get to see a lot of it, but some of it was immediately visible. I was there during the months immediately before his death and a month after. So, that was quite an experience.

My first trip overseas was to Spain when I was seventeen, a senior in high school, with a class of seventh graders. My mother was an English teacher, as I mentioned, and in her junior high school, the Spanish teacher was a friend of hers and asked if she would help her to supervise the spring trip to Spain. So, she said, "Yes, but I'd like to take my daughter."

I went to Spain. And we spent three weeks traveling throughout the country. I met a boy on that trip, who was also seventeen, when I needed to go to the American Embassy in

Madrid because I lost my passport early during the trip in Malaga, during a Semana Santa parade. He worked at the hotel where we were staying, and I asked him, "Where's the embassy? How do I get there?"

He said, "I'll take you." So, he accompanied me to the U.S. Embassy, where I got my new passport—it was much easier in those days to have a new passport issued. His name was Santiago Martinez. And Santiago Martinez, it turns out, was born the very same day I was.

Q: Isn't that wild.

FITZ-PEGADO: I mean, same year, same day, same everything. So, we became pen pals, and when I went back to Spain my junior year, we used to hang out. So, I used to go to his house for dinner. His father was very conservative. You know, there weren't too many Black kids in Spain.

Q: I would imagine.

FITZ-PEGADO: You know, it was still the Franco-era. I remember going to Santiago's house on several occasions for that traditional late night supper. His father would scrutinize me. It was a bit intimidating, but very interesting. We would have conversations about America and his father was clearly very anti-American. And as I said, thank goodness, my Spanish was very good.

Q: Yeah. It would have to be, to have that level of conversation.

FITZ-PEGADO: Yes, it was interesting. So, I was there for a semester, and this guy that I had met when I was seventeen, now I knew at nineteen. To this day, we are friends. His daughter, Sara, and her friend came to live with me and my family one summer when they were sixteen. They came here to study English. I've visited him and his family in Madrid, and at their county home in Santibáñez. We still are very close friends.

Q: That's really fantastic.

FITZ-PEGADO: It's an amazing relationship. So, anyway, I did that semester during my junior year, then returned for second semester senior year and graduated the following year in 1977. I was inducted into Phi Beta Kappa. There was one other Black student inducted that year, but I don't know how many, if any, other African Americans preceded us. It was kind of a big deal ceremony. I graduated and didn't know what I was going to do. I had been offered a job at an insurance company after an interview on campus with Ernesta Procope. I was not terribly interested. It turned out that she was quite an important woman in New York business circles as an owner of a successful Black insurance company. I was not interested in that area, insurance.

Q: Now, your college years were 1973 to—?

FITZ-PEGADO: 1973 to 1977. Oh, there's another gift from my dad. He's a force of nature. My dad knew someone in government who was responsible for a program called the Federal Junior Fellowship Program. So, I applied, was accepted, and it guaranteed me a job in the government every summer and any school break I wanted to work in Washington, D.C. You got a GS-2 or 3 salary, but it provided spending money, and it helped. I had a campus job, and then I would come home in the summer, and I'd have a job all summer; I didn't have to look for one.

That is how I began working at USIA [States Information Agency] at the time. The summer after my high school graduation, I worked at FDA [U.S. Food and Drug Administration]. I don't know how I landed there. I didn't know what my major was going to be, what I was going to do, so they placed me at the FDA, part of what was then called the Department of Health, Education and Welfare [HEW]. I used to take the bus from my home in Silver Spring to the building in Rockville where I worked in the procurement branch and learned to fill out requisition forms to buy mice and guinea pigs, and whatever else for testing, I assumed.

Q: Oh, my goodness.

FITZ-PEGADO: That's what I did for the summer, so it kind of taught me the basics and mechanics of a purchase order, how to fill it out for orders and what the prices were. I did that my first summer. My second summer, I think, I may have been there too. But that was when I knew I was going to declare my major, Hispanic Studies. Helen Murphy, who was the family friend who told us about this program said, "You really need to go to an agency where you can do something relevant."

That's how I ended up at USIA. I spent my next two summers at USIA, and my vacations because I'd have six weeks off in December and January. I was right there at the Voice of America in the building near Capitol Hill, and that's where the Public Information Office was where I was assigned. I was basically assigned to give tours in English, and Spanish sometimes, of the USIA/Voice of America exhibit. I wonder if it is still there. There was an exhibit lining several hallways where I explained the Voice of America and the USIA's mission, "Telling America's Story Abroad." There was a big clock displaying times around the world, a display of publications produced and distributed by the USIA, earphones to listen to recordings of Voice of America's popular programs, and an actual glass window with a view into a broadcast studio. I learned from a colleague, Margaret Jaffe, to give that tour.

I also basically transcribed or cut sections of tapes on a reel of recorded voices from the news, called actualities, for the radio shows in the Spanish language shows broadcast to Latin America. I'd listen to the recordings of breaking news of the day, cut the sections of the audio tape (splice the tape) and transcribe what was said, so when the producer for the afternoon show arrived, they would have the actualities on a reel, transcribed and ready to be reviewed. When I think about how radio programming was produced in those days, it

is pretty amazing to have learned that skill. So, that's what I did for two summers and two vacations, and that's how I got introduced to the USIA.

Q: You know, it couldn't be a better opportunity, because you got to see the whole place, the mission, probably got to know a few people who remembered you. Nice.

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Q: We are resuming with Lauri Fitz-Pegado, and she's going to go back and recall a couple of things at Vassar before we continue with her professional history.

FITZ-PEGADO: The Black dormitory was called the African American Cultural Center, the AACC, Kendrick House. So, it had a dual name. It was hard-fought in terms of winning it through the Vassar administration and the board of trustees to gain this dormitory/cultural center.

Q: And once again, this is what year?

FITZ-PEGADO: I don't know. I went to Vassar in 1973, and this happened before I went there, so it must have been 1968, something like that. It was one of the demands that the women I mentioned, the African-American women who had taken over the college central, the administrative offices, and sat in for, I think, a couple of days. They pretty much closed things down at the college.

Q: Right. The old-style sit-ins.

FITZ-PEGADO: Right. Sit-ins, and in terms of the demands they had regarding hiring more professors of color, an African-American studies program, an African-American cultural center/dorm. So, that was all part of the gains that they achieved through their sit-in and through their protests.

So, the African-American cultural center was located across the street from the main campus entrance, and was a beautiful Tudor house that had several floors. I don't know how many people it housed, but there was a lovely living room with a piano, where we had cultural activities. There was singing, there was an African American chorus created at the college. We had a lot of very talented people among the students of color, so there was a gospel choir formed during that time. There were rehearsals for the gospel choir. There were impromptu jam sessions that happened there. A lot of the parents of some of the kids, because many of the kids came from the New York City area, so often there were parents who came up to visit.

We sometimes cooked, and ate dinners together. In good weather on some weekends, there were barbecues outside. Behind the house was a lake which froze over in the winter. Vassar has a beautiful campus, so it was quite lovely. There were also movies. There weren't videos at that time, but we watched a few movies on reel-to-reel projectors. I'm not sure how we got them. And then there was the TV series, *Roots*, based on the book by

Alex Haley. That TV series was transformational for most Black people. It was the first time most of us saw the story of our ancestors, with Black actors, based on a book by a Black author. I actually remember watching it in the dorm room of a Black friend, Shelley Hayes.

Q: Yeah, because it was TV.

FITZ-PEGADO: It was on TV, right. And we knew which friends had TVs. I certainly didn't. At the House, we saw movies on a projector about political issues. I remember a movie, I think, about African liberation, and about Southern Africa. You know, this was the time when a lot of African countries were gaining their independence, so there were huge liberation struggles going on. I remember a movie called *A Luta Continua*, which means *The Struggle Continues* in Portuguese, so it was about Mozambique, the former Portuguese colony. There were things—I remember self-defense classes in the backyard of the House. One of the male students taught the class, not that women can't teach self-defense, but some of the guys, who were very much into karate and other martial arts.

There was a strong radicalized sense of working for social issues. There was a cultural center in town. Poughkeepsie, New York, where Vassar is located, has a very large population of economically challenged and underrepresented minorities. So, there was an effort to coordinate with people in the city, working at the center. We would organize and actually take a bus into the city and try to work on programs that contributed to the community, the underrepresented population.

There were some Black people from Poughkeepsie who came to the House to participate in our activities. If we were mobilizing against or for a cause, whether it was the anti-apartheid movement and getting ready for protests, that was the place where we congregated.

Q: And of course, with the anti-apartheid, most of the attention was on the boycott, the disinvestment, those sorts of things.

FITZ-PEGADO: Sanctions, exactly. Economic sanctions, Free Mandela. We made our signs there, we organized and marched across the street to the campus and set up. So, it was a political center, it was an education center. We talked about issues there. We gathered in the living room and talked about issues. We talked strategy—if we were going to picket the trustees when they came in because we didn't like x, y, or z.

Q: Now, when you said it's a place where you could be kind of radical, when you say radical there's all kinds of different understandings of what radical was. I mean, did Angela Davis visit and talk? Did you have Black Panthers who came in, either organized or recruited? Did you have other organizations that were active? In other words, where did you fit on the radical—?

FITZ-PEGADO: Well, I should say, radical probably is a bad word. We had very progressive thinkers. We had people who were changemakers. We had people who had been affiliated or were still affiliated with the Black Panthers. And they said they were, you know; we didn't see their bona fides, but they had been perhaps in high school or that kind of thing. Angela Davis, I believe, came in during that time; I know she's been at Vassar. I believe she came in to speak during that time if I'm not mistaken. It's hard to remember. But there were also other schools in the area, like Marist College, which had populations of people of color who were activists. I would say that we were a very activist community.

Q: And I guess part of what I'm driving at is, was your activism intended to be part of a political party or a specific movement, or was it more just issue by issue?

FITZ-PEGADO: I can't say that we were all part— There was an African Nationalist theme and thread through a lot that happened that has permeated, and you know, I just got something last week talking about the new movie that's just come out, *I'm Not Your Negro,* based on a book that James Baldwin never finished. Ironically, some of those same people who were with me in college, who now live in the Washington area, we still get together.

There was a request that we all get together to go see this movie in Silver Spring. We are meeting with the new president of Vassar who will be here on April 1 at the new museum, the National African American Museum of History and Culture. There's going to be a lunch for her, and our understanding is that she's very much interested in the alumni of color, because we've been pretty active.

We formed an African American Alumni Association, of which I was co-chair many years ago. It continues to be active, and there's a multi-day conference at Vassar every three years. We meet with the students, elect a new president of that organization, see old friends, get a sense of current student concerns and how we can be helpful. So, there is that kind of core activism and support for dealing with the U.S. community, minority community, diversity-focus, Africa-focus. That has been a thread that all of us have maintained throughout our lives.

Q: That's what I wondered. How has your focus changed from those early days in college to today, or has it? In other words, in terms of your sort of priority list or your top list of things to do?

FITZ-PEGADO: I think very much that those days at Vassar, which I treasure, and the friendships and the education, they informed who I am, and I've maintained much of that. Perhaps I'm not twenty-one or eighteen anymore, when your views tend to be a bit more strident, or how you manifest them may be more strident.

You know, I'm not at every protest anymore, and that kind of thing, but in terms of what I believe and what's important to me and my focus, issue-wise, and my orientation, I'm not sure that that has really changed so much. It has informed and helped to have me define

what my views are. Perhaps they're a little more moderate today, but I think those days were instrumental.

Q: One last question about this sort of period. Are the new, younger African American students that you're now encountering from Vassar significantly different in their focus? You know, "Oh, those young people today." What would you say about that?

FITZ-PEGADO: I have not seen or met with many students in recent years. I've been there a couple of times for reunions, but it's been more with alumni. And there've been some student participants when the alumni go for what we call the AAAVC, the African American Alumnae/i Association [of Vassar College], gathering conference. There is often some interface with the students of color, some alums have more than others.

I think that they have maintained, perhaps through their parents, because quite a few of those students are second-generation Vassar, and given the nature of the alums and the experiences of the alums and their accomplishments. I mean, it's an unbelievably accomplished group of alumni who have remained committed to Vassar and are active. You know, serving on the board of trustees, serving in this African American Alumni group. But really being engaged.

So, I think those students of color have formed their own groups. Vassar is a very activist place, and hopefully always will be and, I think, it attracts people who are not afraid of expressing themselves and taking on issues. And it's a liberal institution.

Q: From here, now, when we ended last time you were finished with Vassar and you were looking on to where you were going next. So, why don't we pick up the thread there.

FITZ-PEGADO: I mentioned, I believe, that I had a Federal Junior Fellowship, which I was awarded my senior year in high school, which allowed me to work in a federal agency, and that I had worked both at FDA, the Food and Drug Administration, but transferred over to the U.S. Information Agency. And there I had been for three years.

I had been encouraged to apply for the Foreign Service by a family friend, Helen Murphy, who actually had informed my dad of this Federal Junior Fellowship. They were friends, and Helen had been a mentor to me and she encouraged me strongly to apply. My political beliefs, and my activities at Vassar, were such that I was a little hesitant to think about becoming a mainstream Foreign Service officer. I thought about other things.

My parents were very patient, I must give it to them, because I talked about doing some things after college that weren't exactly in the mainstream of what they expected me to be doing. I won't go into it, but I had explored some other plans that were a little bit more socially oriented. They were very patient and said, "Lauri, is that really what you want to do?"

I think that once I got back home after college that summer and I had taken the Foreign Service exam and had talked with Helen, I was offered a job at USIA [United States

Information Agency] while I waited to see if I was going to pass the oral exam. I had to pass the oral exam, and there were several things like getting a security clearance, which, you know, I sat and said, "Wow. I wonder how with all of my political activities I'm going to get through this." I wasn't sure about it. Also, at that time, I had a full-time job at USIA in the office of personnel. I was working in staff support for the USIA foreign service selection boards.

So, you know, the Foreign Service reviewed the performance of foreign service officers and determined if they would be promoted. And I met a woman, Ethel Payne, who was an outside member of the Selection Board. She was a well-known and respected African American journalist, a genuine trailblazer in the profession. We talked a bit and she took an interest in me. And I told her I wasn't really sure whether the Foreign Service was what I wanted to do, but I kind of felt a commitment. And she said, "Well, if you want to do something else—" She then facilitated an interview with an insurance company in Los Angeles. I considered it, but didn't think insurance was what I wanted to do.

Oh, I should add that I was offered my first insurance company job before graduating from Vassar. Vassar set up career interview opportunities, and I was interviewed by and offered a job in New York City for a woman named Ernesta Procope at E.G. Bowman, Inc. I learned later that her company became the first African American owned business to be located on Wall Street the same year. I was interviewed and graduated from Vassar, 1977.

She owned an insurance company in New York, I think in Bedford-Stuyvesant, and she was impressive—her presence, the way she carried herself; she took up all the air in the room. But insurance to me just wasn't what I wanted to do, so I turned that one down.

So, here I was working at USIA personnel, with this Los Angeles, California (L.A.) offer and a potential Foreign Service appointment if I passed the oral exam, and I really struggled with what to do. I also had a boyfriend from college. He was in New York City, I think at Columbia Law School at that time. He had done a graduate program earlier and spent time in Kenya, Africa. So, you know, I was kind of going through the typical struggle of personal life, professional life, domestic, foreign, all of those things.

At the end of the day, I turned down the job in L.A., and I took and passed my orals. So, I was going to enter the next Foreign Service class. I graduated in May of 1977, I started working in personnel, I worked there through the summer into the fall, and then I went to work for another part of personnel, which was the training division. I ended up working with my boss, Jeff Lite, planning for my own junior officer training class.

Q: Interesting. Now, you are working in training after having been accepted into the Foreign Service?

FITZ-PEGADO: Right. So, I was working for a guy named Jeff Light, and I was working on organizing panels for speakers that the JOT class was going to meet with, and it was for my class. So, that was kind of ironic. I did have a little bit of inside knowledge of

what was going to happen because in those days, USIA had its own training program, and then it joined the State Department A-100 class for part of it. We went out to Harper's Ferry, I think together as a group, and that kind of thing.

When my JOT class started, which I think was in January or February, I believe I was the youngest in the class, because I had just turned twenty-two. Right out of college. I had had like six months, or something, of full-time work experience. I believe there were three or four other people of color in that class, maybe five. It was a great class. I'm in touch with one or two of them today. It was a fabulous experience, and I was the first out in my class, because I spoke Spanish, so I didn't have to take language. So, I got a language exemption or whatever and didn't have to take—

Q: You got off language probation.

FITZ-PEGADO: Right. I went through my Latin America, Caribbean area studies, but in my selection process—I don't really remember what else was on there, but I selected the Dominican Republic as one of my top three. So, I got the D.R. [Dominican Republic] and I went out in May. So, I landed in the D.R. in May of 1978. That was to be an eighteen-month JOT [Junior Officer Training] tour.

Q: Right. That would be typical at that time.

FITZ-PEGADO: Holly Mack Bell was the PAO [Public Affairs Officer] and his wife was Clara Bell, and they were from the South [United States], and he actually was a delightful guy. It was just interesting landing there and having them meet me at the plane. They were pretty old-school in terms of dress and the gloves and the whole nine yards. Tim Carroll, I think it was Tim, I'll have to look it up. Not Carroll. Tim something-else was my immediate supervisor. So, I was doing cultural affairs work. It was a huge JOT post. There were probably eight to ten junior officers from the Department of State.

Q: But mostly, I would imagine, in the consular section.

FITZ-PEGADO: Oh yeah. They were all in the consular section, except for me. So, I was the envy of the junior officer class down there. When I got there, some of them had been there for a year or six months earlier, because I think their State Department tour was two years.

Q: It would vary; sometimes two years, sometimes eighteen months, but roughly that.

FITZ-PEGADO: Right. So, some were already there, and some came in after me, but it was a huge group. I will say that group of people, many of them, at least six of them, have become lifelong friends. We had a ball. That's all I can say. We had a fabulous time. We became very close friends. We traveled together on the weekends, we went to the beach, we went out in the evenings. We were mutually supportive in terms of any issues—family issues, or concerns professionally. They're just a great group of people.

Out of that group—I'll tell you, it was a high-achieving group—out of that group, Lino Gutierrez became ambassador several times over, Pete Romero became assistant secretary and an ambassador, and Mike Senko, became ambassador once or twice. Deborah McCarthy wasn't in our group; she came in later, but we ended up kind of embracing her later on. She came in maybe a couple years after we did. Deborah was an ambassador. It was an amazing group of people. Marcie Ries, Charlie Ries, both ambassadors a couple times over. I'm probably leaving out some people, but it was—oh, Denise Mathieu was ambassador twice. It was just a great group of people, and we really liked each other. Several ended up marrying Dominicans. Lino married a Dominican woman, and a couple people got married at post. Fran and Prescott Wurlitzer were two junior officers who married. It was a great group.

I did my tour in cultural affairs, but I also did a rotation in the political section, and that was quite an education. You know, the Dominican Republic—the election was over when I got there, so I heard stories from people like Lino Gutierrez, who had been instrumental in the issues related to the highly contested election that took place. I missed some of that, but I learned a lot from them. Lino was a political officer, so it was interesting to learn from him, and from my boss, John King, and colleagues in the political section. I hadn't done political work, so it was new to me. I enjoyed working in the Embassy, the new environment and getting to know colleagues that I only ran into socially. USIA, where I worked, was located a few blocks from the Embassy and closer to the consulate.

