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

CYNTHIA FARRELL JOHNSON

Interviewed by: Peter Eicher
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INTERVIEW

Q: Good afternoon. This is Peter Eicher. It's May 11, 2018, and I'm interviewing Cynthia Farrell Johnson for the ADST Oral History Program. This is the first interview session.

Good afternoon, Cynthia.

JOHNSON: Good afternoon, Peter.

Q: Well, let's start at the beginning. Maybe you can tell us when and where you were born.

JOHNSON: I was born on August 28 in New York City. My parents, Arthur and Linnet Farrell, immigrated to the U.S. in the late 1940s, after World War II. They came from Panama and settled in New York City on the West Side, West 98th Street, across from Central Park. I'm told that's where my older sister used to run around and play, and we've got lots of nice pictures from that period in the 1950s. But just before I was born, we moved to the Bedford-Stuyvesant section of Brooklyn, New York. That's where I grew up, attending public schools in New York City from kindergarten through the 12th grade. I had the good fortune of being admitted to High School of Art and Design, a vocational school for commercial and art. While I had wanted to go to work and do something in the art field, my father was not having any of that. He said you will go to college and you will like it. And so, although I had dreamed of going to Pratt Institute—I lived about six blocks from the campus—I also wanted the real college experience of going away to school. So, I ended up going to State University of New York in New Paltz which was also a lot cheaper, and not that far from home.

Q: Okay. And your parents came from Panama; what brought them? Were they Panamanian?

JOHNSON: Yes, my parents were Panamanian, of West Indian descent. My father's side of the family was Barbadian. Myrtle Seale Farrell and Thomas Lewis Farrell were both from Barbados but met and married in Panama. In the 1980s, I actually got to visit the remaining relatives that we were aware of in Barbados, which would have been a great-

aunt, Maude Rose, and a cousin, Oliver Chandler. Sadly, all have since died, and I don't know of any other family members, although I'm sure there are still some there. My mother's family was originally from Jamaica, and unfortunately, we never were able to find any relatives there. I'm sure there's some; with ancestry.com maybe one day I'll track them down. So, the grandparents, Grace Whitter Barton and Charles Barton, traveled to Panama, and it was interesting because my paternal grandfather went to Panama from Barbados to work on the canal, as did so many West Indians. But my maternal grandparents traveled there because my grandfather was working for someone who I guess had business there and there were some opportunities, so he migrated. My mother was born in New Providence, which is in Colón Province, and to get to and from Colón City, they would use a kayuka, a canoe, to go across Gatun Lake because it was quicker than taking the road, which was pretty wretched. Even in the 1970s, when I first visited Panama to meet my uncles, aunt and cousins, we took the bus up there and it was a rough ride. Bus service was kind of spotty and yes, it was kind of a difficult route. I hear since then it's been much improved. Unfortunately, my uncle sold the family home, which backed onto the lake. It would have been nice to have kept it around for this time in our lives as a winter get-away spot.

Q: It sure would, yes.

What did your father do?

JOHNSON: My father was a printer. And that's also an interesting story because, let's see, his father—my father was born in Silver City, which is a whole other story.

Q: In Panama?

JOHNSON: In Panama. Silver City was in the Canal Zone and it was the town where silver workers lived. Now, one thing that a lot of folks don't always realize about the Canal Zone is that a lot of southerners worked there and were involved in running the Canal Zone, and so they brought some of their cultural practices there. There was a gold payroll and a silver payroll; the gold was for the engineers and doctors and professionals, and the silver payroll was for the laborers. But somehow it ended up being that there were silver water fountains and gold water fountains, silver bathrooms and gold bathrooms, and all this kind of thing, so there was a Silver City. And my father was only able to go as far as Silver City Junior High School because silver people weren't allowed to go to Balboa High School; only gold people. But I digress. My father was born and lived in Silver City until age 13, when his father died. His father died while at work, and since it was a company town my grandmother and the family had to move into Colón City, which was also traumatic because in addition to losing his father he was told by the Panamanian government that he wasn't a Panamanian citizen because he was born in Silver City, and of course, the Americans said, "well, you're not an American citizen, you're Barbadian". The Barbadians said, "well, you weren't born in Barbados so you're not one of our citizens". Apparently, he had to go through many gyrations before he got legal status and citizenship in Panama. Perhaps that's why he did not return to Panama until I ended up being assigned there later on in the Foreign Service. It was probably

because of his memories of these difficulties. I mean, you're 13-years-old and you lose your house and then all of a sudden, you're told you don't exist!

Q: How did he end up in the United States?

