

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

**SARAH HAPPEL**

*Interviewed by: Tom Sellinger  
Initial interview date: May 8, 2025  
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**INTERVIEW**

*Q: Okay, this is Tom Selinger. I'm here on May 8th, 2025 for ADST [Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training] and the Fulbright Association with an interview with Sarah Happel. Sarah, can you say and spell your name for us, please, to start out?*

HAPPEL: Sure. My name is Sarah Happel, S-A-R-A-H, H-A-P-P-E-L.

*Q: Thank you. And can you tell us your current occupation and employer?*

HAPPEL: Sure. I'm a leadership development coach and I own a boutique leadership development and executive coaching firm outside of Washington, DC.

*Q: Excellent. And can you tell us what kind of international experience you had, or what sort of attracted you to Fulbright?*

HAPPEL: I always wanted to do something internationally. I was jealous of a brother who got to go on a Rotary [International] scholarship when I was in seventh grade. He was a senior. But I could never do it because of sports, and they said, "You wouldn't be recruited if you left high school." I waited until the end of my college career and decided I wanted to do something with Fulbright. I knew that global citizenship was something that Fulbright stood for. And I wanted to go have an international experience and learn about another culture—something that is not the same when you read in a book or take a class at your local state university. It was very prestigious and it took me a couple of tries. I knew that it was something that most graduate students received. So, in my final year of grad school, I applied for a Fulbright to go to the University of Helsinki and was able to spend one year studying there.

*Q: Excellent. And I forgot to ask you where you grew up. Was there a lot of international activities that inspired this?*

HAPPEL: Not so much. I'm from rural Minnesota. I grew up with one stoplight in town and lived seven miles out of town on Little McDonald Lake. I found it very exotic when someone from another country came to town. I was drawn to wanting to learn more and

especially dreamed of one day being a diplomat, working with an embassy or working for the State Department in some way that would really serve the country, and I think that's what really started the path to investigating Fulbright.

*Q: Interesting. So, can you tell us more about your Fulbright experience, what it was and what kind of stuff you studied?*

HAPPEL: I was at the University of Helsinki in Finland. I was there 1997-1998, and I did a cross-cultural study on the credibility of male and female war correspondents. What I was looking for was what different countries and people who live in those countries would think of a woman reporting in the middle of a war zone and a man reporting in the middle of a war zone. And on the flip side, a woman who was talking about fashion and a man who was talking about fashion. It was this cross-cultural experiment, if you will, of seeing how the audience would react to bombs going off and bow ties being tied.

*Q: Fascinating. People these days talk a lot about how things should make America safer, stronger, and more prosperous. Can you talk about your Fulbright project in those terms?*

HAPPEL: Yes, I'm really proud of looking back on my Fulbright experience because I thought it was really fascinating to see. For me this was the first time I really saw a woman standing in the middle of a war zone with the bombs going off and seeing how that would actually affect not only her safety, but also seeing televised reporters really standing in harm's way. I think that not only my Fulbright experience, but other people who are working with Fulbright, it really adds to the safety and the prosperity of coming back to the U.S. and knowing what thought I guess the bravery that they're really putting forth in order to bring us the facts and bring us the stories of what we can't be on the front lines watching. I'm proud to say that studying the credibility of war correspondents was something that I think helps us all be safer at home.

*Q: Interesting. Was there a civic engagement part of your Fulbright experience as well?*

HAPPEL: Community engagement? No, mostly involved graduate students and professors.

*Q: Are there lessons that you draw from your Fulbright experience that are useful in your everyday life?*

HAPPEL: Yes, my Fulbright experience was transformational. I started out in journalism reporting facts and studying the credibility of journalists, which I think is a big hot topic right now in the U.S. But then I transformed into a leadership development business owner and I think it's been pivotal and fundamental for me to have spent some time internationally to see how people work, how people click. I work with a lot of leaders who lead global teams and I am positive that I would not be where I am today as a successful small business owner, really the backbone of our U.S. economy, if I didn't have this Fulbright experience.

*Q: Fantastic. Is there anything else you'd like to add, Sarah?*

HAPPEL: I just want to say that Fulbright is something that we can all be proud of as Americans. It increases our safety, our prosperity, and our knowledge of the world and there are so many amazing alumni. We have over 400,000 all around the world. So many from America go someplace, learn something so pivotal, and they come back and apply it here in the U.S. whether they're diplomats or politicians or business owners or professors. It's just an amazing transformational experience that I really hope goes on for many centuries to come.

*Q: Thank you Sarah. This concludes our interview with Sarah Happel.*

*End of interview*