The other JOTs continued to be on my case because they were on the visa line, and they would go out in public and people would just walk up to them: "*Oh, Señor Consul, por favor, quiero*—" (Oh, Mr. Consul, please, I want—). You know, with the whole visa thing, they were just bombarded and barraged. They were rock stars, and it was good and bad.

So, I didn't have those issues. I was doing things like taking the New York Philharmonic around the country, the director Zubin Mehta and his wife, and I was working on student exchanges, you know, college students coming down for summer exchanges. I was doing all kinds of fabulous things. I was also dancing. So by day, I was a diplomat and, by night, I was a dancer.

I took my ballet classes in the evening. There was a company called Ballet Santo Domingo which was run by Irmgard Despradel and her sister, Haydee, both were dancers in the company. It was not a folkloric company; it was a ballet company in Santo Domingo. I performed classical ballet and contemporary original choreography with them. We performed in several places in the country, and at the National Theatre, and it was a wonderful experience. I really enjoyed that and it gave me a special insight on the arts and culture of the country.

I actually brought a friend of mine from Washington, D.C. to Santo Domingo to teach and dance with Ballet Santo Domingo. We trained and performed together at Jones-Haywood School of Ballet and with the Capitol Ballet Company. Sandra Fortune-Green was the prima ballerina in Washington, D.C. who had made quite a name

for herself in having been the first Black ballerina to compete in the international ballet competitions in Varna and Moscow. She came down and she stayed with me for a couple of weeks and she taught and performed. It was exciting to have her there. We traveled around the country; her husband came. It was fabulous.

I should tell you about an adventure I had with Irmgard Despradel and a wonderful Panamanian dancer and choreographer who was working with the ballet company in Santo Domingo, Armando Villamil. I danced in quite a few contemporary ballets that he choreographed.

Let me just jump to one thing that I think was very interesting in the Dominican Republic. When I was with the dance company, Armando suggested that we take the company on tour to Panama. So, I went with him and with the head of the dance company to Panama to basically check out whether we could do this. It turns out that Armando was very close to Omar Torrijos. So, he drove us out to have lunch with the famous "El Jefe" General Omar Torrijos at one of his beach houses; I think it was in the town of Farallon. That ended up being quite an experience. I won't go into too much detail, but we, Irmgard, Armando and I, were at lunch at Torrijos's home and he suddenly decided to take us to another town. So we flew, in the plane that I believe he died in later, to another small town. We landed in a field. I had never thought about landing in a field like that.

I don't think anybody back in Santo Domingo or in Panama knew where I was. You don't think about those things in the moment. I probably should have let somebody know where I was going; here I was in a plane with the leader of Panama, landing in a field. Then, when we left, they lined up cars with their headlights on, facing each other forming a path down the middle, lining each side of a makeshift runway providing enough light for us to take off. Torrijos, who was quite inebriated by then, fell asleep on the way back and thankfully the plane didn't take us back to Farallon, but to Panama City.

So, it was quite an experience. And that was toward the end of the historic Panama Canal negotiations. I think Ambler Moss was our ambassador at the time but, of course, I wasn't there in any official capacity. Afterwards, I thought, you know, here I am, this junior officer visiting with a dance company. You know, there are things that you do that you wouldn't do again. But it was an experience that I will never forget.

Q: Absolutely. And it was in sort of the last days of when, in the Foreign Service, little things like that could happen that, you know, you smooth it over and you go on.

FITZ-PEGADO: Right. But I had to listen to Torrijos blasting the U.S.; that's why that kind of came back to me when you were asking about the Mexicans, because Torrijos was, woo, as everybody knows. He just was ranting, and I'm sitting there. He didn't know that I was an American diplomat. Probably thought that I was one of Armando's Dominican dancer friends.

Q: So, did you end up taking the company to Panama?

FITZ-PEGADO: They may have gone, but it would have been after I left the D.R. I think it was something that they planned to do but it didn't quite happen then. And I actually went back to Panama on a TDY [Temporary Duty Assignment] at some point after that trip, I don't remember exactly when.

But, that was my Panama Torrijos story, and I thought about that plane when he died in a plane crash in 1981. I was in that plane. And he was a character. "*Mi prieta*," he called me. "*Mi prieta*." (My dark girl.) I thought, "Oh, my goodness. That's not exactly a term of endearment." But he was something else, bigger than life.

We JOs in Santo Domingo, as a group, got to know the country very well. All of us spoke good Spanish. There were quite a few Latinos in the group. There were some Asians and several African-Americans. We were so diverse. We should have been in a Benetton ad. It was a beautiful group of young, dynamic, diverse, intelligent climbers. It was a fantastic group of people. We were well-liked in the community, we knew everybody. It was just great. Couldn't have been better.

So, that was the Dominican Republic. I left before the hurricane. I was so lucky, because a lot of my colleagues, the last few months of their tours, or the last year of their tours, were horrible because of the hurricane that hit and devastated the country. There was no power, no water, you couldn't get around. I was really lucky. I think it hit a month after I left.

My onward assignment was to Mexico City. You know, I came home for leave, and then off to Mexico City. It was so different. I mean, it was a huge embassy. I had three ambassadors in two years. So, they had a huge staff turnover. When I arrived there, the ambassador was Patrick Lucey, the former governor of Wisconsin.

Q: Well, Reagan would have been sort of 1981?

FITZ-PEGADO: Okay, it wasn't Reagan yet. No, Carter lost in 1980.

Okay, so this wasn't quite— Lucey was there when I arrived in late 1979. So, not yet. Patrick Lucey was the ambassador when I got there and then he was succeeded by Julian Nava, who was the first Latino ambassador, and was not received so well by the Mexicans. Then John Gavin, the actor, was ambassador when I ended my tour.

I was there, believe it or not, two years with three ambassadors. Stan Zuckerman was the public affairs officer. I was at that post doing more information/press work. So, I'd done cultural work in the D.R. and now was on the media side. So, I walked in, here I am, twenty-something, still pretty young and my special assistant was a fifty-six-year-old Mexican woman. My secretary and I were the only two women on my staff of about fifteen. I walked in to supervise a staff of all Mexican men.

Q: Right. And it's press work, which automatically means it's a bit more pressure, because it's not quite yet a twenty-four/seven information cycle, but there's an information cycle and there's a little bit of an edge.

FITZ-PEGADO: Right. And I was doing mostly work with broadcast media. I was doing radio and television. Any U.S. journalists coming in to do stories for radio or television, I had to help out. There was a pretty big press operation. Larry Ikels was the information officer [IO], so I reported to him, and then he reported to Stan. It was fascinating, but very different and challenging. I learned a lot about management. I got along well with all my staff. I got along with my special assistant too.

Q: Now this is a Mexican, local employee.

FITZ-PEGADO: Yes. I had all Mexican, local employees. Graciela, who was my secretary/assistant, was the only woman. Enrique Esteinou was my advisor, special assistant, whatever he was called at the time. So, he was a little skeptical; I was a little skeptical, but we ended up getting along very well. I met a lot with the heads of the television stations and staff when they were doing pieces about the U.S. The radio, the Voice of America feeds and programs that were coming in, I got involved with that. It was a wide variety of media-related work.

I actually accompanied Mexican TV crews to the border a couple of times where they were shooting footage for documentaries about border affairs. You know, everything from trying to help them book interviews, and even sometimes translating, if necessary, if they didn't have the language skills. Back in the public affairs office, we were able to use some of that footage to produce our own videos for various outreach efforts.

I served at the embassy in Mexico City for two years. Socially, it was not as rewarding as the Dominican Republic. I didn't have that core group of colleagues. There were a few of us who used to hang out from USIS—it was called USIS [U.S. Information Service] overseas and USIA [U.S. Information Agency] domestically. And then it went through that weird period of being called USICA [U.S. Information and Cultural Agency]. So, I don't remember what we were at that time, but at any rate, there were some interesting people. A younger group of people. And everybody was friendly and nice; it was fine.

It just wasn't, you know, Mexico City is not Santo Domingo. It's huge. The traffic, the pollution, the this, the that. The embassy was huge. But I did travel a lot. I took advantage of being there so that on the weekends several of us would travel together. Sometimes fly or we'd drive. I had a good friend named Yolanda Robinson, who was in Cultural Affairs, an assistant Cultural Affairs officer, and so I made some friends.

Q: So, this is the late 1970s, early 1980s. How is the security situation for you, at that time?

FITZ-PEGADO: Well, nothing like it is now. We were free to go pretty much wherever we wanted to go. We picked our own housing. They would come in, look and see if it was

okay. I had a great place; an apartment in a building that had two apartments. I had a huge patio. I remember hosting a reception for the visiting Alvin Ailey Dance Company, and it was fantastic, lots of fun to be with the dancers.

Q: Now, what about interacting with the Mexicans that time in the media? Did you have to deal with a lot of negative press?

FITZ-PEGADO: About the U.S.? Yes. There was always a sense—this was during the presidency of Lopez Portillo, and the anti-American sentiments were pretty broad-ranging. I remember being at certain parties or with Mexican "friends" who would launch into attacks against the "*gringos*" (Americans). I'd have to sit there and decide, "How much of this am I going to deal with?"

As I said, it was a good experience; I remember being at our election night party. We had an embassy election night party where you invited all of your Mexican contacts, and it was over so fast it was embarrassing. Carter lost so quickly.

Q: Oh, that's right. It was that famous moment when he came out and conceded even before the California returns were in, and there was the argument that, had he at least waited until the California returns were in, he might have actually won California. But, that's history.

FITZ-PEGADO: Right. So, I remember that night vividly, and I remember thinking, "Oh, wow, Ronald Reagan." It's kind of like what some people are feeling right now about the Trump win, and you think about those days when you have a change in party like that and someone who has some controversy around their political beliefs and whether you believe what they believe. I've had some flashbacks to that recently. So, Reagan came in and my tour was over in 1981.

Q: Ah. Okay. So, yeah, just as the administration gets in and begins to mold foreign policy towards his goals.

FITZ-PEGADO: Right. So, my onward assignment was to Dar es Salaam, Tanzania.

Q: Wow. That's a difference.

FITZ-PEGADO: Interestingly, when you asked about college and what impacted me or formed my thinking— Well, I had been very interested and had done some work in college about Julius Nyerere. The whole concept of "ujamaa villages." And one of the things at the African-American Cultural Center at Vassar that we celebrated was Kwanzaa. So, Swahili, Kwanzaa—I think we may even have had some elementary Swahili lessons at some point.

Q: But take a moment and describe what the ujamaa village is?

FITZ-PEGADO: It's a socialized type of community living environment that Nyerere had promoted in Tanzania, and the whole Swahili concept of unity. The principles of Kwanzaa also are all around unity, economic equity, partnership, that type of thing. So, when I selected Tanzania, I was very interested in really finding out what this was about. Nyerere, kind of like Kwame Nkrumah [former President of Ghana] and other African leaders of the time, were socialists, and were quite lauded by the whole African nationalist and independence movement. All of these things had informed my student experience. So, this was interesting.

I selected this country on my bid list, and I got it. I had to come back and study Swahili, because mine was a language-designated position. I believe there were only two language-designated positions in the Dar-es-Salaam Embassy—the ambassador, and the press attaché, and I was to be the information officer/press attaché. I had to learn Swahili. So, I came back to Washington, D.C. to learn Swahili and to take the African area studies course. Upon arriving that summer, I think it was summer—

Q: That would be a typical, on-cycle move.

FITZ-PEGADO: Right. There were a couple of things going on with my life and my family. There were some personal things going on and some things to decide in terms of my future. Was I going to go on another tour? I still had this relationship I was in that had been long distance all this time. I also had a deferred entrance to graduate school.

Q: Wow. And they'd been waiting for you all this time.

FITZ-PEGADO: Yes. And they said, "We ain't waiting any longer. You've deferred for five years. After five years, we can't hold your place." And I had received a fellowship to partially cover my tuition. So, it was not only the acceptance. It was the money too. I had, of course, gone into the Foreign Service straight out of college, pretty much, save the months I worked in foreign service personnel. I thought it was important to have a graduate degree. This was at SAIS [School of Advanced International Studies] at Johns Hopkins.

Q: Quite a nice school.

FITZ-PEGADO: Ironically, the same guy who had convinced me to go to Vassar, George Crowell, was the dean of students at SAIS—

Q: Right. I actually met him. I don't know him, but I met him a couple of times because I applied to SAIS and I took a summer course there. But I couldn't say I knew him well.

FITZ-PEGADO: Right. Well, George was associate dean of students at Vassar, I think, and then dean of students at SAIS. So, I went to talk to George, and he said, "Lauri, you've got to decide now." So, I enrolled at SAIS. You had to take the minimum number of classes to be full-time. They just didn't allow part-time students then.

So, I enrolled at SAIS. I started Swahili language training and area studies, and I did all of that. I guess I had a few weeks of vacation first. I don't know when I started. Sometime in the summer, July or August. And I maintained that schedule until April. In April, I resigned from the Foreign Service.

Q: That is a very heavy schedule.

FITZ-PEGADO: Yes. Now, I didn't resign because it was a heavy schedule. As I think about it now, I was excited about Tanzania, but the Reagan Administration had come in and had started to define its Africa policy. The anti-apartheid movement was still going on. There was war in Angola, where the U.S. and South Africa support in the civil war was for the same side, UNITA [The National Union for the Total Independence of Angola], Jonas Savimbi's party. Chester Crocker, who was the assistant secretary for African Affairs at the State Department, designed or coined our policy toward South Africa, "constructive engagement."

I just wasn't with the program, and I think that might have been the icing on the cake. There were personal issues, there was graduate school, there was family, there was this relationship and that whole concept, which I didn't agree with, and being the U.S. embassy spokesperson, out front, in what was then called a "front-line state," now called the Southern African Development Community, that opposed apartheid and U.S. policy. Tanzania and Nyerere, the whole history, and my anti-apartheid views, and I was going to be standing there as the American spokesperson for constructive engagement? As an African-American woman with my history of African nationalism, and the African Liberation Movement, and anti-apartheid protests and all those things, it just didn't sit well with me.

Now, I could have asked for another assignment. They may have said no, but I could have asked. I didn't. I just kind of walked in one day, I think it was in April, and I said to my career counselor, Harriet Elam, who was an African-American woman—

Q: Interesting. She would actually later go on to be an ambassador in Africa as well.

FITZ-PEGADO: Absolutely. I went in to see Harriet, and Harriet was not happy with me.

Q: Well, they'd just put six months of training in.

FITZ-PEGADO: But, I mean, I had been a pretty cheap ticket, given the fact that I had helped to plan my own JOT class. They didn't have to invest in language training for me the first time around, and here we were, six months in or less, and I was resigning. I think the biggest issue was not the investment, I think it was her disappointment. There were very few African American women in the Foreign Service, and I think that kind of feeds into this sense of burden that I have often felt in my life. That I'm carrying this tremendous responsibility to uphold the race and the gender. Sometimes it gets a little—

Q: Yeah, you get into morally or ethically tricky situations where tough decisions have to be made.

FITZ-PEGADO: Right. I was in one of those, and I think Harriet was a little disappointed. We've talked about it subsequently. She and I reconnected several times in later years, but it was when we both were speakers and mentors at the International Career Advancement Program (ICAP) in Aspen, Colorado around 2020 that she said that had I not resigned, I would not have experienced such a rich and diverse career. I just didn't feel that staying in the Foreign Service at that time in that capacity was what I should have been doing. I'd been at USIA since I was a sophomore in college. I had spent all of my professional life, seven years at USIA, but I'd been posted abroad in the Foreign Service only for a JOT tour and one full tour. When I resigned, I did not have a job.

Q: That's brave.

FITZ-PEGADO: I was in graduate school. But I'm from D.C., so I was living in my own apartment. I think I actually moved in with my boyfriend; we lived together for a while. I had a new job in three weeks.

Q: Holy cow. Wow. But now wait, so you started SAIS in—

FITZ-PEGADO: September of 1981, because I came home in May.

Q: But you couldn't have finished your degree in one year, could you?

FITZ-PEGADO: No, it's a two-year program. And because I was taking the minimum number of required credits to be "full time," it took me forever to graduate. I was working more than full-time and traveling frequently. I don't think I finished until 1986. It took me four years, longer than most.

Q: But after just barely the first year of graduate school, you now have a job?

FITZ-PEGADO: Graduate school and the Foreign Service Institute—Swahili language training and area studies starting in the fall of 1981. I resigned in April of 1982. Three weeks later I had a job. My job was at a company called Gray & Company. The head of it was a guy named Robert K. Gray, and he was a piece of work, boy, was he a piece of work—quite a fascinating character. He's from Nebraska and was cabinet secretary for President Eisenhower. He, with Charlie Wick, was the co-chair of the Reagan inaugural. Wick soon thereafter became the head of USIA.

Previous to the inauguration, Bob Gray was with a company called Hill & Knowlton and, I think, ran their Washington, D.C. office, but when he took a leave of absence to co-chair the inaugural, he didn't go back to Hill & Knowlton. He created his own company. Gray was a trailblazer. He bought a building in D.C., Georgetown, called the Powerhouse, which is still there, right on the canal. There's a big smokestack on the top.

Q: Oh, that's the building. Okay.

FITZ-PEGADO: He purchased that building, or rented first. I don't know what he did originally. He set up an office there, and he was so before his time, because that office was like something out of Architectural Digest. It was all open space. There were no doors. There were some glass partitions, like you will find now in a lot of buildings, but that was 1981 or 1982.

So, Gray & Company was way ahead of its time. There were TV screens with all of the major stations running, and there was a teletype going. It was just a fabulous space all open. There were three floors and from the second floor, you could peer over the railings and see all that was happening on the ground floor. There was absolutely no privacy. The third level was a small, low ceilinged, windowless crow's nest space where three of us had desks. You reached it by climbing up a winding narrow, metal staircase. A hazard for women wearing heels, but I got used to going up and down those steps several times a day.

Bob Gray was a force of nature. I learned so much from that man. Of course, I was the only Black professional—I'm sorry, there was a librarian there who was also African American. There was an African-American driver, but in terms of doing account work, I was the only one. I was kind of surprised they hired me so quickly, but they did.

There was a guy I reported to named Neil Livingstone, who is an enigma. He was something else; still is. He's still around, ran for office I think, somewhere out in the midwest. He was very much into intelligence-gathering and operations, an anti- terrorism expert. He's been interviewed a lot on TV about that kind of thing.

It was a fascinating place to work. It was another place where there was a core group of people—I'm actually having dinner with them on Monday night—a core group of young people, who grew up together, shared storybook-like experiences, and remained friends for decades after leaving Gray & Company. It was fascinating because it was dynamic, fast paced, challenging, and there were very smart, young people on the staff along with several icons leading the way. It was bipartisan; Frank Mankiewicz was head of the PR [Public relations] division, Gary Hymel was head of the government relations division, both well-known Democrats, and here was Bob Gray, who was the boss and a Republican.

We represented domestic clients. We represented foreign country clients. We were one of the first companies I think in Washington, D.C. to do a lot of foreign country representation. We represented all kinds of countries, all kinds of individuals, from Robert Maxwell to Kuwait. I worked there from 1982 to 1993.

Q: And you would call it basically a public relations firm, or was it more towards lobbying?

FITZ-PEGADO: It was a little bit of both. It was a public affairs firm, but we did traditional PR [public relations] work and also lobbying. I was not in the lobbying division. I was in the international division where we did some lobbying, but most of what I was doing was more strategic communications. I worked on lots of company and country accounts. I don't even know how much of this we need to go into or I should go into, but I worked there for eleven years.