JOHNSON: His older brother, Samuel E. Farrell, migrated for education and then little by little each family member followed—he had an older sister, Olga Marcano, and his mother, Myrtle Seale Farrell, who one by one arrived in the U.S. And then there was my mother. I guess by then they were engaged, because they hadn't gotten married yet. When he went up to the States she followed shortly thereafter and they actually got married in Ephesus Seventh-Day Adventist Church that is still an active congregation in Harlem (New York City).

Q: Great. And that was- went to New York?

JOHNSON: Yes, to New York. And apparently a lot of the West Indians who lived in Panama either settled in New York or Los Angeles because after World War II many of the job opportunities that had existed in Colón and in Panama disappeared. Since they were bilingual English speakers, it was easy for them to make their way up to the U.S. if they had worked for the United States Government or for the Canal Company in some way, shape or form. I'm assuming that made it a little easier.

But back to your question: what did my father do? When he moved into Colón and was growing up, he got a job at "The Star and Herald," which was the English language newspaper in Panama City, with a sister newspaper, "La Estrella de Panamá." He worked there for a little while, but I think he got homesick for Colón so ended up going back to Colón and got a job working at the Seventh-Day Adventist Church's Pacific Press. The church had a publishing house and printing operation down there. He learned that skill there, so when he came to New York he continued in that profession, getting work as a printer and he did that for many, many years. I used to go with him sometimes when he had to work on the weekend if they had a big job. The Green & Sisselman plant was located at 34 Hubert Street in Lower Manhattan. Today it's condos, but back then it was right by the elevated West Side Highway. I remember going many a Sunday with him to keep him company and looking out the window and watching all these cars whiz by on the West Side Highway. A few years ago, when I was in New York visiting my sister Betty, just hanging out, I said let's go see where Daddy's old job used to be, and we could not believe how the whole neighborhood had changed. It was totally transformed. The elevated West Side Highway had been torn down and was at street level, and the old printing plant had become a fancy condo building. It had been beautifully renovated. And I was just like wow!

Q: So, it kind of foreshadowed your career in public affairs, huh?

JOHNSON: Oh, indeed, because when I ended up being assigned to Panama I was the press officer. When my dad came to visit me we went down to "La Estrella's" offices; they were still publishing the English language paper at that time. So I said well, show

me where you used to work or where you used to hang out. And unbelievably, the same gentleman who used to sit with him at the door to one of the work areas was there on a break, and he looks up at my father and says, "Eh, how you doing, where you been?" And this is like after 30 years or something. It was so funny. He recognized my dad and my dad certainly recognized him.

Q: So, you were already settled in Brooklyn by the time you were born, or they were settled in Brooklyn.

JOHNSON: Well, they had just moved into the house and I was born like a week or two after they moved in. My mother always said, "I think I went into labor because I was vigorously scrubbing, cleaning up the tiles in the bathroom of the house." She would joke that I was too excited and wanted to come out and see what the hubbub was about.

Q: You grew up in the same house in Brooklyn?

JOHNSON: Yes, I lived in the same house until I went off to college. When I finished college and moved back to Brooklyn, I shared an apartment not far from there with my older sister, Betty Farrell, who by then had finished nursing school and was at that point working on her master's. She became a nurse-midwife, so she was working on her master's in midwifery. I ended up rooming with her. And I ended up going to graduate school at Pratt Institute for Library Science. Her apartment was two blocks from Pratt, so it just made more sense to live there.

Q: Well, let's go back a little bit earlier than graduate school. What was it like growing up in Brooklyn at the time? Those were the 1950s?

JOHNSON: Yes, it was the 1950s and '60s. They were interesting times because, as you can imagine, there was lots of turmoil—all the civil rights movement with the riots and demonstrations. And I remember sitting in my paternal grandmother's room watching the news on TV. My grandmother lived with us. She used to tell me stories all the time about how lucky we were to live in the United States and go to school here because when she was growing up in Barbados, if you misbehaved they would hit you with a ruler, and they don't do that here in the United States. She would say, "You study and be a good girl—you don't know how fortunate you are." So, yes, they were interesting times.

We lived on a street where it was a mix of immigrants from the Caribbean and folks from the South who had migrated to New York. Every summer all my friends who had relatives in the South would disappear because they'd go down South to see relatives who had farms or lived in more rural areas so they could have some fresh air. We were always jealous, because we said they get to go someplace, and we just have to sit here. Once in a

while my parents would send us to summer camp in Hyde Park, New York, or out on Long Island, which was nice, but usually it was just for two weeks.

Q: Brooklyn is so trendy now. Back then, what kind of place was it?

JOHNSON: Brooklyn was considered the hinterlands. But what's fascinating is that previous to our moving there, Brooklyn had been considered an upscale suburb. A few years back a friend of mine, Stephen Grant, wrote a book about the Folger family, of the Folger Shakespeare Library. Henry and Emily Folger had a brownstone in Brooklyn. Mr. Folger worked for Standard Oil and invested all of his earnings, because they had no children. They invested in collecting books and folios and memorabilia, anything having to do with William Shakespeare. Stephen was doing research since no one had ever written the Folger's biography. Stephen had done a lot of research and found out where the Folgers had lived and some of the places where Mr. Folger had gone to school, which turned out to be right around the corner from where I had lived when I was going to Pratt Institute. There was a connection between Folger and the Pratt family. St. Joseph's College in Brooklyn had been the home of someone that Mr. Folger was associated with. It's like Brooklyn has come full circle because it was an upscale suburb and then it became overrun with all us immigrants and their children and some with hard luck. This cycle of block-busting and white flight played out across the country during the 1960s. And now, again, Brooklyn and many other cities are having this rebirth or resurgence. Like everything in life, there are always different cycles.

Q: Well, you mentioned the civil rights movement; was your school, were your schools integrated?

JOHNSON: The schools that I went to were a reflection of the neighborhood—and, by the way, I lived two blocks from the famous Marcy Houses where Jay-Z grew up. Ours was a neighborhood that was predominantly African American and immigrants from the Caribbean, including a contingent from Puerto Rico. I remember one year there was a young man from Texas, Eddie Harmon who was white. He was the only white kid in our school. And when Betty was in elementary school, there was one immigrant family from Poland, the Stalinskys, but they moved after a few years. So it was not that integrated. It was predominantly black and Puerto Rican. And then, that was also the period when they were going to desegregate all the schools, so my older sister was "bused." What she did was have to take a train, two trains to go to a school in the Bensonhurst neighborhood, which was predominantly Italian, and that was not a pleasant experience. The black students were often chased to the subway station by groups of energetic young white boys. But there was a music teacher there who was beloved by all of the students. Franklin Delano Roosevelt High School had a music program that apparently was quite good, and my sister, who played piano and clarinet, loved her music teacher, so I think that sort of helped. But it was not a pleasant experience, so I decided I didn't want to go to any of those kinds of schools. I had an English teacher, Brenda Lavin, in junior high school who helped me with putting together my portfolio so I could apply to High School of Art and Design, because I decided I'd rather go to a vocational school where the focus

was on a specific subject rather than one of these academic schools where you're just thrown in with a whole bunch of people and there was all kinds of craziness going on.

Q: So, already in junior high you were looking towards an artistic vocation?

JOHNSON: Oh, elementary school.

Q: Oh, really? Wow.

JOHNSON: I'm still in touch with my elementary school art teacher, Mrs. Carole Teller. I still call her Mrs. Teller after all these years. She's retired, living in New York, but we still keep in touch. She encouraged me, when she saw how much I enjoyed painting and drawing—and my father and mother also encouraged me. I should say that it was my mother who probably got me started down that road because we would go to church and I would be fidgety. For me, it was so boring listening to these adults talk about something I could not understand. I'd go to our Sabbath School, which was at my level, and then I'd have to sit through this hour and change of big people talking about stuff that I didn't really understand. My mother always carried a little notebook or a little pad in her purse to make notes. When I got too fidgety, she would draw something and then give the pad to me, and I would just get totally engrossed in drawing something, and that's how she kept me quiet in church. I cannot remember a time when I wasn't drawing. From as early as I can recall, my parents got me little paint sets for Christmas—you know, paint by the numbers. Unfortunately, I would always run out of paint before I had filled everything in, which I found very frustrating, but they would humor me and encourage me and they would get me extra little supplies and paints. And the elementary school art teacher, Mrs. Carole Teller, when she had some leftover paint, she would let me have it so I could do stuff at home. There were a lot of adults who encouraged me.

My father, because of his printing, would show me what he was doing, sometimes when I'd go to work with him. For instance, Green & Sissleman had the Shell Oil Company account for many years. They did the labels and other things for Shell Oil, so he would show me how he was going to mix the signature Shell yellow. He did not just pour the yellow from a can; he mixed a little bit of red and a little bit of white to make it a nice vibrant yellow. He taught me about mixing colors and that kind of thing. These are little things that you don't really pay much attention to as a kid, but you just absorb them. When I got to high school and we started studying color theory, I realized, "Oh, yes, that's kind of like what Dad was telling me." It all lined up.