Q: Yeah. It's the kind of job, I imagine, that as you get better at it, you get bigger and bigger accounts.

FITZ-PEGADO: Well, we actually had the largest account in the history of PR during that period of time, which was also one of the most controversial and was one that landed me in the press. That has been a huge issue for me, unfortunately, in subsequent years, because of how it was covered in the press, a lot of it quite erroneously. But it was controversial because it was about the Iraqi occupation of Kuwait, violating international law.

Gray & Company, had been acquired by Hill & Knowlton (H&K) in 1986.

Q: So, Bob Gray goes back to Hill & Knowlton, like it or not, in a sense.

FITZ-PEGADO: Right. With a lot more money, I'm sure, because they had to buy him out. So, it was Hill & Knowlton that represented Citizens for a Free Kuwait (CFK).

Well, let me tell you about my fifteen plus minutes of unwanted fame when Hill & Knowlton represented Citizens for a Free Kuwait.

It was the summer of 1990, and I was senior vice president of the International Division at Hill & Knowlton. This was when Iraq had recently invaded and occupied Kuwait. Way before the Gulf War started. It was a political quagmire, and there have been plenty of folks with opinions about who, how and what influenced the U.S.'s decision to go to war. Hill and Knowlton was retained by a group of Kuwaiti exiles, a group called Citizens for a Free Kuwait (CFK). Most of them appeared to be wealthy, many of them scared, traumatized, who had escaped to the U.S. or lived here already. Some were in the U.K. The ones who fled Kuwait after Iraq invaded left their families and possessions behind. Many were confused and suffering physical and mental trauma. Our team was expected to deal with all of this—the people, the strategy, the plans and implementation.

The Iraqi occupation of Kuwait was a clear violation of international law and H&K was hired by CFK to tell Kuwait's story, to educate the U.S. public about Kuwait. Most Americans could not even find Kuwait on a map, let alone knew anything about the country, the people, and the consequences of the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait.
What I understood when we took on the client, CFK, was that H&K's mandate was not about encouraging or supporting U.S. military action against Iraq. Our job was to organize these Kuwaitis to tell their story to the American public, to educate, build

awareness in America about Kuwait, the Iraqi occupation, Kuwaitis in exile and those still within their occupied country. It so happened that Citizens for a Free Kuwait was the public relations industry's single largest account so far, paying H&K thirteen million dollars over six months. Media attention was unrelenting. After all, CFK was a group of foreigners from a far away country of Arabs and Muslims. Of course, the average American looked at them with suspicion. It's a shame that after September 11 and still today almost thirty years later, too many Americans hold onto the same negative stereotypes. I was the account manager and the main public spokesperson for H&K. I became a convenient target. The subject of relentless scrutiny, reporting that was just wrong, and politically motivated accounts of events, in both print and broadcast media, and later, even in books and university classroom case studies. My credentials, credibility, morals, and professionalism were attacked. Everything I had worked so hard to build was under threat, and all because of an inaccurate, partisan controversy, and some genuine misunderstandings.

Besides the twenty-four/seven work schedule, I should add that I was pregnant at the time. My nightmare began when H&K coordinated a hearing with the House of Representatives' Human Rights Caucus, co-chaired by Democratic Congressman Tom Lantos and Republican Congressman John Porter. This was an opportunity for Kuwaitis, in exile here in the states who had suffered atrocities before escaping, or their families had, to tell the stories of human rights violations by the Iraqis occupying their country. Because we were concerned about the safety of the Kuwaiti witnesses and their families in Kuwait, we agreed in a meeting with the Human Rights Caucus co-chairs and staff that the witnesses' identities would not be revealed—that all of them testifying on the panel would be anonymous. One of the controversies was the testimony of an anonymous young witness, a teenage girl, who said she was in Kuwait visiting her pregnant sister who gave birth during that time. In a Kuwaiti hospital after the invasion, she said that she personally saw babies being removed by Iraqi soldiers from incubators. The controversy boiled down to whether this actually happened, whether the witness was telling the truth, and whether the Human Rights Caucus chairs agreed that the witnesses would remain anonymous, and who she was. When it was revealed that she was the fifteen-year-old daughter of the Kuwaiti Ambassador to the U.S., the media was all over the story. The implication was that she was lying because she was the Ambassador's daughter.
Maybe it was naïve, but my team members and I did not believe that her family connections were a reason to doubt the truthfulness of her memory of the events she recounted. Further, her eyewitness account was consistent with other independent reports at the time by reputable human rights organizations.
Our pledge to keep her identity secret, with the agreement of Human Rights Caucus co-chairs, only added suspicion that this was staged to incite a U.S. policy response.

Q. *Right, I'm now remembering. This was famous, yeah.*

FITZ-PEGADO: The testimony was repeated by President George Bush in speeches that were then used by politicians to build support for U.S. military action against Iraq. I was caught in the crosshairs of biased accounts of events and political crossfire between both supporters and opponents of U.S. military action against Iraq.

The producers at *60 Minutes* reached out to H&K to set up an interview for a segment on their show. I was encouraged to take the interview and to speak about the account and the hearing. No one from among the senior H&K management expressed any concerns about me doing the interview. Craig Fuller was George H.W. Bush's chief of staff when he was vice president. In 1990, Bush was president and Fuller was chief operating officer of Hill & Knowlton.

My friend and colleague, Jill Schuker, had advised me not to do the *60 Minutes* interview, saying that the approach to be taken by the show probably wouldn't be sympathetic. How I wish I had taken her advice. They misrepresented what I said through creative editing. I was accused of lying in *Harper's Magazine*, in the *Wall Street Journal* and other print and broadcast media. I thought it was my responsibility to explain to the world H&K's honorable intent and actions. Our representation of CFK had ended well before the U.S. Congress's vote to go to war. Further complicating matters, there were press reports that the CFK funding came from the government of Kuwait, further undermining Nayirah's story. Her name was revealed by the press.

This was the story that never seemed to die. I was haunted by it for two decades. And when it mattered most—during the confirmation hearings for my Commerce Department appointment— all this negative press coverage and this interview were powerful blows against me, creating doubt about my credibility.

This was a time in my life that was difficult. I don't regret it, because I thought our work on behalf of Citizens for a Free Kuwait was good work, and I will stand by my position and what I did to this day. I believed the girl. All the evidence at the time supported that she was in the country, her passport, her sister had a baby at that time, she was in Kuwait at that time for that reason. She could have been in the infant care ward of a hospital.

All of these things, to me, added up. We made every effort to verify her testimony, but it was difficult considering that Kuwait was still occupied by the Iraqis. We did find other reports of babies being removed from incubators from reputable human rights organizations, some of which were retracted later. But it was one of those situations that I learned from.

Q: But you wouldn't have been able to verify it regardless. There would have been no way to get into Kuwait, or call up the hospital and say, "Hi, are you taking babies out of incubators?"

FITZ-PEGADO: Absolutely not. All of this controversy and misrepresentation of the facts came back to haunt me when I was going through the Senate confirmation process after being nominated by President Clinton to become assistant secretary and director general of the U.S. and Foreign Commercial Service when Ron Brown was secretary of commerce. For decades, I got hate messages through social media about it. There've been people interviewed about it, there was a book about the incident and my alleged role as reported in the media. I was the fall guy.

When I was representing my company, I stood up where I could have had someone more senior in the company do the *60 Minutes* interview and the other media interviews, but I felt a responsibility. I was managing the account and was the closest person to it. I was working with this client on these issues day in and day out. It was unfortunate that I ended up caught in the crossfire.

There were lots of controversial issues over the years. The firms where I worked had some unbelievable clients in every sense of the word—famous and infamous personalities, some amazingly impressive, others that were notorious A few of us protested engaging certain clients or as we became more senior, refused to work on certain client issues, but it was considered a hot, cutting-edge public affairs company for quite a few years.

Working at Gray & Company/Hill & Knowlton was really a fabulous experience, and as I said, I learned a tremendous amount from Bob Gray. He was a master, bar none. The relationships that I've had over the years with many of my former colleagues, people like Frank Mankiewicz, my goodness. Frank died a couple of years ago, but there are others who were my colleagues and became lifelong friends. We still get together over twenty years later. In a lot of ways, it's a kind of interesting pattern in my life maintaining long-term friendships.

Given my activism on race issues in college, I identified with the gay activists at Gray & Company. Many of them have become a core group of friends and we continue to meet several times a year to catch up, exchange views, and reminisce.

Q: Interesting. So, it was a firm you could feel at home with because they would let you say, "I'm not going to take this client. This is one where I feel, either ethically or morally or whatever, I can't go out."

FITZ-PEGADO: I did represent some clients that I had issues with. I tend to be one who will move forward with a client and try to insert reason or other points of view. Maybe I think I can change the client's perspective. I don't know. But I'm not one who often says, "I absolutely will not represent this client."

Now, there've been a couple of occasions. But most often, I will move forward and hope that my point of view will prevail or will influence change. I mean, I represented Haiti. A lot of people said, "How could you possibly represent Baby Doc, President Jean-Claude Duvalier?"

Q: Oh, because it was back then, before the changes and so on.

FITZ-PEGADO: How do you represent Baby Doc, when you know he's a dictator? Well, Ron Brown, and I represented Haiti and it was Ron Brown who brought me into that client representation. That's when I met Ron; I was a newbie at Gray & Company.

Ron Brown, who was a lobbyist at Patton Boggs was among the first black lobbyists in this town. He and Tommy Boggs were good friends. Ron was a political figure. He was a former senior staff member for Ted Kennedy. He became vice chair of the Democratic Party at that time.

I traveled to Haiti with Ron Brown about every other month for quite a while. We represented Haiti, I think, for four years, from 1982 to 1986. My view was, there were things that needed to be done in that country. There was an official bilateral relationship. There were diplomatic relations between the two countries, which means that things were going to happen anyway. So, why not try to educate, inform, influence a government like the Haitian government, with a leader who became president when he was nineteen, where you know he doesn't have the experience, the expertise, and where there are things that can be done?

Even on the human rights front, to understand, "If you do that, maybe you're not going to get aid, and maybe we're not going to be able to help you get aid, unless you change your ways, or unless you modify your behavior. Because human rights groups from the United States are watching, reporting on what is happening." If you want the Peace Corps to come in, you've got to, if you want military assistance, if you want GSM-102 [Export Credit Guarantee Program], if you want grain coming in, you've got to—

So, there were things that, I think, at the time were new—AIDS [Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome] and it was called the 4H disease: Haitians, Hemophiliacs, Homosexuals, and Heroin users. But Haitians were being detained at the border because they were seen as possible carriers of AIDS. You know, what kind of craziness is that? So, we worked with the CDC [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention] regarding changing the usage of the 4H designation to ensure that Haitians would not be discriminated against. There were things that we did, that we were able to achieve, that I'm pretty proud of.

Q: When you did these sorts of things, when you were representing a foreign country or a foreign individual, did you work with the State Department or did you work with any of the U.S. government people responsible for some of these programs?

FITZ-PEGADO: Yes. Absolutely. Ron was the "lobbyist," so he was on the Hill [Capitol Hill] working with the Black Caucus and the foreign affairs, foreign relations people. My first lessons in lobbying were with Ron because occasionally I would go with him, even though that was his responsibility and mine was more PR communications and messages. We also worked with the State Department in Haiti. We met with Clayton McManaway, who was the U.S. ambassador to Haiti at that time. We had a very good relationship with McManaway, and I think he appreciated the kind of facilitation, interlocutor, voice of reason, whatever role we could play. Yes, there was a real sense of cooperation.

Q: Right. Because you could, theoretically, echo at least some of the policy objectives in Haiti that the U.S. government had, because you could be another voice in explaining them and trying to get the government to understand that in order for you to get these

things, for us to be able to represent you well and get you the kinds of things you want, this is really what the U.S. government expects.

FITZ-PEGADO: The thing that I've really enjoyed about foreign country representation throughout my career—I've represented over twenty countries, at various periods—is that I don't think people really understand how difficult it is for foreign countries to navigate the U.S. body politic. Every country has its idiosyncrasies and its political orientation and grounding, but there's also, I think, a huge amount of complexity to the U.S., a lot to understand, particularly for developing countries, which have limited staff at the embassies here.

Some of the ambassadors are great, some of them aren't. People think, if you're in Washington, D.C. you've got to be a top notch ambassador from a foreign country. And sometimes that's the case. We have a complicated federal system, let alone at the state level—the state and local governments and the think tanks and policy institutes, and which ones, and who's important, and who's influencing policy where.

Then you have the business community, you have associations, you have special interest groups—I mean, it's very difficult, and I've taken a lot of pleasure in being with firms, like this one, like Gray & Company, like Hill & Knowlton, when we have done a good job in helping to inform, to explain, and then advocating for countries when they have objectives that are useful.

But, you know, I've represented a lot of countries and individuals, which some people at first glance will say, "How could you do that?" But I'll stand up and say, "Yes, I did." Angola, for example. Some of it has been about trying to facilitate reestablishment or establishment of diplomatic relations. In the case of Angola, there were no diplomatic relations between the U.S. and Angola.

Q: This was during the Reagan era?

FITZ-PEGADO: I started that work in 1986, and it wasn't really completed—there was a break in our representation for a period—then we resumed our work and Angola was granted diplomatic recognition in 1993.

Q: Right.

FITZ-PEGADO: Soon after President Clinton was inaugurated. That was my last accomplishment at Hill & Knowlton—I actually have a framed poster of the *New York Times* article saying, "The U.S. and Angola establish diplomatic relations," which happened right before I went into the Clinton Administration, and I had been working on that for quite a few years. So, you know, that's important to me. Whether the U.S. relationship with Angola is good or bad today, the fact that countries can talk to each other and that there's a formal mechanism established, like Libya and the U.S., I just think those things are important. Sanctions being lifted.

If it's time, or it's time to make the case, and the country doesn't really know how to go up to Capitol Hill and explain to the right people. Who are the people they have to talk to? Who do they have to convince? What's the process? What's the legislative process? What's the regulatory process? Who do you talk to? Which agencies do you need behind you? What special interest groups do you need trying to advocate with members of Congress? It's a whole system and a process that I think is important, and that I'm still engaged in after all these years.

Q: You're absolutely right. It's a huge thing to try to understand, and certainly for smaller countries, they need the help.

FITZ-PEGADO: That's right. And some of the bigger ones.

Q: Sure. I mean, what country has a staff big enough to hit every single level of the U.S. government that may be interested or have a view on whatever it is you're interested in?

FITZ-PEGADO: Right. And what's the message? How do you formulate a message that has resonance? If you don't know who you're talking to, you can't formulate a message that has resonance. If you know that Senator X was in the Peace Corps in Nigeria, and that maybe when you go in and you're talking about the African Growth and Opportunity Act, they may have some interest because they have some orientation toward sub-Saharan Africa. Then, you can formulate your message in a different way. You can't possibly know all that stuff.

It's easier now, with the internet, but a lot of times, culturally, people don't know what they can say, or they go in and they want to spend thirty minutes and the guy's got ten, and they don't know how to formulate their message in seven minutes. They have no elevator speech. It's interesting, and I've enjoyed that throughout my career.

Q: I certainly can understand how, because it draws in all of your skills and your background into focusing on the achievement of a particular goal, and it's not unlike the kind of work that a Foreign Service Officer does. It's in the private sector, but it's very similar in the way it requires analysis, communication, and advocacy.

FITZ-PEGADO: Right. Absolutely, except it's not for America, it's for another country.

Q: But, you know, the whole point of your work is to find the sweet spot where the interests are the same, and to express it in a way that demonstrates that it's a win-win.

FITZ-PEGADO: Absolutely. So, I think that transition from Foreign Service to public affairs was a pretty easy one.

Q: And it kept you in Washington, D.C. as your home base?

FITZ-PEGADO: Right. I have been in Washington as my base in various incarnations. At Gray & Company/Hill & Knowlton I traveled quite a bit. From there, and I've mentioned

Ron Brown, I got very interested and involved in the Democratic Party with and through him, because he had roles over the years. He was a vice chair of the party.

He was a representative of Jesse Jackson to the Democratic Convention in 1988, where he pretty much made a huge mark politically for himself in brokering the whole relationship at that convention. On the Democratic side, there was a huge issue between Michael Dukakis and Jesse Jackson. So, he brokered that relationship.

Q: Yes, now I'm recalling.

FITZ-PEGADO: That was in Atlanta, 1988. Dukakis, Jackson. Dukakis emerged, and then Ron became the chairman of the Democratic Party, months after that. But his mark was made quite publicly there in how he handled that. He got a lot of good press—I was his press secretary—out of that, then became chairman of the party. I was doing all of these things as a volunteer, pro bono, on the side.

Q: Wow, on top of all the responsibilities you had with Gray & Company or Knowlton or whatever it had become? That's a lot of work.

FITZ-PEGADO: I also got married that summer of 1988. Ron became chairman of the party, I continued to do work for and with him while he was chairman. I did his briefs on meetings with foreign leaders. I did two trips with him. One to Europe to the Liberal International, and one to Africa, to about six countries, which was kind of the forbearer of the whole concept of economic and political trade missions.

It was interesting. We took a couple of companies with us when we went to Africa, and that kind of became, I think, somewhat of a model for what he ended up doing at the U.S. Department of Commerce with political and economic development. So, that really was my foray, because in the Foreign Service you can't be political. So, I basically grew my political chops soon thereafter, when I went to Gray & Company.

Q: Okay. But you hadn't really been involved in political party activities until then? In other words, you were doing your public relations and so on, but the more political engagement just remained with what you did with Vassar and the alumni organization and that kind of thing?

FITZ-PEGADO: Right. I had been highly political, but not partisan. But the partisanship came immediately after the Foreign Service, in 1982. I met Ron in 1982.

Q: Oh, I see, okay. I didn't realize—

FITZ-PEGADO: Yeah, when I went to Gray & Company, my first client was Haiti, and that was Ron's client. So, my political activity with Ron, my work and then my political activity, began in 1982, 1983. Immediately.

Q: Okay.

FITZ-PEGADO: Pretty much immediately. I got more interested in party politics, ended up doing work with him on campaigns, getting to know members of Congress.

Q: What I was driving at was, it was at that point in the early 1980s, when you sort of began to become known to the party.

FITZ-PEGADO: Sort of, I guess. Through him, largely. Yes. I mean, it wasn't that I was an independent player. He became the mentor, the big brother, the person who would grab me and say, "Can you do this press? Can you do this event?" And then it really did speed up, I think, after 1988, when I worked at the Democratic Convention in Atlanta and handled Ron's press. After the convention, he became chairman of the Democratic National Committee, the first African American to be elected to that position. When he became chair, I stayed at Hill & Knowlton, but was providing him briefing materials about international issues and leaders he met with, and I traveled with him on several trips. Then there was the Clinton campaign.

Q: Right. Okay. Do you want to go into your activity with the Clinton campaign now or should we pause?

FITZ-PEGADO: I think we should pause.

Q: Now we are resuming, and have gotten up to 1992 with Lauri Fitz-Pegado.

FITZ-PEGADO: So, in 1992, I was still at Hill & Knowlton, but my activities with the Democratic Party through Ron Brown had started back in the 1980s. But it was on a volunteer basis, I want to make that clear. I never worked directly for the party. As I said, I had worked at conventions and meetings with Ron Brown, like in 1988 at the convention in Atlanta, and soon thereafter he became chairman of the party. I had traveled with him at his request and done research on international issues. For example, in 1990, we took a major trip to Africa.

Q: Just curious, did the trip to Africa result in better commercial ties or any outcome, or was it more to begin to build towards some other kinds of activities?

FITZ-PEGADO: I had been to Africa before. My first trip to Africa was in 1986 with Jesse Jackson, Sr. Jesse Jackson, Jr. was on the trip, and Santita Jackson, his daughter, and several other folks. I don't remember if I talked about that at all. Oh, I didn't mention that? Okay, so I'll mention that in 1986, which was very important. I believe we went to about eight countries, and this was before Reverend Jesse Jackson's run for president. Of the types of meetings we had with leaders all over from West Africa to East Africa to Southern Africa, I remember that we were invited to Bishop Tutu's investiture when we were in Botswana, and we declined the invitation because we would have had to get visas as honorary whites.

Q: Because it's 1986 and apartheid is still—

FITZ-PEGADO: Right. We joined a protest against apartheid in London, England when we stopped there on our way to Africa. We went through London, and there were major anti-apartheid protests going on. It was kind of ironic that we were so close by in Botswana when we had this opportunity, this honor, to go to the investiture of Bishop Desmond Tutu, whom we knew by reputation and some of us had met when he visited the U.S and we decided not to go in protest to a system that would require us to play by their discriminatory rules.

So, we marched to Botswana's border with South Africa. We were in Botswana, in Gaborone, and that was kind of our moment. We prayed there at the border, and prayed for Bishop Tutu and his investiture and the end of apartheid. It was a really life-changing trip for me because it was the second time I had been to Sub-Saharan Africa. I had been to Angola when Gray & Company represented Angola, which was quite an interesting experience, because we had dropped the account under major pressure. We were representing the government of Angola, the MPLA [The People's Movement for the Liberation of Angola], whereas another company in town, I believe, then called Black, Manafort, Stone, and Kelly—I think some of those names might be recognizable, mean something today—was representing the opposition, led by Jonas Savimbi.

So, there was a little clash of lobbying firms going on here in Washington, D.C., and I think that some of my colleagues who had been very active in the Bush administration, and also Bob Gray who had of course been active in Republican politics since the Eisenhower administration, were not comfortable with continuing to represent the government of the MPLA, I should say, because there was no ceasefire at that time.

They kind of backed out of it, which did not make me very happy, because we had accepted to represent these guys and to try to get some type of normalization of trade relations because they had said that they wanted to embrace more of a commercial and capitalist system of doing business, even though they had traditionally been known as Marxist. The war was still going on, and the U.S. had taken certain sides during the war with South Africa.

Q: Right. This was still the Reagan administration.

FITZ-PEGADO: This is still Reagan, and this is still constructive engagement. This is Andy Young, and this is his resignation from the UN [United Nations]. All of these things are happening at the same time. So, I had been there with Jesse Jackson, but then I went back with Ron Brown, and that was a very interesting experience as well, while he was chairman of the party, because we were among the first delegations of Americans—

Q: Now, Brown became chairman of the party in 1988?

FITZ-PEGADO: 1989, I think. After the convention—the convention was in the summer of 1988, and I think the actual election was in 1989, I believe.

Q: Because you had mentioned last time that Brown took a lead role in reconciling Jesse Jackson with Dukakis.

FITZ-PEGADO: Exactly, at the convention in Atlanta, Georgia. Jackson asked Brown to be his representative at the convention, so he was the convention director or manager. But, it was a lot more than just what was happening on the convention floor. It was also the political behind-the-scenes negotiations that were going on between Dukakis and Jackson, which were tough.

Ron was very good at brokering those types of things, and so Dukakis came out of the convention with some momentum, but was pretty much lost as things went forward and, of course, we know the result of the election. But Ron came out of that convention with quite a few feathers in his cap as having brokered that, and he got a lot of exposure in the press—I was his press secretary at the convention, and he got a lot of exposure and a lot of very good exposure. He was very good in interviews—charismatic, knowledgeable; he was always very good in those situations.

So, from that he was able to, contrary to the beliefs of a lot of people who didn't think that he would make it, be elected the chairman of the Democratic Party. First black chairman. It wasn't easy, but there were a lot of people who were working to help make that happen.

Maybe now, today, they think about the campaigns for chairman of the party, because this one was so contentious recently, resulting in Perez becoming the chairman, but they're tough campaigns that are run for chairmanships. Then there are some chairmen who are seen as really important chairmen and leaders of the party, kind of on par with the leadership in the Congress, and there are other chairmen who are kind of backseat chairmen. Ron Brown was pretty much an out-front chairman.

In that capacity, I think it was 1989 that he must have assumed the chairmanship, so he was instrumental in leading the party in the next election cycle. Clearly, very instrumental. I understand that he was at the top of the ladder in terms of the recommendation and the approach to Bill Clinton to run for president.

So, in that regard, in those years subsequent to the convention in 1988 and up through the election of Bill Clinton in 1992, I was very active with Ron Brown in assisting him on international issues and some domestic issues in my spare time, because I was still full-time at Hill & Knowlton. So, I got involved in campaign-related issues, then when the election occurred and Bill Clinton won—I was actually traveling in Argentina when I got a phone call from Ron Brown, who was able to track me down there in a meeting that I was pulled out of. I said, "Oh, my goodness, what's happened?" I thought somebody had died, you know? "What's going on here?"

I got on the phone and he, in his typical way, called me Fitzarooni. "Fitzarooni, I need you to do something for me."

I said, “What’s that, Ron? I’m in a meeting here in Argentina, in Buenos Aires.”

“I need you to become one of the directors of the Clinton-Gore inaugural committee. I’m the chairman of the inaugural committee, and I need you to become the director of the public liaison responsibilities at the inaugural committee. That means you’re going to have to take a leave of absence from your job, and you’re going to have to work on this for the next couple of months, full-time.” Back in those days that’s how it was done.

I said, “Can I think about it?”

He said, “Not long,” in typical fashion. He says, “You really have to do this for me.”

So, I came back and I had to meet with Rahm Emanuel, who was the day-to-day—Ron was chairman of the inaugural committee, but he was—I don’t know what his title was, executive director, president, whatever. I won’t go into that meeting. But, I had to pass the Rahm Emanuel test, and there were some things that I had to deal with.

One thing that resurfaced was the negative press I had received two years earlier related to the Kuwait client, Citizens for a Free Kuwait. I discussed that in detail earlier.

Q: We don’t have to revisit that, but I didn’t ask you earlier, had they themselves created an organizing committee? Were there key officials that you worked with or was it more general? It’s hard to imagine how refugees who are located, some in the U.S., some in Europe, how they organize themselves to have this done.

FITZ-PEGADO: Right. They had an office, they had leaders. They called themselves Citizens for a Free Kuwait. They had tentacles into universities; they had students around the country who were here. They were, from what we saw, many of them very wealthy. Some of them had contacts or connections with the royal family of Kuwait. They were across the board: businesspeople, students, regular workers, all kinds of folks. The common thread was that they had been basically locked out of their country, and many of them had suffered abuses that human rights organizations had written about.

Q: Absolutely. If you become a refugee, you must prove a reasonable expectation of persecution in your home country. So, just their status—

FITZ-PEGADO: Right. And how exactly that was all working, who knows. In 1990, before the Gulf war started, of what was required—

Q: Right. And you’re not responsible for that. That’s their own.

FITZ-PEGADO: They came to us as refugees. It was very difficult to get all kinds of detailed information at that time. Their country was still occupied. As I said earlier, I was the manager of that account.

So, the Kuwait issue did come back to haunt me in terms of my future political positions. One of those moments was when I had to sit down with Rahm Emanuel. Before, Ron Brown had asked me to do this, begged me to do this. I come back from Argentina, I go in, I sit down with Rahm Emanuel, and Rahm Emanuel goes through this grilling about the Kuwaiti incident. “I’ve read about you, and it says that you lied.”

I must have passed his test. I became one of the directors of the inaugural committee and served my time there, which was twenty-four/seven. By the way, I had a baby girl, Briana, by then. I was pregnant with her when I was going through all of these attacks about the babies in the incubators. I was pregnant when I was on *60 Minutes*. I was pregnant when I was being grilled by *Harper's* reporter on whether babies were taken out of incubators or not, so I did say, at one point, to *Harper's,* “I don’t give a shit whether it was one baby or ten.”

He says, “Well, you said they were babies!”

I said, “It doesn’t matter.” I said, “Even if it was one, it was too many.”

So, that quote was taken out of context and used later on, which I’ll get to, and as I said, I was pregnant, so for me this was a very personal issue to talk about babies taken out of incubators. At any rate, it was a very difficult time. I got through it, worked at the inaugural committee, brought my child on the weekends there, strapped on my chest. It was crazy, but it was a fabulous experience. That was the first inaugural, and I worked on the diplomatic ball. I worked on outreach to the LGBTQ [lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer] community, to African-Americans, to Latinos, Asians. We had events for everything that was going on, and it was a great experience. I met and engaged with a broad range of people and organizations in a short period of time expanding my network and ending up being useful to me down the line.

During that time, Ron Brown very much wanted to serve in the Clinton Administration. His primary interest was to be secretary of state. I think that the path to becoming secretary of state was not going to be a direct one, so there was discussion of him becoming the U.S. ambassador to the United Nations (UN) because several secretaries of state have followed that path. He considered it, there was a kitchen cabinet-type discussion with some of us about it.

Ron always wanted to be the first. He believed that breaking barriers was important, and he wouldn’t have been the first African-American ambassador to the UN. First was Andy Young, and then Don McHenry. It also would have required a move to New York City. I thought the ambassadorship and a move back to his home city was a good idea. He could have re-established himself in New York City and opened doors to later be elected to some state political position. While he wasn’t convinced that moving out of Washington, D.C., the center of national politics was for him, Secretary of State Warren Christopher’s insistence that he report to him and not directly to Clinton, sealed his decision to turn down the job. There was a precedent for a UN ambassador to be a cabinet member and report to the president.

So, Ron was offered the position of commerce secretary. I just remember when all this happened, because I received a phone call from him when I was a director at the Clinton-Gore Inaugural Committee.

I got a call saying, "I'm on my way to Little Rock, Arkansas because they're going to have a press conference and they're going to announce my nomination to be secretary of commerce."

I said, "Oh, okay, that's great. Congratulations!" He says, "I want you to work on my confirmation process." I said, "Sure Ron, whatever you need."

I was part of the team, and was his personal representative to his confirmation process. So, through that whole craziness, I had to talk to the FBI [Federal Bureau of Investigation], to this one, that one, the people who were interviewing him. I'd go through and be sure that his accountants had stuff in order, that his lawyers did this, that, and the other thing, and it was quite an intense process.

Q: Oh, sure. For any cabinet official, there's so much paper to fill out and so on.

FITZ-PEGADO: Exactly. And then he was among the first confirmed. He pretty much sailed through a lot of that, which was great. He then said, "So, you're coming over right, to Commerce?"

Before I talk about my response to him, let me come back to your question about that trip to Africa, because I think it has significance now. When we went to Africa, when he was chairman of the party, it was really designed as not only a political trip—it was political, economic, commercial, ironically. Maybe it was some kind of a visionary thing for him, about combining politics and commercial activity. I think he even called it a trip for political and trade issues.

So, when we were in these countries in Africa, there was talk about business and trade, along with political progress, and he met with all parties. He didn't just meet with the party in power in the countries we visited, he went to visit business. He visited communities. He was always a person who wanted to get into a community and see what they were doing and talk with the people about the issues, and we did that throughout Africa. We were among the first delegation in 1990, I think it was 1990 that we went to meet with Nelson Mandela, because he had gotten out of jail.

But, apartheid was still in place, so I remember walking the halls of the foreign ministry with Ron Brown in Pretoria, South Africa, and having people come out of their offices to look at us. Kind of come to the edge of the door with a look that said, "Who are these people? Who are these Black people walking the halls?"

It was a very significant trip for all of us, but particularly special was going to Soweto, South Africa, to the home of Nelson Mandela, because he was still living in his original

home. He came back to his original home with Winnie Mandela. Winnie Mandela was in the kitchen, she came out, she said hello, and it was just us. It was Ron Brown, Alma Brown, his wife, Lynn Cutler, who was a vice chair of the DNC [Democratic National Committee], Bill Morton, who was Ron's very faithful right hand, and myself.

We met with Nelson Mandela. What an honor—in that meeting and all the others in South Africa. But part of the conversation always included a range of issues—the importance of politics, leadership in the party, of having multi-party systems, of economic development, inclusion of the private sector in dialogue and in politics, development, growth of youth. It was always that type of discussion with Ron Brown.

Q: And at this moment with Ron Brown, he's going as head of the Democratic Party?

FITZ-PEGADO: Correct, as head of the Democratic Party. But then, ironically, he became secretary of commerce and, remember, wanted to be secretary of state. So, Ron Brown always kind of saw this nexus of politics and commerce, and this was the root of what became his policy and the development of commercial diplomacy.

There are many who have adopted this commercial diplomacy mantra. It was reborn in this last administration, which I was thrilled to see happen, because it was Ron Brown who developed it among his cadre there, and who really implemented it in a way that was interesting. So, Ron Brown was confirmed. He became the secretary of commerce.

He was very serious about providing opportunities for young people, for women, for people of color. His circle there at the Commerce Department was just amazing in how diverse it was, and frankly how talented it was. He had people who have gone on to do really impactful things in subsequent years, and he really did gather the best and brightest, and really spoke to the whole concept of—people often say, "Well, I can't find any minorities who are good at this, or who have the background to do that."

He found us. It was a fantastic moment in time, in history, really, because he was a visionary. He was a great boss, he was really determined to achieve his goals, and he had a lot of creative people around him who helped make that happen. He was able to thrive. So, he said to me, "Do you want to come over to Commerce?" And he said, "communications director," and I said, "Thanks, but I don't want to do that." I've done a lot of that in my life, starting with the Foreign Service in some ways, as a kind of PR at USIS. Sure, in the Foreign Service, I worked in Cultural Affairs, but I had worked on broadcast media, and the press officer part, and then I had been at a PR firm at Gray & Company, then at Hill & Knowlton, but a lot of what I enjoyed doing was the broader strategy, policy. I felt that being put into the communications box was limiting in many ways. I admire people who do it, but I didn't want to do that for the next four years.

So, he says, "Well, what do you want to do?"

And I said, "I don't know. Let me think about it." So, I pulled out The Plum Book, and I really will give credit to Jill Schuker, my colleague and good friend. She worked with me

at Gray & Company and at Hill & Knowlton, and I think Jill's office was next to mine at the time. I said, "I don't really know what I'm going to do."

So, we went through the book, and she said, "What about this job? This looks really good."

Q: Take one second: The Plum Book is the book that lists all of the positions in a given agency, so in this case with Commerce.

FITZ-PEGADO: Right. So, she found this job and it was in this section called "The U.S. and Foreign Commercial Service." If I had my druthers, I would have wanted to be at the Department of State with my diplomatic background and my interest in policy and foreign affairs. So, it really looked like it was the best place at the Commerce Department, that it was the closest clone of the Department of State.

I said, "Well, this is interesting. I didn't even know this was there." I told Ron. I said, "What I want to be is the head of the U.S. and Foreign Commercial Service [USFCS]." This service was both domestic and overseas. It had ninety offices throughout the United States, in major cities, and 130 foreign offices.

We expanded it quite a bit during my tenure because there was a congressional mandate, there was legislation passed requiring the expansion in the United States of these offices. Every member in Congress wanted one of these offices, because these were the people who were basically serving their constituents' small and medium sized enterprises, helping them to export their widgets or services to a foreign country. In doing so, they were creating jobs, and export-related jobs paid more than domestic jobs, so what politician wouldn't want one in their district?

I did become the head of the U.S. and Foreign Commercial Service. It was one of the longest titles, unfortunately. It was, "assistant secretary and director general of the U.S. and Foreign Commercial Service." That was my title, and that meant that in order to be confirmed, I had to be reported out of two committees before reaching the floor committees before I went to the floor for a vote.

Q: But both of the committees were CSJ—Commerce, State, Justice?

FITZ-PEGADO: And Banking. That was not fun. This is why I told the story about Kuwait because among the things I had to be accountable for, and there were a couple of things that had nothing to do with Kuwait, but that were interesting because Ron Brown had gotten through so easily. He and I had both represented Haiti from 1982 to 1986.

Q: Oh. Baby Doc.

FITZ-PEGADO: Right. So, I don't even know if he got a question about it, but I certainly did. You have to go meet with senators, staff or both. First, the committee folks, and for me, I not only had to meet with the committee folks because I was controversial, but also

because of my representation of foreign countries, particularly Kuwait. There were all kinds of questions about whether I knew that this young girl was lying? I still to this day don't believe she was lying, but how do I know? Also, did I mislead members of Congress? Even to the point where, ironically, if you go back and look at the transcript of—

Well, I finally got to a vote, but I was held up in committee for a very long time, and ironically, I was held up at one point by a Democrat, Fritz Hollings. So, it seems that I became controversial to both Democrats and Republicans, and Fritz Hollings held me up because he was against the war and he heard that I was involved, so he even went as far as to say that I had responsibility, or some responsibility, I don't remember what the quote was, for the Gulf War on the floor of the U.S. Senate. I was held up for a long time, but I got through. Ron Brown at one point called me in and said, "You know Lauri, you don't have to do this. I can withdraw your name, and you can have another job here at Commerce doing something else."

Q: It must have been difficult if he's actually going to you and saying, "Wow, you're really being raked over the coals. I'm prepared to—"

FITZ-PEGADO: Withdraw. Well, he had talked to the White House, and you never quite know where people are coming down. There were other people interested in the position. It was a highly coveted job, a great job, but you know, my dad had retired from the Department of Commerce just a couple years before I was appointed. I grew up in a home where, as I said before, my dad was a tough cookie. He taught me never to give up, and I felt at the moment when Ron called me up to his office, and I'm sitting there in one of the most beautiful offices in the government, and he says, "Fitzarooni, you don't have to do this. If you really think you've had enough, you've been through a lot, I'll find you another job and you can do something else."

And I said, "Let me sleep on it and get back to you."

I heard my father's voice saying, "You can get through this. You know you're right, know you haven't done anything wrong. Don't let these people get you down."

I went back the next day and I said, "Nope. I'm going to hang in there." There were people on Ron's personal staff who, I learned later, had basically advised him to cut me loose.

Q: Right. There's always that excruciating sensitivity at the beginning of an administration that there not be a single potential embarrassment cloud, and of course, they're all over.

FITZ-PEGADO: Right. But Ron, to his credit, was going to let me make this decision. I mean, we had been through a lot. It wasn't like I was just somebody that he brought in. I had known this guy for a long time. So, I said to him, "No, I want to stick it out." He then kind of mobilized, and his wonderful wife, Alma, whom I loved, and she loved me, too,

she had Senator Hollings who was holding me in the Commerce Committee, and his wife over for dinner.

Needless to say, I was reported out of the Commerce and Banking Committees and went to the Senate floor. But instead of one majority vote, I had to have a cloture vote first. I tell you, some of the Commerce folks, like Sally Sussman, who was my personal congressional affairs designee at Commerce—she was with me every day up on the Hill, every meeting. We must have gone to the offices of almost one hundred senators. I had to have a cloture vote, so I needed those sixty votes in order to get to a confirmation vote. After I had gone through the committee—and there were various holds, not just Hollings.

A couple of other people placed holds on me too and a couple of other senators had been really nasty. I mean, press releases: "America Can Do Better Than This: The Case Against Lauri Fitz-Pegado" from a senator's office. Another senator, on a really personal issue, which was—she was misinformed—she was holding me. I had to go in and do the "*mea culpa*" (my fault), even though what she thought wasn't true, and explain what the real situation was. It was just crazy stuff, and I feel for these people who are going through confirmation, because it's worse now. It was bad then, but it's worse now.