Arthur Farrell was also a very practical man, and although he encouraged me with art, he said, "You need to get a good job with a pension because it is hard to make a living as a artist. Whatever you do, figure out how to get a good job with a pension". He knew this because he was also an artist; he was a musician, he sang. My mother was a visual artist and also a skilled seamstress. She would make our clothes when we were younger before she went to work full-time. She would make our dresses, and she made the patterns out of newspaper or the grocery bags, and she would design and make the patterns. She was in heaven when Simplicity started making patterns, and she could go out and buy the

premade patterns. Nonetheless, sometimes she would make adjustments to those Simplicity patterns. She was very talented in that domain.

My father was a musician. He was a bass-baritone. He sang music from Paul Robeson's repertoire because his voice was a dead ringer for Paul Robeson. He worked with Mr. Robeson's arrangement accompanist, Lawrence Brown. Mr. Brown used to come to our house for Sunday dinner and they would practice and do concerts in the New York metropolitan area and probably other places. As I was a kid, he never told me where he was going. But later on, after he had died (in 1995), we went through his sheet music collection. Buried in all of those papers, we found a program from 1964 where he had sung at a tribute to Mr. Robeson at the Americana Hotel in New York City. The master and mistress of ceremony were Ossie Davis and Ruby Dee, and then there was this long list of people who performed, people like Billy Taylor and Pete Seeger, and there's my father's name, Arthur Farrell, and I was so upset that he never told us this! How many other secrets did he take with him to the grave? Arthur Farrell wasn't prone to boasting, he just went about his business and did what he did. Music was his passion.

I grew up a Seventh-Day Adventist, with my father singing in the choir at our church on Saturdays. He was what they called the minister of music. He worked with the organist on selecting music. He wasn't the choir director, but he would do the research and find interesting pieces for church services. He did that on Saturdays and on some Sundays, he hired out as a rent-a-voice at different churches in New York. He also took voice lessons, studying with different vocal coaches in New York City. Years later, I did an exhibition of paintings inspired by the spirituals that he used to sing, and at one point I did a collaborative program with a bass singer, Russell Saint John, who was going to do a concert at the Schomburg Library auditorium in New York City. When I met with him to discuss what I was going to say and show the images that would be used, and coordinate how the program was going to flow, he said, "Oh, yes, I've heard of your father" and he cited Sylvia Olden Lee who had taught at the Curtis Institute. She was one of the few African-American vocal instructors at Curtis in Philadelphia and he said, "She spoke of your father, saying she admired his voice because it was rich in color." I was like, wow! All of these things that I never knew! Clearly, I needed to learn more about his musical career. There was a family friend, Gilbert Washington, also from Panama, who served as an accompanist for him at times. He had trained at the music conservatory in Panama. I traveled to Brooklyn to ask him if he knew who my father's vocal coaches had been and to see if he could tell me anything more about my father's musical pursuits. However, by then Mr. Washington was up in years and he said, "Sorry, my memory is just not what it used to be and I can't remember those details. I know there was a German gentleman and an African gentleman, but I can't remember their names nor do I recall where they taught". So I lost that thread and couldn't figure out anything more. I don't know that he studied with Ms. Lee of the Curtis Institute but apparently she knew of him. My father had won an Arthur Godfrey radio program talent contest and had an option of going on

tour in Europe, but he had these two little kids and a wife and was concerned about who was going to support the family while he was over there. So, he didn't go.

Q: So, it was just you and your sister then?

JOHNSON: A third sister, Anita Hughes, came along a little later, so we are three sisters. Both of my sisters are in the medical profession—I'm the only oddball. Our father wanted all of us to go into the medical profession because it offered job security, but I was like, that's just not me.

Q: So, at home, did they ever talk politics or foreign affairs or anything around the dinner table?

JOHNSON: Oh, absolutely, absolutely. I guess I should also tell my mother's name; my mother's name was Linnet Farrell, and she didn't talk much politics. My grandmother, her name was Myrtle Agnes Lavinia Seale Farrell, she had very definite opinions about everything. And I remember so many times sitting around the dinner table and her calling Arnulfo Arias everything but a child of God because he did not treat the West Indians in Panama very well during his various presidencies. (Understandable as he was a Nazi sympathizer.) She did not have very warm memories of him and his government. I don't remember my father saying too much about Panamanian politics. He was more interested in what was going on here in the U.S. and U.S. politics. He was always very disturbed by U.S. policy toward Cuba because he said it didn't make any sense because these folks weren't going to disappear and we might as well figure out a way to live with them and engage. That was his point of view. My father was a great admirer of Paul Robeson and the fact that he spoke so many languages and understood other cultures—and collected folk songs from different countries. Consequently, my dad performed folk songs from Russia and Central Europe and Western Europe that became part of his repertoire. There was all talk about faraway places. We had visitors from all parts of the Caribbean who would come to the house, and we would hear them talking about what was going on in the islands. Since there were all of these faraway places that were always under discussion, from an early age I was curious about what it would be like to live in these places and speak a foreign language. Oh, yes, it would be so cool to be able to speak six languages like Paul Robeson! Yes. Growing up in that kind of an atmosphere, yes, there was always news of what's going on "back home" and discussion of the politics, pro, con, whatever. There was also discussion of domestic U.S. politics. But basically the attitude was that we had more opportunities here in the U.S. than we would have had in Panama. While it was not perfect here, the assumption was that we children would have more opportunities for education than our parents. Therefore, it was worth it to settle here and try to make a contribution in some way.