I won my cloture vote, and my confirmation vote, after three hours, I heard the debate on the floor. Now, why would Lauri Fitz-Pegado merit that kind of time and effort? I'm embarrassed by it. But, anyway, I got through, took on the job. I had been waiting for almost a year. I had been at the Commerce Department, but could not act in that particular position. I was a special assistant to the secretary, or a senior advisor—I don't know what I was called; something like that.

I was in a position where I was working on things, and they were always interesting things, but there were moments that really were horrible. I had worked on the first trade mission after the lifting of sanctions against South Africa. I had spent from college, as I told you, protesting at anti-apartheid demonstrations. To see those sanctions lifted and the first trade mission ever of the United States to South Africa, with the whole trajectory of my life, I couldn't go. I couldn't go, because I wasn't confirmed and I couldn't act in the position I was nominated for.

When I saw all of my colleagues, Ron and all these business people get on that plane to go to South Africa on that trade mission, my heart just broke. There were things like that, which happened during that year, while I was a senior advisor waiting to be confirmed. I worked on projects, but around the edges. Anyway, I certainly made up for it later. So, I started my job, and what an experience it was.

Q: Before you go on with the specific experience here, when Ron Brown arrived at Commerce and he had some goals, he had some ambitions for it, did he do any reorganizations to advance the vision that he had, or did he more or less look at the way things were organized and say, "Yeah, I can work within this"?

FITZ-PEGADO: Oh, he definitely did things to advance the vision. There was a strategy of commercial diplomacy, which was kind of at the heart of the things that he did. So, he took trade missions to troubled spots in the world to rebuild, to work on development. He opened offices in the former Soviet republics, commercial offices.

He developed strategies around the "big emerging markets." There were markets in the world that were designated "big emerging markets" where we opened stand-alone commercial centers, including: Indonesia, India, Mexico, South Korea, Argentina, Turkey, China, Brazil, and South Africa. We developed plans to focus and enhance existing trade and commercial relationships between the U.S. and those countries.

We opened the Advocacy Center, at Commerce in the International Trade Administration, which was a place for major U.S. companies to get assistance and support from various government agencies. This resource was intended to help them compete more effectively and win when bidding on projects in foreign markets. So, if they were trying to go up against a German company or a French company—the European companies were eating our lunch in terms of winning a lot of these contracts, for airplanes and major projects in various industries. This advocacy network at Commerce, enlisted ambassadors, our ambassadors in these countries, to take on more aggressively a commercial portfolio, and to organize country teams around helping American companies to be able to compete and win in these markets, and also helping the small and medium sized companies.

There were commercial officers in a lot of countries, but not all. In the countries where there was no commercial officer, State Department economic/commercial officers took on this effort, when ambassadors provided the leadership and prioritized supporting U.S. companies winning these opportunities.

Many companies talked about the change, the change in attitude, the support they were getting that they hadn't gotten before, the advocacy efforts, the fact that they were winning more contracts. It became a big deal. When Ron Brown traveled, he would take trade missions, U.S. company CEOs [chief executive officers] and senior executives. He led these trade missions and wasn't shy about advocating for these companies. There were more wins; he would meet with foreign government leaders and say, "Hey, Mr. President or Mr. Finance or Trade Minister, this is our American company. They're really qualified to win this contract. So, let's be sure there's a level playing field here."

Q: Right. I'll give you one example of how that filters all the way down to the working level. This is obviously many years after Ron Brown established this, but in Costa Rica, which was my last foreign post, in 2012, the embassy was trying to assist U.S. companies to bid on large public works activities in Costa Rica, and one was a road. So, it would end up having to be a toll road, and there was a great deal of opposition in general in Costa Rica against toll roads. Nobody liked the idea of having to pay tolls.

So, part of the strategy was to begin to educate the population that, yes, you pay a toll, but you get something for paying the toll. It's not like an invisible tax where you don't know where your money's going. You see what you are getting for that toll: you're getting

a road that isn't simply open, but that's maintained, even after hurricanes, even after floods, so that you can get from place to place and so that you can get your goods to market and you can get to the beach for a vacation and so on.

As the public affairs officer, I was recruited to help the entire commercial effort with public affairs packages about how toll roads actually work, and how they are good for development in these developing countries. So, it got all the way down to the public affairs person in the embassy to help sell the basic idea so that U.S. companies could bid with a little bit more confidence that they would be taken seriously. It got that far down.

FITZ-PEGADO: Yeah, absolutely. That's important, and those are the things that were so rewarding: when we saw American companies win, when we saw ambassadors embracing a commercial priority. I used to meet with, or at least try to meet with, every new ambassador before they went out, and talk about the commercial agenda and how we could cooperate. The senior commercial officer reported to the ambassador and to me. In their evaluation reports, the ambassador would contribute to that, but we had our own assignment and promotion boards, internal to Commerce.

A lot of people don't know that there are Foreign Service officers who hail from the Commerce Department, and that's why they're called Foreign Commercial officers. Everyone thinks that the only Foreign Service officers are from the State Department, but you've got at the Agricultural Department, the Foreign Agricultural Service's Foreign Agricultural officers. You have the U.S. Agency for International Development Foreign Service officers.

There's this misconception out there that somehow everybody in the Foreign Service is from the State Department. Oh, and you used to have USIS officers, where I started my Foreign Service career, but now they're part of the State Department, the public diplomacy part of the State Department. But, for me it was interesting, because when I came into the job, the reaction from career folks was, "Oh, here's another political appointee. What does she know?" You know how that goes.

But because I had been a career Foreign Service officer, I had a little bit more cred, I think. I also knew how the system worked, and I wasn't going to just walk in there and continue with business as usual. So, there were things that I did to change the Foreign Commercial Service, some that people liked, some that they didn't.

I had to manage three personnel systems: civil service employees, who were in the domestic field, Foreign Commercial Service officers overseas, and foreign national employees working in the foreign commercial offices. I also had to interface with the Foreign Service Union [AFSA]. It was a lot. On my senior staff were a PDAS [principal deputy assistant secretary], I had a DAS [deputy assistant secretary] responsible for the domestic field, I had a DAS for the overseas field, the Foreign Service officers, and a DAS responsible for events, trade shows, and trade missions. So, I had four deputy assistant secretaries. It was just a huge operation. So after some time in the position, my view was that more people from the domestic field might be interested in and might be

very good at working in the foreign field, and might want to become Foreign Service officers. They were the ones who were on the ground in the U.S. dealing with the companies, with the small and medium sized companies and oftentimes with the big companies that were headquartered across the country.

You know, how few companies are headquartered in Washington, D.C., the DMV [District of Columbia, Maryland, and Virginia]. So, they had these relationships with companies in the ninety offices throughout the U.S. They had the on-the-ground experience, and they probably would be very good at understanding and serving the interests of their constituency, of our constituency as the Commercial Service.

The thing is, you have Foreign Service officers, some of whom were overseas for years and had limited contact with these U.S.-based companies. They'd come back to Washington, D.C., and be assigned to headquarters. They never served in the domestic field offices, and they often lost touch with, in my view, their constituencies. So, I mixed it up, and I required the Foreign Service officers to do a domestic tour every so often.

Also, if you were coming into the Foreign Commercial Service for the first time, you had to do a domestic tour first, before you went overseas. It used to be, you went immediately overseas, but you need to know what you're doing. So, you come in, you serve a domestic tour, you figure out what these companies want and need, and then you go do your overseas tour. So, there was a lot of noise about that change, because a lot of people didn't like that. But I thought it was an important change in getting in touch with what the needs were of the people we were serving.

Q: Now, the other thing about commercial diplomacy is finding out and using all of the resources available to you in the U.S., such as OPIC [Overseas Private Investment Corporation] or others that I'm not even aware of, and I imagine that that was also part of what you were trying to accomplish by bringing the officers back to the U.S., or starting them in the U.S., so that they are aware of all of the potentials that they might not be aware of if they're overseas.

FITZ-PEGADO: Absolutely, and that's another thing that Ron Brown did. During his tenure, something called the TPCC was created. The Trade Promotion Coordinating Committee. That brought all of these agencies together, with the purpose of developing an export strategy. Also, when he went on trips, he took other agencies with him, which apparently was unprecedented. He would take, and maybe this is the commercial diplomacy again—I remember him taking people from the African Development Bank or the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development, or from OPIC or from Exim [Export-Import Bank], the Trade Development Agency, or from the National Economic Council or the National Security Council, on these trips. If he felt that there was a national security/commercial objective in a country, he invited the appropriate person from the State Department and the NSC [National Security Council].

But we would take people with us from the administration who were responsible for that country or region of the world, so that they could participate in the dialogue, in the effort,

and in the promotion of the companies, and commercial interests of our country. I think that his other legacy was the integration of and cooperation of government agencies where we worked together. There wasn't that competition among agencies.

Q: And he was trying to break down some of the stove piping.

FITZ-PEGADO: Exactly. And also, the Export Assistance Centers—there had been domestic offices before, but they were renamed U.S. Export Assistance Centers, USEACs, across the United States. Many of them housed multiple agencies. They included the Export-Important Bank, USAID [U.S. Agency for International Development] and sometimes a State Development Office in some of them. So, these one stop shops, as they were called, with several agencies to coordinate and meet the needs of companies that wanted to export, were where they could go to one place and learn what each agency might do for them.

Q: Now, what about other entities from the private sector or, let's say, from universities, or from, perhaps—I think this is the moment when business incubators begin becoming a potential, where you have university research, alongside a corporation looking for or developing a particular product, alongside the state government, which is trying to promote it with tax, etcetera—

FITZ-PEGADO: There was some of that happening already. For example, in our new office in South Africa, there was also the Illinois State Development Office. So, there was some partnering between federal and state. As for universities, there may have been some. I'm not totally aware.

Remember, I'm only talking about trade and the International Trade Administration, which is only one part of Commerce. You've got NIST [National Institute of Standards and Technology], you've got NOAA [National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration], the Patent and Trademark Office. Commerce is huge. You've got all of these places that also are doing foreign, many of whom are doing international programs, working with universities and research. All kinds of things, which I should remember and be able to talk to you about, but I can't, so I'm going to limit it to what I know.

Q: No, you're right. I was an intern at the Department of Commerce for two years, way back when I was a student, and yes, it's huge, and the amount of things going on there is very difficult to keep in mind.

FITZ-PEGADO: Right. It really is amazing. One reason why I did not, when I was asked, at a certain point in my tenure, Ron asked me to become his chief of staff. He says, "You've done well, you've done all this good stuff. It's time for you to do something else."

And I said, "I'm flattered that you asked. I'm sorry. That's just not what I want to do," I said. I knew his chiefs of staff. One had resigned after two years. Left. The Department of Commerce was so huge. It was just a mind-boggling job. All of these different agencies,

staying on top of all of those things. It's a management and administrative job, and that's not where I wanted to be. But I agree with you, it is tremendously diverse.

Q: So, now, you've begun the job as the head of the USFCS—the U.S. and Foreign Commercial Service—and you've begun making the changes to the Service that you saw as necessary in order to make them more effective. Now, perhaps, you can talk about how you went out to evaluate things after they had begun.

FITZ-PEGADO: Right. Well, I did a lot of traveling as director general. A lot to my domestic and foreign offices, opening of offices in the U.S. and new commercial centers abroad and traveling with Ron on trade missions. My folks were responsible on the ground for making things work. Of course, his immediate staff—I wasn't on the secretary's staff where the detailed schedule for him was organized. I was in the International Trade Administration [ITA] and reported to the undersecretary. I had great colleagues at ITA.

There were four assistant secretaries in the International Trade Administration. The names of each section were changed several times during my tenure and now have been reorganized with current names that I don't know. They've changed a lot of their names. But there were four assistant secretaries, and we worked pretty well together. We had our moments, usually over re-organization or management of new programs.

There was an undersecretary and a deputy undersecretary. The undersecretary was Jeff Garten, and the deputy undersecretary was David Rothkopf. I will say that the two of them—a lot of what happened, whether it was creating a big emerging markets strategy, commercial diplomacy, all those things, were very much from the ITA level. Rothkopf, Garten, people around them, some of us. It was a pretty top-notch team.

We're all very proud of what we were able to achieve there. These projects, like TPCC, the Advocacy Center, the big emerging markets, the expansion of the Commercial Service—all of these things happened during the Ron Brown years. Then you had trade development committees divided by sector. These were designed for private sector members to contribute to policy development.

At any rate, one of the things in terms of changing the system and how it worked that was very important to me was being sure that the field operations, particularly overseas, domestically, too, but particularly overseas, dealt with underrepresented commercial groups, or underrepresented groups of people who had the potential to be in business or commercially engaged.

Ron, as I said, had hired a lot of people who were talented, who hadn't had opportunities, who were diverse, and that was ingrained in me for a very long time, and clearly the Foreign Commercial Service did not look very diverse when I came in. I'm not going to say it looked terribly diverse when I left, but there were opportunities created through this kind of domestic integration. People went into the Foreign Service who weren't normally

from the domestic and civil service. There were more opportunities created for people who wanted to pursue that path that I felt very good about.

Overseas, there was a network of officers who served in Europe. That's not uncommon. They were kind of the big guys, the club, and then there were the people who served elsewhere. These FCS officers were accustomed to serving in the European circuit, and that's where they wanted to stay. So, I tried to break that up a little bit.

Q: That's not going to make you popular.

FITZ-PEGADO: No, I didn't care about popularity. It wasn't a popularity contest for me. I just wanted to create some kind of legacy and some meaningful changes that I thought were significant to the future of the organization. So, I also imposed upon the system, in terms of evaluations, a requirement that each post address underrepresented folks.

Q: And the thing about underrepresented potential commercial or trade people in these countries is, the more you make them stakeholders in the open market, the more they support open market policies. I mean, how can they even care whether there's a market economy in their country if they have no stake in it?

FITZ-PEGADO: I wanted to ensure that we reached beyond some of the more marginalized companies and communities, which might have been micro-enterprises, but which might show or have our offices abroad reach a more diverse economic, commercial group of people. Sometimes, those more diverse people, the marginalized ones, might be racially, ethnically different from the mainstream of the company. Case in Brazil: the Afro-Brazilians, many of whom are in those "favelas." Every country has a marginalized, or economically disenfranchised, or a community that may want to be better engaged in commercial activities.

So, I added a dimension to the evaluation reports, asking, "How are you reaching out to diversify your base of contacts, of opportunities, and inclusion?" That didn't meet with universal support, either.

There were people who came back and said, "My country's homogeneous. There's no diversity."

My answer to that was, "Find it." Every country has diversity. Every country has marginalized people. I'm not telling you that it has to be racial diversity, or ethnic or religious. Maybe it's women. I don't know. Maybe it's young people. I don't know what it is, but you can find some dimension of marginalization that you can find a way to include.

A lot of interesting things occurred through that. I think in Saudi Arabia, there was some type of reading room thing for women that was set up. But, you know, people got creative when they were challenged. So, that, to me, is what Ron Brown's leadership reaped, and

for people who worked with him and for him, it was challenging you to think creatively, inclusively. To educate, to learn, and to achieve.

Right, and they're not benefitting from it. Many of these people, of course, are diverse people. So, I got pushback. Oh, did I ever get pushback. "What are you talking about? You're going to evaluate us based on whether we're doing outreach to minorities? There are no minorities here! This is Japan! It's a homogeneous country."

I said, "Oh, are there women there?" I said, "There is no place where there isn't some sort of underrepresented group."

With Saudi Arabia: "What do you think we're going to do in Saudi Arabia? We can't reach out to women." They ended up setting up reading rooms. There are things that can be done quietly in a country that are not offensive or disrespectful of cultural norms, but move the ball forward—create opportunities for those who otherwise wouldn't have them. Maybe it's youth. It's not always about race or ethnicity; sometimes it's about being creative about what "diversity" means, or what "underrepresented" means. Maybe it's a microenterprise that you need to bring into the mix.

So, I shook things up a little bit. I went to Brazil once, I remember, and I went to a reception, and the whole room was white. White Brazilians. And I said, "This country is majority of color. This is a very mixed country."

And I had been in meetings with Ron Brown where he said to the Brazilians, "What are you doing for Afro-Brazilians?" And then they called someone of color to the meeting suddenly, who appeared out of the woodwork and into the room. They said, "Oh, we have one!" Which is just not the same.

I remember giving a speech in Salvador, Bahia about bonds between African American and Brazilian slavery, and about the fact that I could have been a Brazilian had the slave ship dropped my ancestors off there instead of going to America, and that we were all part of the same—. And I remember that the mayor was looking at me like I was crazy.

So, I was always one to be true to what I believed was important in terms of message, in terms of equity, in terms of development, in terms of making a difference. I never bit my tongue about it. I tried to be diplomatic—remember I started as a career diplomat—but nonetheless, whether it was my employees, whether it was people with whom I was meeting, the business community, whether it was government—in terms of this whole commercial diplomacy thing, which I really identified with and grasped, because I believed that through commercial activity, one can often reach politicians, and sometimes it's even easier to deliver a political message through business and commercial activity.

I saw it time and again with Ron Brown, whether he was in China and there was a human rights problem and he was able to mention that in a conversation, or he was able to talk to a trade minister or somebody else about a problem. Sometimes he stepped on toes. There were some occasions with the State Department, or with USTR [United States Trade

Representative] on a trade negotiation where somebody wasn't happy that the secretary of commerce was getting into their territory. They were kind of like, "Hey, Ron Brown, you need to stay in your lane." But he was never one to listen to people talking about staying in your lane. If he thought he could effect change or he could move something forward, he did.

Q: It is tricky, because you're talking about the level of the ambassador where the priorities are set for the embassy, and the ambassador has certain views about where attention needs to be placed and the extent to which the Commercial representative or the Econ/Commercial officer pays attention to some things, and so it can create friction. That's just part of what happens.

FITZ-PEGADO: Well, at that level, yes, but at the secretary level—I'm talking about when Ron Brown was there, and he's talking to the president, or the minister of economic or commercial affairs. He would often raise something that was a bilateral issue that might have been considered the purview of the State Department, or the purview of the U.S. Trade Representative.

He did it all the time, because if he knew that here was an opportunity for him to try to further the U.S. agenda, he wasn't going to shy away from it because he was the secretary of commerce. He saw commercial diplomacy in a much broader context, and believed that if he could move a diplomatic agenda forward through a commercial route initially, then he was going to open that door and he was going to walk through it.

Q: Is there an example you can think of?

FITZ-PEGADO: I think that in China, for example, he became very friendly with the trade minister, Madame Wu Yi, who was a powerhouse. I know that in conversations with her—what is the purview of USTR versus Commerce on trade negotiations and that kind of thing, because it's supposed to be the U.S. Trade Representative, right? However, there's a little crossover there, and he had such a good relationship with this woman, that I think he would raise some broader issues, even outside of the trade realm, because he was so close to the leadership, to the top, that I think there might have been an occasion or two where there might have been a human rights issue that was going on that he might have mentioned.

I remember all of us walking behind them, one day. They went for a walk through the Forbidden City. What's that have to do with commercial relations? Here they are, walking along, Madame Wu Yi and Ron Brown, the rest of us traipsing behind, and they're talking. And he was so good at it; he was able to gain people's confidence.

He was probably the best negotiator I've ever seen, and he also had this way about him that he could just win them over. If he thought he could win somebody over and get something else done, he was going to do it, whether Warren Christopher wanted him to do it or not, or whether Mickey Kantor wanted it. So, you know, there were moments I'm

sure of, “Why is this man in my lane?” But it was our lane, right? It was Bill Clinton’s lane, it was the country’s lane, and whoever could get it done.

Q: Right. And, you know, he wasn’t doing it from the point of view of self-aggrandizement. He saw opportunities, and tried to take them. Interesting. Alright, we can pause here.

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Q: Okay. So, today is June 7th. We’re resuming with Lauri Fitz-Pegado as she moves towards the end of her tenure as the assistant secretary and director general of the U.S. and Foreign Commercial Service.

FITZ-PEGADO: The encompassed included two dimensions. One was being involved in trade policy and promotion with three other assistant secretaries in the International Trade Administration. One focused primarily on policy, one headed the Import Administration, and one focused on industry sectors. We all had to work well together because the outward facing presence in the U.S. and overseas was through the U.S. and Foreign Commercial Service, through my shop.

Sue Esserman and later, my deputy, Bob LaRussa, headed the Import Administration, Ray Vickery was the industry sector person, and Chuck Meissner was the policy person. This was when ITA [International Trade Administration] was led by Under Secretary Jeff Garten, and his Deputy David Rothkopf.

It was a team that worked well together and was at the center of building and promoting commercial diplomacy, Secretary Brown’s signature trade agenda. These newly established commercial centers were stand-alone operations located outside of the embassy complexes to facilitate access for the private sector. We opened these centers in the country’s major commercial/business cities—Shanghai, São Paulo, Johannesburg. The one in Illovo, Johannesburg was particularly significant because it was established soon after the lifting of U.S. sanctions against South Africa, the end of apartheid, and the transition to the Mandela presidency. Ron Brown led the first U.S. trade mission to South Africa, ever. So, that time in history was very special. Millard Arnold, the one allowed minister counselor for commercial affairs political appointee to each secretary of commerce during their tenure was selected for the South Africa post.

It was a very interesting time where we had a lot of visibility and support in the Congress for commercial expansion. FCS [Foreign Commercial Service] often had to take the lead on the Hill with the legislative office at Commerce, in meeting members of Congress. Our work resonated with members of Congress because it reaped results for their constituents, small and medium-sized enterprises [SMEs] and big corporate employers in their states and districts.

So, it was a great time for ITA, for the Department of Commerce. There was no one better than Ron Brown at lobbying. He was a master lobbyist and negotiator; he had

come from being a staffer on Capitol Hill, with Senator Ted Kennedy, political party leadership and the lobbying world, and he knew members of Congress, and they liked him. Having him as our leader in an expansionary period was a good thing. The U.S. had an actual national export strategy that was working.

Q: Can you take a second and just briefly review what the national export strategy was? Or at least, what it meant for your organization?

FITZ-PEGADO: Sure. The national export strategy was an interagency effort led by Ron Brown, but involving all of the major agencies involved in trade: Export-Import, OPIC [Overseas Private Investment Corporation], TDA [United States Trade and Development Agency], USTR, State Department, USAID. Every agency that was involved in development, trade, commercial activity.

The thing that was so fascinating about it was that a lot of times in the past, these agencies were very competitive, and there was always a lot of in-fighting, interagency, jockeying for positions. Ron Brown, the master negotiator, was able to bring these people together in a very complementary way, and a mutually supportive way. He expanded that beyond meeting on the national export strategy, and beyond the establishment of these USEACs.

We at Commerce were really into partnering and into collaboration, and Ron Brown was at the helm of that. His leadership facilitated that. He was the master of trade missions. When we traveled throughout the world, he took these high-level business representatives involved in industries of importance to the country to meet with their counterparts: the trade ministers, the commercial people, companies, and presidents. He was able to get in the door and take these businesses to meet the presidents and decision makers at the highest levels. He advocated for U.S. businesses.

The Advocacy Center was created under Ron Brown at the Commerce Department, and still exists today. It basically was an interagency effort to support companies and to advocate for businesses to win contracts around the world. So, all of this was such an exciting time in American commercial and trade promotion history.

We were all a part of that, and we were excited by it. We were doing it, and we were traveling, seeing American businesses win where they hadn't won before. They were competing against the French and the Germans, and they were winning contracts, and businesses were excited, because a lot of companies said that they didn't really know what the Commerce Department could do for them. Well, now they knew, and now they had an advocate, and they had an effective one.

So, he would take them on trips; when we went on trips abroad with trade missions, he invited the National Security Council. He had Susan Rice with us when we went to Africa, when we went to South Africa, or someone from her shop. He had someone from Madeline Albright's State Department with us on these trips. He had the head of TDA ,

Joe Grandmaison. He had the head of Exim-Bank Ken Brody or someone from that shop. He had someone from USAID.

There was an interagency synergy, camaraderie that developed. There's nothing like traveling with people to establish those kinds of relationships. He had somebody from SBA [Small Business Administration] to talk about how small businesses could benefit from this. We always had an interagency group on the plane, with the businesses, on trade missions. We had time to talk about policy issues, and to talk about trade issues. Companies were able to get to know each other. These were very special types of relationships that developed.

Q: Is there one example from any of these trips that resulted in a new American venture, or enterprise, or activity in any of these countries that stands out in your mind?

FITZ-PEGADO: Oh, there are so many. I don't want to point out one in particular, one company over another, but there were companies that had not won bids in various countries in the world, whether it was in India, whether it was in Egypt, whether it was in Brazil. Their CEOs will tell you to this day, and I will run into some of them, and they will say to me, "Ron Brown changed our dynamic in our company, because we were able to win that multi-billion-dollar contract or multi-million-dollar contract with the advocacy of Ron Brown and the support of the Advocacy Center."

I meet people who, when I mention the Foreign Commercial Service, they say, "Wow. I had a deal; I needed an agent or distributor for my product," or, "I was in Poland and I needed some help," or, "I was in the Czech Republic."

It doesn't matter. The image, I think, of Commerce's assistance and support and advocacy for companies, both small and large, I believe was transformed through the leadership of Ron Brown at that time. I'm not saying there wasn't good work done before, but maybe some of the visibility that he gave to it, perhaps the creation of some of these things like the Advocacy Center, like the new commercial operations in the big emerging markets. Now, what happened after that time, I don't know.

Q: Before we go a little bit further: You have the Advocacy Centers and the major hubs for these emerging markets. At the same time, you also had FCS officers in other countries, important places, important countries, but not necessarily in the big emerging market locations. Do you want to talk a little bit about what was going on with FCS as these other initiatives are going forward?

FITZ-PEGADO: Sure. The rest of FCS was moving well. There were, as I said, efforts on my part, definitely, to change the paradigm of how long people served overseas. The fact that I wanted them to come back in a certain number of years to reacquaint themselves with the American body politic and business/commercial capitals in the United States, and to go and serve a tour in the U.S., that wasn't met with a lot of support throughout.

There were people who didn't like that, and didn't want to do that. They didn't want to come back from overseas. They were Foreign Service officers, and they wanted to be in the Foreign Service, and they wanted to serve abroad. Or, in Washington, D.C., they didn't necessarily want to go and live in Dubuque.

So, that evolved, and I think we were able to accommodate people to the extent possible. I also moved people, which is typical in a lot of the Foreign Service. You serve in one region. You're in Europe, you're a European hand and you stay in Europe. Well, I shook that up too, and I moved the barons of Europe out of Europe and into some other places, some of the big emerging markets, which were very important, or some other places in the world.

We also started trying to recruit more people from the domestic field into the Foreign Service, to encourage them to go through the process, to transition, to be tested, to go into the Foreign Service. We had some success with that. Their first tour was always a domestic tour so that they could get ready, and maybe a domestic tour in a place where there was a lot of international activity, like Miami or somewhere in Texas on the border, or something on the border of Canada. You know, something where they could get some experience but they were still serving a domestic tour.

All of those things were happening. Ron Brown was a proponent of ensuring that there was opportunity and inclusion for everyone. He never went on a foreign trip without visiting the community, or the workplace, or the factory, or where the people, normal everyday working people, were. Listening to them, hearing about their issues and concerns.

Those of us who helped plan those trips were people in his office of course, in the office of the secretary, but also in the Foreign Commercial Service, because we were the ones receiving him and the delegations in the field and had to work with the embassies to ensure that it was acceptable to the ambassador and the country team. But they knew that Ron Brown did not just want to be inside of ministries and office buildings, and that he wanted to get out into the communities.

There were often interesting discussions about that. I remember having a discussion with the Brazilian ambassador about Ron's desire to go to a "*favela*" (meaning slum in Portuguese) when he was in Rio de Janeiro. We had a very interesting debate about that, and I stuck to my guns, and he went to the "*favela.*" We basically looked at the creation of costumes for carnival. There was quite a microenterprise for the production of costumes in the "*favelas*." They're very elaborate costumes, as we all know, and there was the process of the kids learning how to sew, and the women sewing and getting fabrics and everything.

It was a great experience to actually go into the "*favelas*," which is an economically depressed area, and I think that the Brazilian ambassador didn't particularly want him to see that area of Rio, but that was Ron. I remember pictures of him there with the kids, and that's who he was, whether it was in Brazil, whether it was in Ghana, whether it was

in Senegal, it didn't matter where he was in the world. Even in Europe, he didn't want to stay in the typical places that people want to show you. He wanted to see for himself.

In that regard, I felt it was important that commercial officers, serving I don't care where in the world, would expand their reach beyond the typical commercial partners that they were sending American businesses to partner with. For example, in the U.S., the small and medium-sized enterprises are the ones that primarily use the services of the Foreign Commercial Service, because they don't have offices abroad, or access to that type of information, or they don't have the language or the culture, whatever.

They go to the Foreign Commercial Service to identify agents and distributors for their products, to set up appointments for them. If they have a widget, where do they sell that widget in the world? When they go to the office in the U.S., they go in to see the commercial officer in the domestic office, and they say, "I have a widget. I would like to export my widget. What market would find my widget interesting, or want to buy it? Where would I get the best price?" That's the conversation. It's a process.

There are programs offered in the domestic offices to acclimate them, to have them learn about the opportunities, and it might take a year or eighteen months or two years before they're ready to export, become export-ready companies, but once they do that and they go to the foreign market, I wanted to ensure that it wasn't always the same companies that the office abroad was offering partnerships to be an agent or a distributor.

Ron's creativity and his outreach, his desire to be inclusive and to help with development, growth, and transition, is how he died. He was very much involved, as I said, in creating these offices in big emerging markets, and helping countries in transition and war-torn places in the world to build again, to have economic development opportunities, to engage with American companies, to rebuild, and that was the case in Bosnia and Croatia.

Q: Very quick word here: I was working in Vienna at the time, at one of the international organizations as a regular Foreign Service officer, and even there, in Vienna—although on the map relatively close to Bosnia and Herzegovina but in reality, a million miles away—even there, we heard. I wasn't even a trade and commercial officer; I was a political officer.

But even there, as a political officer, we heard about Ron Brown and the efforts he wanted to make through Commerce to restore Bosnia and the former Yugoslav republics to their pre-war economic status. So, even somebody as far away as that, who hadn't been involved, heard about it.

FITZ-PEGADO: Right. Well, he was legendary for it, and legendary for doing what he believed in. As I said, the Foreign Commercial Service was kind of his face abroad in terms of his trips, but I did not go on every trip. I couldn't. I had other things, responsibilities. But I went on many trips, and it so happens that the last six months of his life, I was on every trip, except for the one he died on.

The last six months of his life, he must have gone almost around the globe. I believe that we did a swing through Africa—he was very committed to the whole theme of, "Africa matters," and he gave many speeches on that theme. He talked a lot about ROI [Return On Investment] in Africa, how high it was, if one was willing to get to know it and invest.

I got very involved back in Washington, D.C. in helping to manage what was the first U.S.-South Africa business development committee. It was a bilateral commission focused on commercial development and trade. It was co-chaired by Ron Brown and by the first Black South African minister of trade and industry, Trevor Manuel. He and Ron Brown became fast friends, and it was a wonderful dynamic duo. They were birds of a feather.

It was one of the highlights of my tenure, serving on that committee. We met twice a year, once in South Africa and once in the U.S. We had businesspeople from South Africa and from the U.S. It was the first time many South African businesses, whites and blacks, had ever sat at the same table. It was stellar to see that unfold in that country, and that country was so young in its efforts. It was a fabulous opportunity and fascinating to watch.

So, we traveled throughout Africa. On that last trip I believe we went to Ghana, Senegal, Kenya, and South Africa. He took U.S. companies as part of a trade mission and met more companies on the ground at each stop. We also went to the Middle East, and I was telling someone recently—I was in Jordan and Palestine recently. I had not been there since 1996—1995, I think. Yes, it was 1995. And that was part of the six-month travel schedule of Ron Brown, before April 3rd of 1996.

It's really amazing when I think about it. We had separate meetings with Israel's Yitzak Rabin, the PLO's [Palestine Liberation Organization] Yasser Arafat and King Hussein of Jordan, all within the course of about seventy-two hours. I remember fighting sleep as we waited until after midnight to meet with Rabin who entered the room in a swirl of cigarette smoke. That was at a very hopeful time for the relationship in the Middle East and for the commercial opportunities that could evolve. Ron fathomed himself—you know, he was the ambassador of "commercial diplomacy" and all of the conversations with those leaders were full of hope for the future. The whole evolution of what he did in his travels and in our work, was indeed commercial diplomacy and more.

Q: As a sort of side question, as Ron Brown goes around and creates the major market areas and so on, is it worth mentioning or going into anything related to how the commercial aspects integrated with the USAID aspects, with the development aspects?

FITZ-PEGADO: Yes, but probably more with the State Department than USAID. I just want to make a note here. I think that many times—I said there was interagency cooperation, and there was. Sometimes, there was a little bit of stepping on toes, in the eyes, I think, of some of the other agencies, particularly the State Department. Ron

Brown, if he felt that he could achieve a goal for the United States in his travels, in his discussions, he would step out of his Commerce Department box, into his human rights box, or into his political box.

He did sometimes raise human rights issues that were, frankly, the domain of the State Department. But if he felt that he could further the objectives of our president and of the country, he wasn't going to not do it because someone was going to get upset with him that he was stepping on someone else's toes. And he did that.

There were moments on trade issues where I know there was a little tension, perhaps, with USTR [United States Trade Representative], because there is a division between Commerce and USTR. USTR is part of the executive, the White House and Commerce is a separate and massive department. Tough trade issues or negotiations are USTR's domain. But, if he felt there was an opening, and because he was such the master negotiator, he would step over that line.

Q: Yeah, and in that sense, he was a very unique individual. That's all I want to say, because in general, Commerce secretaries are very cautious about not treading on USTR and so on, and he was one of those people with the ability to do that. He wasn't the only one; there were other people at the top of U.S. diplomacy—you think of Holbrook, for example—who had a different style, but also would, when he saw an opportunity, tread on other people's turf. Obviously, Brown did it with much more finesse than Holbrook did, but there are people who do this.

FITZ-PEGADO: Right, and it has to do with experience, relationships, and capability. Ron Brown was the chairman of the Democratic Party. Bill Clinton said at his funeral that he would not have been president of the United States had it not been for Ron Brown, and his mother. He said, "The only two people who believed that I could become president were my mother and Ron Brown." He got a nice laugh at the funeral.

But, Ron had that very special relationship with Clinton, that probably wasn't surpassed by any other cabinet secretary. So, he knew, and maybe Clinton even told him, "Hey, if you get the chance, raise that," or who knows. We'll never know. But it was a special relationship, and he did have that history and that experience, and he used it, I think, to the advantage of the country. So, anyway, over his last six months, there was the Africa trip, there was the Middle East trip, the Central America trip, I think there was a Brazil trip, and there were others. But one of them that was so important was the one to Croatia.

Q: Just one last question about this six-month period: Was there one to Russia that you recall, because of course this is also a period where there were friendlier relations between the U.S. and Russia?

FITZ-PEGADO: Right. I was not on that trip, but I believe there was one to Russia. I'm not sure if it was in those six months or in a prior period, but there was a U.S.-Russia Commission, the Gore-Chernomyrdin Commission, because these commissions started evolving with Vice President Gore; he then took the helm at leading these multi-agency

bilateral commissions, even though the first one was the U.S.-South Africa Business one, which Ron reminded us of many times.

But it became the Gore-Mbeki Commission, which kind of superseded the U.S.-South African Business Development Committee. We became a subcommittee of the Gore-Mbeki Commission. So, there were several commissions that Gore set up, and there was one with Russia, Gore-Chernomyrdin, which I believe was successful in advancing the bilateral relationship.

There was a lot going on with the former Soviet republics, with Russia. There were business centers established in the Newly Independent States—I think they were called BDCs, Business Development Centers, that were established in the former Soviet republics. The Department of Commerce was engaged in new and expanding commercial activity there. The trip that was designed for Croatia and Bosnia was one that was focusing on rebuilding after the war.

The company executives who were on the trade mission were from construction, energy, housing—usually represented by rather senior people. If not CEOs, then business development execs, or whatever, but definitely C-suite type folks on these trips. On that particular trip, people were very enthusiastic about going. I did not go on that trip, because I was on a trip to Vietnam with the first trade mission to Vietnam since the war. We were opening the first U.S. commercial office in Vietnam, the senior commercial officer was Ken Morefield and a young first tour commercial officer, Dao Le was staffing our delegation. I was going for the inauguration and to accompany the trade mission with Tim Hauser, the deputy undersecretary, and several staff.

So, that's where I was when the other trip was going to Bosnia and Croatia. Needless to say, there was an accident, and everyone was killed. About 33 people were on the plane, a U.S. Air Force plane, that crashed into a mountain outside of Dubrovnik. It was such a shock, just such a tragedy.

We got the phone call that night after returning to our hotel after a reception on a boat in the harbor of Ho Chi Minh City. It was close to midnight. We had just come back from the event and were back in our rooms when the calls came telling us to turn on CNN [Cable News Network], the secretary's plane had crashed. We all kind of got together and watched CNN as it unfolded. We were on the phone with Washington, D.C. watching it together and then continuing back in our rooms. At that point, they weren't sure where the plane had crashed and thought it might have been into the Adriatic Sea. The reports were confusing, even the next morning, nothing had been confirmed.

I was supposed to leave that next morning after giving a speech at the hotel to a women's organization in Vietnam and then leave for Japan for another speaking engagement and full schedule organized by our FCS Tokyo SCO George Mu. I hadn't gotten much sleep, but got up, delivered the remarks to the women's group the next morning. I had asked Pilar Martinez, my special assistant, to change my ticket to go back to D.C. and to cancel my Tokyo stop. On my way home, I had to change planes in Taiwan, and when I got to

Taiwan, I was met by the senior commercial officer who said, "You need to make a phone call to Washington."

I was very hopeful that someone was going to tell me that there were some survivors. But what I got was, "Lauri, are you willing to divert to go to Dubrovnik?" Mary Fran Kirchner, one of my deputy assistant secretaries, was on the line conveying the message. "We would like for you to represent the U.S. government and the Commerce Department. It's been discussed at the White House that someone senior should go from Commerce, and Mrs. Brown would like for you to go as well. So, will you go?" I knew the family very well, and I had known Ron for years, as you know. Also, I was a friend of Alexis Herman at the White House, a senior advisor to President Clinton, and close friend of Ron's who was leading much of the recovery operation from D.C.