As it turned out, all three of us got involved in public service in some way. My younger sister, Anita, went into the Navy, and ended up working as an operating room technician. She went back to school after leaving the military and now, she's an operating room nurse, specializing in orthopedic surgery. My older sister, Betty, did not go to work for the U.S. Government directly. After becoming a registered nurse, she got a degree in

midwifery and practiced for a while, eventually going on to obtain a masters degree in public health. Over the years, she has worked with various international public health organizations. She has also served as a consultant on child and maternal public health projects with entities funded by the United States Agency for International Development, so she's also involved in public service. And then, of course, I went into Foreign Service.

Q: But before that you sound like you were going into art.

JOHNSON: Well, yes, I had planned to do art, but because I was looking for a job with a pension, I got a degree in library science. My first after school job was working in Brooklyn Public Library. During the time I was in high school they had all these different anti-poverty programs and so, there was one in our neighborhood and I signed up for it and got a part-time job in our local branch library, which was fine because I was a bookworm and that was the easiest way to escape having to do chores. I'd be buried in a book and they'd forget I was even there. But every now and then they'd catch me.

Q: What kind of books did you like to read?

JOHNSON: Oh, I loved those fairy tales from faraway places; the Laura Ingalls Wilder series I found fascinating—I liked all kinds of books. One that I particularly enjoyed was called The One of a Kind Family, which was about this large Jewish family in New York City. That was the other thing; many of our teachers were Jewish, and so we learned all about the different Jewish holidays and things relating to Jewish traditions. I was always curious about different people and different customs and history. I loved biographies, for me it was the most interesting way to learn history because you saw events through a human eye. To me straight history sometimes seemed a little sterile. But when you read these biographies, they put things in context; I found that really fascinating. So, I enjoyed those kinds of books.

Q: Did you get politically active at all during these years?

JOHNSON: Let's see. In high school, my-

Q: Which years were you in high school just so we can-

JOHNSON: Oh, let's see, when did I go? From 1968 to '72, I guess, because I graduated in 1972.

Q: That's a very active political period.

JOHNSON: Yes. I do remember going to some anti-war demonstrations, but of course, my parents were very strict about, you know, no violence and no craziness. Just get an education so that you can have something in your head and go out there and actually make a contribution. And of course, my grandmother being a very good Barbadian, was always on us about speaking properly, because she said if you do not speak properly, people will think you are stupid, so you must speak properly. She would always say,

"Don't talk to me like you talk to your friends; I want to make sure you can speak properly." It's so funny, I talk to people and they say you don't sound like you're from Brooklyn, and I say you didn't know my grandmother.

So, yes, some of us would go to some of these anti-war demonstrations. I vividly remember when. One of the students killed at Kent State was from New York City, and they had his funeral not far from our school. All the high school kids, college kids, everybody converged in the neighborhood where the funeral took place and it was like as far as the eye could see, just people out there as part of the anti-war protest movement. But no, I wasn't really involved in a lot of the demonstrations. And then, when I went up to college, it was interesting; I was assigned to a dormitory that was predominantly black called Chango. A lot of the students in there were in this program that was called Special Admissions because it was trying to increase the number of minority students who went to college during that time.

Q: Can you just, for the record here, say what years you were in college, the name of the college, what city?

JOHNSON: From 1972 to 1976, I was an undergraduate at State University of New York in New Paltz, New York, which is 90 miles up the Hudson River from New York City, so about an hour-and-a-half on a Trailways bus. New Paltz had a respected art program, so that was the attraction. At the time I started college, I thought I wanted to be an art teacher, and then after doing a semester program where one was introduced to art education at the campus school, I decided well, maybe not. I switched to art history so that I could go to library school because by then I had a part-time, college work-study job at the Sojourner Truth Library in the World Studies Center, which was a collection of books and periodicals on Africa, Asia and the Middle East. At that time, New Paltz had an international studies program focused primarily on Africa, Asia and the Middle East. The World Study Center also contained The Haggerty Collection, which was a collection of papers belonging to William J. Haggerty. He was president of the college at New Paltz from 1944 – 1966 and instituted the international studies program. Sadly the World Study Center has since been disbanded and I'm not quite sure what happened to the Haggerty Collection. All the books that had been at the World Studies Center got integrated into the general library collection because they eliminated the international studies program due to low enrollment, budget cuts, and reorganizations. As usual, that was a shortsighted decision.