So, I said, "Of course." What was I going to say? So, I flew from Taiwan to Zagreb. Longest flight I've ever seen. I don't remember if it was direct from Taiwan; I think I had to change planes somewhere else, but I don't remember. It was just all a blur. I got to Zagreb, and I was met by officials at Zagreb. They took me to a holding room where the remaining Commerce advance staff were huddled. They had lost colleagues who were on the plane; they were processing, in disbelief and grieving, while being grateful for being on the ground and not on that plane. Then flew to Dubrovnik on a Croatian government plane.

The impression left with me, after all that happened, was that the Croatian people were the loveliest, the most kind, the most empathetic. It was unbelievable. They were so devastated by the fact that these people, these Americans, had died in or near their city. They were just unbelievably kind and wonderful. So were the C-4 people who had flown in from Italy, our folks, for the recovery, and all of the military folks there. The recovery effort, it was just the most efficient, caring, and professional, under the horrible circumstances.

There were several people from Commerce on the ground in Dubrovnik when I arrived. Ron's right hand, Morris Reed, who unbelievably wasn't on the plane because he was left in Zagreb to take care of some business for Ron. Ron had reprimanded him and ordered him at the last minute to stay in Zagreb to take care of something. A story Morris shared.

When Ron left Zagreb, his first stop in Croatia, he went to Bosnia, to Tuzla for a brief stop before he continued on to Dubrovnik. He was going to meet with the U.S. troops stationed there, and he took them McDonald's hamburgers. So, he took this whole thing of hamburgers to the troops in Tuzla, and met with them, and then he was going to fly from Tuzla to Dubrovnik, and that's when the plane crashed. So, Morris was left in Zagreb to fly from Zagreb to Dubrovnik with a couple of other advance people to make final arrangements with the Embassy folks for the Dubrovnik leg of the trip and to meet the plane when it landed. Peter Galbraith was the U.S. ambassador in Zagreb.

As you know, when you do these trips, and you're stopping in multiple cities and countries, you have advance teams in each spot. So, there were all of these advance

people who were devastated when they found out that the plane crashed. I also had one of my officers, Bob Taft, who was on my staff in Washington, D.C., waiting for me in Dubrovnik. He wasn't on the plane, but one of our colleagues was on the plane. They were both senior Foreign Commercial officers, and had debated who was going to be on the plane with Ron to Tuzla and who was going to be on the ground in Dubrovnik awaiting his arrival. It just so happened that Bob was the one who was on the ground in Dubrovnik and Steve Kaminski who was on the plane, was posted in Vienna but sent to Zagreb to help with the trade mission—

Q: Right. I knew Steve. Not well, but I knew him.

FITZ-PEGADO: Yeah. He was on the plane, and died in the crash as did another of my FCS staff, Lawry Payne who was serving as an advance person. There were so many stories, and so many things that came out after the crash about the people who lost their lives and those who could have, but didn't due to last minute decisions. Ira Sokowitz was waiting in Dubrovnik, from the General Counsel's office at Commerce. So, there were probably, I think, four or five of us who ended up in Dubrovnik. I was briefed by them and the Embassy staff when I arrived. I was flown in a helicopter to the crash site and briefed by a C-4 officer.

The U.S. Ambassador, Peter Galbraith, was not in Dubrovnik the days that I was there. I learned later that the Embassy staff had recently dealt with another crash, a car accident of an American convoy traveling from Split, Croatia to Sarajevo. Three American officials working on a peace agreement died when their vehicle rolled off the road and exploded. It had been a horrendous time for the U.S. Embassy staff and they were tired and on edge. Galbraith arrived with Croatia's President Tuđjman for the departure ceremony to load the caskets on the C-130 for our return flight to Dover, Delaware Air Force Base. They flew in to see us off. Everybody did all they could to ease the pain of the tragedy.

A few days before flying to Dover, I had been flown up by military helicopter to the crash site. That scene will stay in my head forever: the tail of the plane was totally intact. It was just sticking out of the mountainside, fully intact, just sitting there, an American flag painted on the tail that was totally untouched. It was on Saint John's Mountain, and the view from there, down into Dubrovnik and to the Adriatic Sea, was calm and majestic. It was a spectacular view. You know, in 1996, you didn't have cameras on your phones and whatnot. So, I asked one of the military guys who took me up, I said, "Could you just take a picture and send it to me? Could you just take a picture of the tail of the plane and the view down into the Adriatic? Would you send it to me?" It just hit me. He did send it. I have that photograph today, I will never forget that image. And of course, you could see the rubble everywhere, what remained of the plane. The bodies had been recovered and taken down the mountainside, so I didn't have to view any bodies. Thank God.

I went back to the hotel after going up there in the helicopter and being debriefed by the general, and getting all the information I could possibly gather, talking to the people who

were still there from the staff and the companies of the executives who died in the crash. These were American senior executives of businesses, and U.S. government interagency groups. There was a *New York Times* reporter, there was a guy from the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development. Then I think there were about twelve Commerce people, most of whom were young, because Ron liked to hire young people and give them training. These were people I had known, some from the DNC [Democratic National Committee], some from Commerce. I'd known a lot of them for years.

We were all just devastated by it. But I remember going back to my room in Dubrovnik, and I think I called Alexis Herman or someone at the White House, gave them an update, and I said, "Get me all the phone numbers for all of the families that died in this crash, please." I sat there and I called every single one. I felt that was the least I could do. I called all thirty-some of those folks. I reached most of them. Because they were all grieving. They'd just found out about this a day or two before.

I just told them who I was, that I had been flown by helicopter to the crash site, and that I was going to fly home with the bodies of their loved ones, and that there was nothing I could say to help them with their grief, but I just wanted them to know, and that I was going to send them the picture; the view from the mountainside. I said, "I'm sure it doesn't bring you much comfort for me to say this, but I will tell you that there's an American flag on the tail of this airplane that's still totally intact. It looks over the Adriatic Sea and the city of Dubrovnik, where these people have been so kind and so sorry for this accident. I'm going to send you this photograph. I'd like for you to have it."

That helped me, too, to get through it, talking to all of them. They were so grateful, all of them. "Thank you for calling, I really appreciate it." A lot of them were still in shock. But I did it. I got the picture, I duplicated the picture, and I sent it to every single one of them. I got to meet a lot of them, in the coming days, because there were funerals, there were memorials, there were reunions. I don't think I've ever been to so many funerals in my life. Subsequently, I try to avoid funerals, because it was just so overwhelming.

It was rugged, the crash site was a mountainous spot. What they must have done to get there. You could not get there except by foot. There was no way to land a helicopter up there. These people in Croatia, a farmer who had heard the crash had tried to get there. The stories were just unbelievable. The people who had gone up to recover the bodies, they had to do it by foot.

Years later, I climbed up a still rugged path to a monument built there. I went up on the 10th or 15th anniversary, I can't remember which it was. A group of us hiked up, and it was still a very difficult hike.

You think about these people climbing up the mountain side to get to the crash site: it was raining, and it was horrible. The Croatian ambassador to the United States, Miomir Žužul, was an amazing guy. He was in Dubrovnik waiting for the plane to land. He later told me that he and Ambassador Galbraith had hiked up the mountain in the rain and mud. He was on the flight back with the bodies, with me and my other colleagues. We

had thirteen hours on a plane together. You can get to know someone pretty well in thirteen hours, when you're staring out on a sea of thirty-three flag-draped coffins in the very cold belly of a C-130. You get to know someone pretty well. We became very good friends.

But, anyway, that's what happened. We got back, and the president and Mrs. Clinton and the Gores met the plane at the airport. There was a ceremony in Delaware. Then, of course, there were the many funerals and memorial services, including the one at the Washington Cathedral for Ron Brown. Life went on.

I stayed at Commerce for one more year, and it just wasn't quite the same. Mickey Kantor became the acting secretary of commerce for a while. I think for four to six months. Then Bill Daley became secretary. I stayed for one year, almost exactly, and I felt I had to be there to finish some things, and also to help some of the younger people, particularly those who were on the ground, who I met in Zagreb when I landed and who were all basket cases, understandably. A lot of them wanted to leave Commerce, go to another agency, or just needed somebody to talk to. They needed counseling.

I kind of put out my shingle for a year and tried to do my own work and get some projects finished that I'd started. But somebody asked me if I was interested in another position at Commerce—deputy secretary—early on after Ron died. I won't name the person, or the discussion, but I will just say that he advised me that I couldn't just think about Ron's legacy. That if I wanted this position, I needed to move on, that it wasn't about legacy, that sometimes things happen and you have to accept them and you have to move forward and not look back. I said, "I appreciate that very much; I'm honored to be asked." But there were a few things that I felt, that weren't even about legacy, deeper than legacy; they were a matter of finishing the job, getting closure, and moving on.

So, after that year, I did move on. I went to the private sector. I went to a company called Iridium, a mobile satellite company. And that was the transition.

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Q: So, today is July 25, 2017. We're resuming our interview with Lauri Fitz-Pegado in the last months of her collaboration with Ron Brown at the Commerce Department.

FITZ-PEGADO: Thanks. I just want to mention, I was recently in the Middle East with one of my non-profit boards—it's called Global Communities—and we were reflecting, one evening at dinner, on what leaders of the world we had met around the table with the board members, and who has impressed you the most. That type of discussion. Because we were sitting in Jordan at the time, and this non-profit has got wonderful programs in Palestine and in Israel, the West Bank, and Jordan.

When it came to me—I've had the pleasure of meeting so many wonderful world leaders, and many of them with Ron Brown, and particularly in the last six months of his life. As I think I mentioned, Croatia was the only trip I had not been on with him in the last six

months of his life, the fatal trip. But we had traveled around the world in those six months, and we did go to the Middle East.

I said to my table companions, "I feel a little—I don't want to sound arrogant in saying this. It's a little bit—I said humbly that I think one of the most impressive forty-eight hours of my life was with Ron Brown, when I met with Rabin, and then met with Arafat, and then met with King Hussein, in 1995 or 1996. Ron died in 1996 in April. It might have been in 1995. It might have been in the late fall of 1995. But it was a very promising time for the region, and there was so much expectation and hope, and the discussions were so rich and memorable. Rabin was killed, I guess, maybe a month, or two after that visit.

To have met with those three leaders to talk about the future of the region and the hope and to have experienced that at that time, and then to be sitting again in Jordan with these non-profit colleagues from the board, it brought back a lot of memories, so I just wanted to mention that. And those were just three leaders in forty-eight hours. When I think about all the years I worked with Ron, and the people that I met, it was pretty amazing.

But, moving on. In 1997, a year after the fatal crash and after—we did have a one-year commemorative ceremony that was attended by President Clinton and Mrs. Clinton and the Gores that I worked on with Bill Daley, who was then secretary of commerce. I knew that it probably was time to go. I didn't know exactly when, where, or how.

But I was actually approached about a position in the private sector with a start-up that was created by Motorola. It was called Iridium, a mobile satellite company. So, this was going to be a handheld mobile satellite phone, which was among the first, if not the first, of its type. The other sat phones were kind of like briefcases, but this was a handheld one, that kind of looked about the size of the original cell phones, kind of like the "brick." But at any rate, not that I was any expert or specialist in telecom, but they wanted someone who understood, had contacts in various countries, and had some knowledge of regulatory processes and of dealing with foreign governments because there were licenses required, many of them, for these mobile phones to be used in countries around the world.

Leo Mondale, the nephew of Fritz Mondale, was working at this company, and actually had been—I had been recommended by a former colleague, Sally Painter, who worked at Commerce and was a good friend of Leo's. I was interviewed, and things moved quickly. I was hired by the CEO Ed Staiano and the Chairman Bob Kinzie. I left Commerce and went to Iridium. I had worked in the private sector with an agency, with a PR firm, public affairs firm, but I had never been with a corporation, or with a start-up like this.

It was quite an experience. The CEO Ed Staiano had been an engineer at Motorola. It was quite a rollercoaster ride. It was fascinating. I learned a tremendous amount. The people with whom I worked were extremely knowledgeable about the business. They were engineers, and technology and telecom experts. I learned a lot about technology.

I headed a unit that supported a lot of the investor companies around the world. Our board meetings were like the United Nations. We had investors from all over the world. The Taiwanese sat beside the Chinese, and there were Russians, and Saudis, and Brazilians and Italians, and Motorola had quite a few seats on the board.

But it was amazing, and there was so much in terms of the politics of it all, because each country where this phone wanted to be purchased and used had to have some regulatory framework, and in many of these countries, there was no regulatory framework. So, trying to secure a license when there was no regulatory framework was a little difficult. So, the whole process was so creative. It was trying to problem solve in every direction: political, economic, technical. You name it.

You kind of had to figure out, how was this going to work? How could we make this work? There were logistical issues. There were production issues. It was just overwhelming, and we worked very hard, long hours. I was told when I came in that I'd have to try to resolve issues in certain regions of the world that were very problematic for them, and those regions were the Middle East, Africa, and China. So, it's like, why don't you give me an easy place to deal with?

We did succeed over the few years that I was there in going from single digits in licenses to close to, I think, one hundred or so at the end of the day, but that did not save the company. The company was not successful for a lot of reasons: business plan, marketing, implementation. It was a difficult road for many companies like that, start-ups like that, and Iridium eventually did go into Chapter 11 bankruptcy. I learned a tremendous amount. It changed CEO, all of those things, but I think that what I had learned both in the PR world, the public affairs world, and the government as a diplomat and running a global network at the Foreign Commercial Service, every single bit of information and learning that I had experienced in my lifetime was brought to bear to work towards success for Iridium. I wouldn't trade it for the world; it was a great experience. Iridium, now, is back and doing well. It was bought out of Chapter 11.

Ironically, when I left Iridium—a lot of people of course were let go over time, but I stayed for quite a while, and was among the last to go, moved into the communications and investor relations role, out of the role that I was doing originally when the new CEO John Richardson came in, when Ed Staiano was replaced. So, I worked for the new CEO before the company ended up pretty much folding, and then I left, and I went to consulting on my own. One of my first clients was a potential investor in the new Iridium. I worked for him for several months, helping him to understand the company and the potential, and particularly the potential in Africa, the reason he was very much interested in Iridium in the first place.

Q: And it's still the same product, the satellite phone?

FITZ-PEGADO: Yes, still the satellite phone, and the company's back, it's doing very well. I believe one of its biggest clients is the U.S. military. It's recovered, and people are making lots of money, so it was just the wrong time for it, perhaps, and there were some

mistakes that were made then, but it's back and moving along. So, that was Iridium. I did my own consulting thing for several years. Had some interesting clients.

Then I began working with Toby Moffett, who was a former member of Congress from Connecticut, and we shared several clients. He was the one who introduced me to Bob Livingston and his company. The Livingston Group was relatively young at that time. I think it had been a business for just a couple years. Toby Moffett and I teamed with the Livingstone Group on several clients. Two of them were in Africa, or Africa-related, and needed appropriations assistance. That was the expertise of Bob Livingston, who was the chairman of the Appropriations Committee when he was on Capitol Hill.

Then, eventually, I joined the Livingston Group. I was a consultant at first with Toby. Toby and I both moved over to Livingston's offices on Capitol Hill, originally. I continued to work on international clients. It was almost full circle for me, because when I started out after being a diplomat, and went to Gray & Company, I started working on a lot of country clients, and when I ended up at Livingston, once again, I was working on quite a few country clients.

At the Livingston Group, the work was more focused on lobbying specifically, whereas at Gray & Company or Hill & Knowlton, it was public affairs, public relations and lobbying. I did not lobby when I was at Gray & Company or Hill & Knowlton. I worked more on communication strategy and public affairs. At the Livingston Group, I am engaged in lobbying as well, but still do a lot of strategic development of solutions for clients that cross over into administration and also think tanks, community organizations. I don't do press here, I don't do PR here. And, of course, the Hill. But the expertise of most of the people here is Capitol Hill. Most of them are former staff, former members of Congress, and I'm a bit unique in that I'm one of the few who never worked on Capitol Hill. So, I bring a bit of a different perspective.

I am a partner, now, at the firm. It's a fascinating place to be, because I currently am the only woman partner. There are six partners. I'm the only woman. I'm the only Democrat, and only partner of color.

Q: Yeah, I was going to ask you earlier. Livingston had been speaker for a little while, if I remember right—

FITZ-PEGADO: Well, he was elected speaker, I believe. I'm not sure of the details. He wasn't actually. He didn't serve as speaker. He ended up stepping down. He resigned about that time, over some personal issues, but I believe he actually was elected speaker.

I've been here for about 16 years, and it's an interesting place to be. There's never a dull moment, and as I said, it's much like returning to the Gray & Company model. Bob Gray was a Republican. He had been Eisenhower's chief of cabinet. But his firm was much more bipartisan, because he had Frank Mankiewicz, for example, who had been Bobby Kennedy's press secretary and head of NPR [National Public Radio]. He was the head of

the PR division. Gary Hymel, who had been Tip O'Neill's chief of staff, ran the lobbying side.

Gray & Company later merged with Hill and Knowlton had a balance of Democrats and Republicans. The Livingston Group is majority Republican, but, you know, we serve clients on both sides of the aisle, and also the administration. I run the international division now, and have for the last few years. We represent countries, and corporations, and individuals, and universities, and hospitals, and all kinds of clients. We always have a challenge. Every minute.

Q: So, you have had the unique experience of being out of government, in political campaigns, then in government, and then back out. Some people criticize that kind of revolving door. What is your attitude towards that kind of stepping in and stepping out of government service?

FITZ-PEGADO: I think a lot of people have that experience now, but twenty years ago, that wasn't the case. You didn't find many people who had been in and out of government like that. At least, maybe there were a lot of them, but I didn't know them. I ended up speaking about this quite often, or in my advising and mentoring role in several programs, when I was talking to Foreign Service officers, at mid-career level or younger—

You know, this was not the norm, for one to go in and out of government. Because I had started as a career Foreign Service officer, left, went to the private sector, came back as a political appointee—as a presidential appointee—left, and then have remained in the private sector. I also have done a lot of non-profit work on non-profit boards, so I think it's a good thing. I understand the ethical concerns, and I think there are ways to deal with that.

One has to pay the price, so to speak, in terms of confirmations. If you're going to be confirmed, if you're in a confirmable position, and you have been in the private sector and you have lobbied, or you have been registered as a foreign agent, all of the disclosure rules should be abided by. And some people don't. They skirt them. They find loopholes, and I think eventually, it may catch up with you. This firm's staff person, Dave Lonie, has been particularly careful about the Lobbying and Disclosure Act filings and the Foreign Agents Registration Act filings.

People who want to go back into government need to think about those things. I had a difficult confirmation hearing. That was one of the prices that I paid for having been in the private sector and then going back into government. But, it happened, I went back in, and it was a great experience. That's when I worked with Ron Brown.

And I think that experience has helped me in my private sector work, because I understand how the government works. I understand how the administration works. I know what agencies do what. It doesn't matter who actually is in the position, in terms of Republican or Democrat. If you understand the process, then that's very helpful to clients.

If you understand the regulatory process, or you understand the legislative process, or you understand policy making, various agencies and inter-agency processes— If you understand embassies, foreign embassies, and what their capabilities are and are not. If you have met with foreign leaders, and you've traveled to foreign capitals, and you've met with private sector leaders. If you understand the play between the private sector and the public sectors, on policy issues, even. What the influence of associations, business associations or corporations, can be on a country, on the United States, on a member of Congress. If you understand constituencies. If you understand diasporas and their roles.