But I do remember at the time that I was there, there was lots of enthusiasm and interest in the wider world, and people who were visionary realized it was important to start studying China and getting a better handle on what was going on in Africa. As I was shelving and putting things away, I would also flip through magazines about different parts of the world; of course, that fed my interests. And then the woman who ran the World Studies Center, Dr. Corinne Nyquist, was also inspiring. She and her husband had been in South Africa because he was an African studies professor and had been awarded a Fulbright. They had suggested I consider working for the State Department, because I was interested in languages and foreign travel and a career overseas. But I looked at the

booklet and I said oh, State Department doesn't look really interesting to me. I want to do something with culture. I didn't realize that in the back of the book there was something on the United States Information Agency (USIA). I only saw the front part so it wasn't until many years later that I discovered ah, there's this thing called USIA and they do culture, so maybe that might be a possibility.

At the time that I was in college, I was working part-time in the World Studies Center and living in this dorm called Chango. And of course, there were questions about why are all these minority students were living in this dorm. Well, we had programs and activities that sort of- getting to know about African culture and black studies and this, that and the other. I started organizing some lectures and getting professors and guest speakers from the community or New York City to come over—sort of like a harbinger of things to come because I ended up doing that later on as well.

Q: In your career, huh?

JOHNSON: I helped organize some of those activities to make the case for, yes well, it's about more than just a bunch of minority students living together. We're just trying to learn in a different way.

But getting back to high school, at one point my social studies teacher told me I should take a leadership class. I said I'm not a leader of anything. And she said oh, I think you should do this class. So, I did the class and actually got involved in organizing activities. We had a dance at the school and other kinds of after-school programs. And then, when I graduated, they gave me the John F. Kennedy Citizenship Award. I still can't remember all the things that made that happen, but Mrs. Shelby Schmidt, the social studies teacher, saw something in me and gave me opportunities to grow in ways I had never imagined. At that dance, we had some kids from another school that tried to crash our party and somehow, I managed to redirect them and diffuse the situation.

Q: Very nice, very nice. I imagine Kennedy, do you remember where you were when Kennedy was assassinated?

JOHNSON: Oh, yes. I was in the fourth grade on my way home from school, and I remember one of the boys who was usually disruptive in our class was running up the street screaming "the president's been shot, the president's been shot." And I said, "Oh, you're such a liar" because he was always making things up. Then, I get home and my mother and my grandmother are sitting at the dining table with their heads in their hands and they look like it was the end of the world. And I asked what was going on? Oh, the president's dead. For the rest of the weekend everybody was glued to the television and it

was really depressing. All the different assassinations that followed, all the upheaval, it was really so depressing, so distressing.

Q: Yes, tough times.

JOHNSON: Yes.

Q: But generally, the State University at New Paltz, how big was it? How many, and was it 50 percent women at the time?

JOHNSON: Oh, goodness. I have no idea, to be perfectly honest. Years later, maybe four or five years ago, I was invited to serve on the Advisory Board for the School of Fine and Performing Arts, so I ended up going back to the campus for meetings periodically. And there were new dorms, a new arts building, all fabulous. There has been a lot of growth and with it the inevitable challenges that arise in a small town housing an ever-expanding university population.

Q: Well, that's okay, it's not _____. I'm just interested because it's-

JOHNSON: Honestly, I couldn't tell you what the population was like. It was just another world for me at the time.

Q: But it was, you know, lots of women as well as men?

JOHNSON: Oh, yes.

Q: Lots of whites as well as African Americans?

JOHNSON: Yes, I mean, it was a predominantly white school. But there were also a lot of international students. Years later, when I went to Sierra Leone, for example, to visit some friends, I was able to track down Sylvia and Gus Wachuku-King, a couple who had been graduate assistants at New Paltz when I was there. It was great to reconnect with them after a decade or two. New Paltz had a lot of students from Africa, especially Ethiopia and Somalia. It was so funny; one summer when I had gone on a summer abroad program, and was walking down the street in Florence, Italy, I ran into two young men from Somalia who had been students at New Paltz. It was such a surprise! I mean, you never know who you're going to run into in this world.

Q: That's one of the great things about the Foreign Service; it happened so often in such unlikely ways.

JOHNSON: Exactly. So, yes, despite the presence of minorities and foreign students, New Paltz was always a predominantly white school. I would say that now the challenge of creating a more diverse student body is even greater, because it's a very good school, highly rated, so therefore very competitive, and you've got a huge applicant pool. It's just the numbers, you know, lots more people applying, lots more people competing to get in,

and so, I'm not really sure what their numbers are like today. Just from walking around the campus it's hard to tell. The times that I've been up there, it seems like they're still struggling to try to attract not just minority students, but students from surrounding communities. I was surprised when I was on the advisory board that the dean said that one of our goals was to do more outreach to the art teachers in the surrounding school districts because they felt that a lot of young people who could be competitive weren't applying. I also tried to encourage them to consider connecting with the Duke Ellington School down here in Washington, D.C. The idea came from some alumni who said if the SUNY New Paltz wanted to try to get some of the youngsters from the D.C. area who could go at in-state tuition because of the special program that D.C. had, they would be willing to try to set up a fund to help them with transportation, for example. But as far as I know that never went anywhere, for reasons best known to the college.

Q: So, you graduated in library science, art history?

JOHNSON: I graduated with a BA in art history, and then went to library school, for the master's in library science at Pratt Institute.

Q: At Pratt, was that immediately afterwards?

JOHNSON: Yes. Since I had gone to school all year 'round—in the summers I was a resident assistant after the first year. I had the work-study job plus the resident assistant job to help meet the costs. I got free room and board as a resident assistant, and with the work-study job, that helped me buy my books and art supplies. Nonetheless, it took me 10 years to pay off my college loans, but the amount was nothing like today's average student debt. Oh, my goodness. I just can't imagine how today's young people are managing with these crazy costs. But anyway, I digress again. Although I finished all my course work by December of 1975, I'm in the class of '76. Since I had finished everything by December '75, it gave me a head start on the job search. I returned to New York City, went back to Brooklyn and moved in with my sister, Betty. I told everyone I was looking for a job and one of my friends, Betty Rauch, saw an ad in an Upper West Side newspaper for Barnard College. The college was looking for a part-time library assistant, so I applied and got the job. Turns out that one of the technical services assistants was going to be leaving in the fall and that job was going to open up and that would be a full-time job. And one of their benefits was you would get tuition paid for any graduate program in the city because at that time, Barnard didn't have a graduate program. So, I applied, and I got the full-time job. Meanwhile, I had started graduate school with only enough money to pay for the first semester. I figured I'd find a way to pay for the rest of it. The job at Barnard was like an answer to a prayer! I worked full-time at the Barnard College library then went to grad school in the evenings; it was a

two-year program at Pratt Institute's Graduate School of Library and Information Science for the master's degree.

Q: Very nice. Two years at night, that must have been a lot of work.

JOHNSON: Oh, it was, but I guess when you're young and energetic it doesn't seem so. But during that time is when Barnard's library director, Robert Palmer, went on a Fulbright in the Philippines, and when he came back, he suggested that since I liked languages and was good at that, I should apply for a librarian position at the U.S. Information Agency. That organization had libraries overseas, he continued, and maybe I could get a job there. So, I wrote away to the U.S. Information Agency, asking about their job opportunities, but I didn't hear anything in a timely fashion, so I just went about life, finished my degree, and got a job with Brooklyn Public Library.

Q: Very nice.

JOHNSON: One day, I get this letter, or maybe it was a phone call, I can't remember which now, asking me if I'm still interested in a Foreign Service career. While I wouldn't be eligible for librarian jobs because at the time that I'd written the letter I was clerical and one had to have five years of professional library experience, but that there were some other options and if I was interested they could send me more information. Apparently, the person I had written to did not follow up on a lot of communications. My letter ended up at the bottom of an in-box, and when a new person, Beverly Hendrix, rotated in, she found it. Ms. Hendrix was in charge of minority recruitment. She sent me a package of the information and I applied to the minority recruitment program where one had to send all college transcripts, write an essay, and jump through all kinds of hoops and fill out all kinds of forms. I did all of that and sent it in, and they did whatever it is they do, and I continued working at Brooklyn Public Library. Then, all of a sudden, one day I get this phone call saying we still haven't gotten your graduate school transcript; are you still interested? So, I walked over to Pratt Institute and I said what is going on? I got them to give me the transcript, the official transcript, and I mailed it myself. They probably gave me the official transcript because I showed them the canceled check that indicated that I had submitted the request and it should have been sent. The process continued and eventually I got an invitation to come in for the orals.

Q: This must have been '78 or something?