There are so many elements, and the more you're exposed and you work in these different areas, I think the more effective you can be as a consultant. When people come to me and say, "I want to be a lobbyist," or "I want to be an international consultant," and they're straight out of school or right out of graduate school, I usually say, "To have credibility, or even to be able to think through some of these challenges or these questions that a client brings to you, you have to bring some experience to the table." And the more experience you can bring to the table from various perspective—whether it's from Capitol Hill or if it's from the administration or if it's from a specific agency, or it's from a bank, or the investment sector—

You know, I think that in order to be an effective consultant for a client, you've got to bring some experience, some know-how, and some exposure, and what better exposure than to have been in the public and private sectors? So, that's my own view. If you can manage to comply with all of the regulatory requirements, and you're not violating anything ethically, morally—I think you can do both, and you will be a more effective professional in whatever you do if you have a broad range of experiences.

Q: The other thing I wanted to ask you was, are you still in contact with anyone in the Foreign Commercial Service, just in the sense of kind of keeping up with where it's going?

FITZ-PEGADO: Yes, I am, to a certain extent. There are people I mentored who are now senior people in the Foreign Commercial Service, twenty years later, with whom I keep up, and also with whom I may interact. It was over twenty years ago that I was actually the assistant secretary and director general of FCS. You know, I don't have any statute of limitations issues now. So, I do a great deal of work and work with Select USA at the Department of Commerce, which is now the new FDI [Foreign Direct Investment] arm, which didn't exist when I was there. It's interesting, because we never got involved in inward investment, it was done by state governments. It was kind of not done and not expected. But now, I have some foreign clients who are investing in the U.S., and I've worked a lot with the Select USA staff.

Q: Have the people that you're still in contact with described how the Foreign Commercial Service has changed, or given you a sense of whether things are better in some ways or worse in some ways? Have they given you a sense of the organization?

FITZ-PEGADO: Somewhat. I've heard things from some of the people that I know in the Foreign Commercial Service. I've heard about how departments have been reorganized. what's changed, what's been thrown out the window and that kind of thing. My concern— A lot of things that have happened have to do with staffing and resources. Everybody's looking at dwindling resources, and it's unfortunate that so many of the Foreign Commercial Service offices around the world have had to shut down.

After September 11, there was a move back into the embassy compounds of standalone commercial centers, which had been a big thing during my time, because business really liked that. They didn't want to have to go through all of the security of getting into the embassy. But then, after September 11, of course the Commercial Centers had to move back. There have been a lot of reorganizations of the International Trade Administration. I can't keep up with what's where anymore.

I think some of that has been good, though, because there have been issues of coordinating better the efforts of the International Trade Administration on behalf of business. Small business, medium and large business, the advocacy. I'm glad to see some things have survived. The advocacy efforts for big companies competing more with foreign entities, winning contracts around the world. Some of the issues with the State Department and the Economic Bureau and "Who's on first?" and "Is it Commerce or is it the Economic Bureau?" You know, some of those things have gone on ad nauseam, and there have been shifts over time with, I think, EB [Economic Bureau] taking a more aggressive role on behalf of businesses.

Now that I'm out of government, I mean, the most important thing is just to get it done. Advocating for U.S. business, get it done, help do the trade missions, but there's been some— There's always been that kind of tug between Commerce and State. The Foreign Commercial Service was created specifically because the State Department did not look for people who had business experience, and the Foreign Commercial Service was formed to bring in Foreign Commercial officers who had business experience, private sector experience. It wasn't about policy—that was the State Department's role—it was about advocating for, supporting, commercial interests, promoting commercial interests for the United States.

When I see those battles going on, and they've been going on forever, I do hope that— And there have been, reputationally—the Foreign Commercial Service, twenty years ago, with Ron Brown, really did grow in importance in the eyes of businesses as being an effective organization. It enhanced its visibility as being effective. I'm sure it was effective before, but in terms of really getting out there and promoting it, he was really good at doing that. I think people who didn't know about the Foreign Commercial Service before, learned during Ron Brown's tenure. His elevated the role of commercial diplomacy.

And there were many people on the Hill who supported it, because they wanted one in their backyard. They wanted a one-stop-shop in their backyard, in their districts, and they were supportive of small businesses in their districts really getting that type of hands-on

support. So, budgetarily, things were much better then, even though there have always been discussions of, "Let's shut it down. Let's shut down the Commerce Department. Let's combine Exim [Export-Import Bank] and ITA and all of these agencies together." You know, that goes on ad nauseam. But as we see, it hasn't happened.

Q: Now, if you were advising a new officer who's coming into the Foreign Commercial Service, what sort of advice, these days, would you give them?

FITZ-PEGADO: I think it's a great place to be. I think maybe, particularly, now, with all of the emphasis of the Trump administration on business, and commercial things. You would think that in terms of messaging and opportunity for budgets, and with Secretary Ross at the helm, that maybe it would be a good period for the Commerce Department. I know budgets are being cut constantly, everywhere, but if I were to give somebody a chance, I might bet on Wilbur Ross being able to get some support, and on the White House seeing the value of an entity at Commerce, the International Trade Administration and specifically the Foreign Commercial Service, adding value, creating jobs back home for people.

Export-related jobs are the highest paying jobs for Americans. The whole job creation argument, the export promotion for the United States, the "buy American" and all of these things really speak to the sweet spot of what I think this administration is promoting. Whether people will see that message and try to expand upon it and get the funding that they need and be seen as effective and talk about deliverables that they have been able to provide will all be left up to those folks at Commerce today.

Q: My final question is, do you think there would be any value in reuniting the Foreign Commercial Service with the State Department, the way the USIA and the ACDA [United States Arms Control and Disarmament Agency] have been integrated into State?

FITZ-PEGADO: I think that the founders, those members who created the Foreign Commercial Service back in the day, did it for a reason, and for the right reasons. The Foreign Commercial officer should have more of a private sector grounding in doing his or her work representing small business, representing medium-sized businesses and big business. I think there are other skill sets required of Foreign Commercial officers that are distinct from the State Department. I think they have separate roles, as they should.

There are other things that might improve or enhance the abilities of Foreign Commercial officers, one of them, which I thought was important, was the grounding in domestic offices and working closely with businesses throughout the country to really understand what businesses need and want, and not losing sight of that. Those are the types of things that I think could make Foreign Commercial officers most effective. Not necessarily joining the State Department, or becoming part of the State Department.

I think they should work together, they should coordinate together, that ambassadors should embrace the role of the Foreign Commercial Service and appreciate it, respect it,

work with it, help to promote it, engage with it, lead it overseas, but I don't think that requires becoming part of the State Department.

Q: So, in conclusion now, looking back on your career, how would you describe the overall U.S. effort at improving its foreign commercial diplomacy? Are there any last recommendations you would make, or I guess more at a strategic level, having seen both the government efforts and the private sector needs?

FITZ-PEGADO: I think that commercial diplomacy, in the terms that Ron Brown talked about it and embraced it and promoted it, is so critical for our country. It was part of the entire philosophy of the export promotion plan, of building jobs in America, of supporting small business, of appreciating the value of exports to our economy, of advocating for businesses, for big corporations. Having the government actually get behind the private sector and say, "How can we help you win this contract in country X against foreign corporation Y?"

Government and business have to work together, and so commercial diplomacy requires that. Diplomacy is thought of as a government function. Commerce is thought of as a private sector function. So, commercial diplomacy can create wins for the government and for the private sector. It's to bring together bedfellows who might not be seen as such. It is effective to lead trade missions to countries to meet with the ministers who are making decisions on commercial deals, or to meet with the private sectors as well, the foreign private sectors, and try to find partnerships and collaboration. Looking at the impact on communities. Looking at potential job creation in those countries and here for that deal. Helping small companies that don't have the means to really find partners overseas, or agents and distributors for their products.

It's a way of bringing countries together, and that inevitably is going to lead to better understanding, better communication, cultural acceptance, political discussions, and economic development. It leads to so many things, to utilize business and commercial opportunities for diplomatic gain. So, I hope—

You know, that was back in the 1990s. It was embraced again by the Commerce Department under President Obama. There were speeches that were given by the secretary in recent years, toward the end of the Obama administration, by Penny Pritzker on commercial diplomacy again. It kind of resurged. And I would think that with this administration and their interest in business and commerce as a bridge and for job creation in America— It's all about those things, that commercial diplomacy dimension.

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Q: When and why did you "retire?"

FITZ-PEGADO: I was at The Livingston Group (TLG) for 15 years. When I left, I had been a partner for half of that time, heading the international practice. Foreign country and company representation was a major percentage of our revenue. Our work often

entailed providing advice, developing and implementing strategies for foreign governments to achieve their objectives in the U.S. These ranged from explaining the complex functioning of the US body politic to embassies, ministers, legislators, and sometimes presidents of foreign countries and corporate executives. Specific issues might include: addressing bi-lateral trade issues; lifting sanctions; market related challenges involving investments in the US; contributing to negotiations on establishing or re-establishing diplomatic relations, securing meetings with U.S. administration and congressional leaders, US companies, policy institutes, building relationships with relevant communities… Lobbying has a bad reputation– those who believe it is meddling in policy issues reserved for foreign countries to resolve directly with the USG, or engaging in illicit practices. If done with integrity, honesty, and candor with clients about what may be achievable, being transparent, communicating clearly and not being hesitant to deliver tough love when necessary, good lobbyists can be essential advisors and advocates. Some official policy makers have appreciated the lobbyists' value.

Managing clients' expectations and having them follow agreed upon programs, was a 24/7 struggle. Relationship building and trust are more essential to success than people imagine. Commitment is often measured by clients through things as basic as availability at odd hours when they are in another time zone. You know, they assume that they are your only or most important client, when you may be juggling three or four at the same time who feel the same way. Among the leadership group of partners at TLG, I was the only woman, person of color, and Democrat. Work days and weeks were always long, and often never ended given serving clients in countries around the world in different time zones, dealing with their constant crises… The work was often thankless, stressful and exhausting.

Including my years at Gray and Company and Hill and Knowlton, I had been engaged in this type of work for over 25 years. In addition I had been a career diplomat; active in Democratic politics; a presidential appointee heading a branch of the foreign service; a senior executive at Iridium, a global mobile satellite telecommunications company; serving on about ten non-profit boards throughout my career and at one period I was on 5 at the same time, while working full time. By 2018, I knew the time had come for a new chapter in my life. While it appeared to some, including my colleagues at TLG, a precipitous decision, it was not. I had thought long and hard about the need for a change and finally made the move to "re-tire" as I once heard someone call it – get new tires when the tread on the old ones were worn out—after over 4 decades of a diverse, intense, and demanding professional career. I left in June of 2018. Little did I know how good my timing was. It was a very different world 18 months later.

Q: What was your retirement plan?

FITZ-PEGADO: I was invited to speak at a global conference in. April of 2018, a global arts and culture conference in Abu Dhabi. I had a seminal "aha" moment there when I was serving on a panel and the moderator, when introducing me, referred to the famous painting of the little girl dressed in white walking through a hostile white crowd to integrate a school in Louisiana. The artist was Norman Rockwell and the name of the

little girl was Ruby Bridges. The moderator introduced me metaphorically as Ruby Bridges. It left me speechless for a longer than normal pause in the program after being introduced, and of course humbled at the comparison. Ruby Bridges and I are the same age. That moment caused me to reflect deeply about my own experience integrating middle and high schools in Maryland in the 60's and early 70's, attending a white seven sister school with a small group of African American students, and my entire professional career; in every position either being the only Black person and often woman in the room, or being the first to occupy a position.

The experience also revived my passion for the arts and commitment to returning to that space with the skills and experience that I had accumulated over more than forty years. I hadn't always enjoyed those positions, but gained experience and knowledge in many areas that could become invaluable in advancing and promoting individual artists and organizations. I had built a reputation as a sought after mentor and advisor and spent a lot of my, not spare time, with younger people that I was able to help along their professional and often personal journeys. I learned a lot from them as well, keeping me current on developments and with contacts that often proved useful in my own work.

My mother told my aunt that you just know when it is time to retire. I arrived at that moment without a plan, just a passion, a need for a course correction, a desire to pursue a path I could determine, and convinced that I would continue to make a difference. It meant shedding some activities, boards, and even friendships.

It did lead to discovering a title for a book I had been writing and finished during COVID, "Dancing in the Dash: My Story of Empowerment, Diplomacy and Resilience," and the coincidence of my domain, email address ending in .live because .com was taken, "inthedash.live;" the concept of living fully in the moment and recognizing how ballet had been critical, providing the backbone, the touchstone for my life's evolution and successes. It was liberating to peel off the skin of so many years of conforming to what was required for my success; often going along to get along; biting my tongue; dealing with an unequal playing field; and working hard on issues and client problems that I didn't support, let alone agree with. Not to say that I have ever been shy when it is a battle I have chosen to fight. A lot of the time I chose not to fight a battle because it was all about survival; I had to pay the bills, support my family. And most observers thought my road was without potholes and detours. I did well because of family support and my parents as an example, the discipline and perseverance learned in ballet training and performance.

Q: What did you do during that 18 months between leaving Livingston and the beginning of the COVID crisis?

FITZ-PEGADO: I celebrated a never before feeling of freedom to do what I wanted. I knew that I wanted to focus on the arts and work with artists who were from and/or committed to making a positive contribution to marginalized communities. I also wanted to spend time with friends and family without the pressure of work hanging over my head. My children and grandchildren lived in Scotland, Angola, and Mozambique. I

traveled to London, Edinburgh, Amsterdam, Rotterdam, Vienna, Toronto, Satibanez and Madrid, along with several US cities during that year and a half.

I began promoting a Dutch artist who was then focusing on creating murals in communities around the world where he consulted with and included the local communities in the design and painting of the large murals on surfaces in their neighborhoods—houses, buildings, roads. I worked with him to expand his footprint in the US – DC, Miami, Denver where he talked about his work, his process, accompanied by photos and videos of his projects in Brazil, Haiti, Curacao, Italy, etc. and I was able to negotiate commissions for him to present and create in several cities, visit communities where he previously produced murals—Miami, Philadelphia. Our last project together was in Denver where he was commissioned to create two murals. He was able to bring several Brazilians to assist with the Denver project from communities, favelas, where he had worked earlier. It was a rich multicultural experience for all of us—combining Brazilian, American and Dutch perspectives, customs. My Portuguese came in handy since the Brazilians did not speak English. Jeroen Koolhaus, yes, related to the famous architect Rem Koolhaas, is an amazing artist and communicator who speaks Dutch, English, Portuguese and several other languages; when Covid struck the world, we were not able to continue our work together.

I also began teaching ballet again at my alma mater, Jones-Haywood School of Dance, where I received my ballet training and danced with the Capitol Ballet. I, like so many, became accustomed to teaching the Jones-Haywood students on zoom until it was considered safe to return to the dance studio. Zoom afforded me the opportunity to take my own ballet classes in my living room from great dancers and teachers from New York to Hong Kong. I did often make time to take a ballet class during my international travel throughout my career and at The Washington Ballet when I was in town.

COVID became a time when dance artists became extremely creative-- performing on video, teaching on zoom. There were opportunities to learn, see, experience things that otherwise would not have been available. That was one of the few gifts of COVID.

I was serving on too many nonprofit boards. So now I am on three—The Washington Ballet, the Center for Investigative Journalism (merged with Mother Jones), and the Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training. I feel both passion and purpose serving on all three of these boards.

Since my book was published by Bold Story Press, in late 2021, I have given dozens of talks to various groups, organizations, schools, book clubs, podcasts, and streamed television shows. This has been rewarding since I started writing the book for my family to have a record and information about our ancestry, my unique life journey, and some lessons learned. I also believed a group of friends might find it interesting. As I wrote over the months of seclusion during COVID, the Black Lives Matter protests, January 6th—I grew to believe that a broad and diverse audience would find resonance in my experiences and perspective. That it might speak to some people I never would have expected. That it would actually enlighten and change some lives. It has done and is

doing all of that. I also continue after more than 20 years, to mentor and speak at the International Career Advancement Program (ICAP) held in Aspen, Colorado annually for mid-career professionals working in international affairs in government, nonprofits and the private sector. And, have recently received non-profit status for a group I co-founded several years ago.

Q: What is the nonprofit that you started?

FITZ-PEGADO: Beyond the Ballet Barre (BTBB) was established by Sandra Fortune-Green and me in 2020. We recognized that this was the first time in our lifetime that there was a critical mass of Black ballet teachers in the DC area. While we grew up studying ballet with two Black teachers, there were very few during those years. We agreed that organizing a "collective" of these teachers and the students of color that they taught in ballet schools across the city, might be beneficial. We started with ballet teachers at seven ballet institutions providing a support group to share experiences, pedagogy approaches, discuss concerns, and to identify opportunities for our students to expand beyond their respective schools, their training and exposure in their craft and in their lives.

This idea was very enthusiastically embraced by those asked to participate and a program developed consisting of: opportunities for the students to meet each other and form a community through attending master classes with well-known role models in the ballet world – former and current professional dancers, choreographers, and directors in the US and abroad; conversations about career paths, lived experiences, opportunities; an annual student and teacher exchange with Canada's National Ballet School (NBS) for our students to travel to Toronto for the full experience of living and studying with their peers attending one of the preeminent ballet schools in North America, and for students from NBS to visit our schools and understand the routines of our students' of color, join our students in classes that we teach, experience our students' home life, visit DC's rich monuments, museums and performance venues; and learn choreography online. They participated in an international conference hosted by NBS exploring "anti-black racism" in ballet, with teachers, directors, choreographers, and students from over 30 schools around the world. BTBB has facilitated auditions for our students at various dance schools' summer programs (intensives) and professional dance companies. Our network has even facilitated a commercial relationship for a dancer/entrepreneur to sell her line of ballet wear.

The experiences have extended not only for the dance artists in their training environment, but expanding their networks, education, and experiences in ways that will forever advance their journeys in the ballet world and *Beyond the Ballet Barre*. BTBB became a 501 (c) 3, non-profit organization in 2024.

Our relationship with NBS resulted from my visit to the school in late 2019 during a global conference of the International Women's Forum in Toronto. The relationship has provided the opportunity to combine the nexus of the arts and international affairs, central to all that I do these days. It truly incorporates all of my professional experience and

takes me back full circle to my start in the foreign service at USIA, where the arts, educational exchanges, media platforms—were all essential to "telling America's story abroad" the old tag line of USIA. Cultural diplomacy is where I started and commercial diplomacy later in my career.

Q: Can you expand on how you have made diplomacy a critical part of this phase of your life?

FITZ-PEGADO: Diplomacy has been central to my entire professional career. As a matter of fact, it has been central to navigating the challenges I have confronted as a Black woman in predominantly white spaces. I am grateful that the skills I acquired through serving our country in two branches of the foreign service – the US Information Agency (now Public Diplomacy at the Department of State) and as Director General of the Foreign Commercial Service. The key element in all of my work – public and private sectors, on nonprofit boards has been developing cultural competence, a term we hear more these days. Diplomacy requires awareness --ability to navigate many cultures. I define culture broadly. I think it includes the history, language, practices, beliefs of people in other countries and our own country, institutions, perspectives, wherever you need to communicate effectively. Because the arts have no boundaries, I am convinced that all genres of art can be incorporated into strategic thinking, planning, et cetera. Cultural diplomacy is undervalued.

This is why I continue working for positive changes in ballet through recognizing the advantages that inclusion of all human resources is critical to its sustainability. As the world has become more interconnected through technology and continues to grow in ways that may undervalue in person interaction, I believe that artists, creatives, will always find ways to communicate and relate beyond borders through their craft.

End of interview