JOHNSON: Yes, this was in '78. I went and did the orals and had the good fortune of staying with a childhood friend who was living in the D.C. area. Florizelle "Florie" Brathwaite Liser, who later went on to direct the Africa division of the U.S. Trade

Representative's office, had gone to SAIS (Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Study) and she schooled me on the oral exam.

Q: Ah, nice.

JOHNSON: Florie said if you don't know the answer, say so, don't try to finesse it, just be honest. That was the best advice because I got an unexpected question at the one-on-one interview. Interviews used to be one-on-one, now it's three-on-one or two-on-one, I can't remember. Back to the one-on-one at that time—the examiner asked me, "What could you tell me about U.S.-Canada relations and what might be some of the problems, and what might we do to address them?" And I just looked at him. I'd been reading the newspaper and focusing on the Middle East and all this other stuff, and he's going to ask me about Canada? So, I looked at him and I said, "I can't think of anything." He said well, just take your time. And then I remembered something, saying "Oh yes, I read this article in Library Journal about how the Canadians are very upset that U.S. books flood their markets and it's very hard for Canadian writers to rise to prominence, so they had instituted a program where you got extra points or something for when you purchase Canadian books and Canadian materials and you could redeem them for other things." I couldn't remember the details, but it was an incentive program to highlight Canadian arts. So, I said that probably applies to a lot of other things in a lot of other areas, and what was the rest of the question? And he said that's okay, that's fine. Then we talked about what I would do if I were in a place where there wasn't television and good radio and how would I entertain myself. To which I said oh, no problem, I'd just paint. I would go out and sketch and then come home and paint. So, he asks what kind of painting do you do? And I said well, a lot of people tell me it looks like Haitian art. Then he says oh, my wife and I have donated some of our art for an exhibition on Haiti at the Brooklyn

Museum. And I said oh, I saw that show, because it was not too far from where I was living. We just had this nice conversation.

Q: You hit it off.

JOHNSON: Indeed.

Q: So, let's go into that just a little bit more. At this time the oral interview was just you and one person?

JOHNSON: Yes.

Q: For an hour or something?

JOHNSON: Yes. At that time, for the orals, you had to write some kind of an essay or something. I'm trying to remember; we had this in-box test and that was a nightmare.

Q: What do you remember about it?

JOHNSON: The in-box?

Q: Yes.

JOHNSON: There was a whole bunch of stuff and I was trying to figure out—couldn't make heads or tails out of some of the things, and then at the end I said—the time ran out before I could get through everything, and so they asked me well, what would you do differently the next time? I said well, I think I would just spread everything out in front of me and try and figure out what goes together, what I need to do, because it was just overwhelming. And in the work I was doing in the library we don't get inundated with that kind of thing, so it was a totally new experience. There was the in-box, the essay, the interview, and then the group exercise. And in the group exercise everybody gets a role to play. There were some people in there who I think thought that it was their job to get their thing funded for the country team and not to worry about anyone else. But I looked at it differently because I remembered Florie told me it's about teamwork. So I looked at proposals and I made suggestions, well, maybe we could do this and maybe you could reach out to so-and-so and that would help with that. It was a little bit of problem solving. We might not be able to do everything but we might be able to do enough that people feel that we take their requests seriously. Maybe we can get someone else to paint our fence, you know, always looking for somebody else to do what the government can't do. That's

how I approached the exercise, and apparently, they thought I was a good enough team player that they let me play.

Q: Well, that's great. Do you remember, sort of an all-day kind of thing?

JOHNSON: It was an all-day thing; it was an all-day thing.

Q: And something which should make you kind of nervous, I suppose.

JOHNSON: Well, yes. It was a lot of effort—that's a long time just to try to get a job, to spend the whole day in this whole process. But again, because Florie knew so many people who had done it during her time at SAIS, and I think they had classes at SAIS to prepare people for the Foreign Service exam, it wasn't totally unfamiliar to me. She gave me all kinds of insights and pointers on what the examiners are looking for and that kind of thing.

Q: And did they tell you right at the end of the day?

JOHNSON: Oh, no.

Q: No, of course not.

JOHNSON: No, they sent you home and you waited to get a letter saying what it was. Now it's much better. Years later, I served on the Board of Examiners and at that time we told people immediately at the end of the day, before they left, what the outcome was. I

thought that made a lot more sense than to have people sort of on tenterhooks for weeks on end wondering.

Q: Were the other people in your group, were they all headed for USIA or were there general Foreign Service?

JOHNSON: Oh, general- it was mixed; it was all mixed.

Q: It was all mixed.

JOHNSON: And I can't even remember if any of the other people who were there that day, if I ever ran into them in their career.

Q: No, at that point they're just names and faces, but no, just wondering whether the USIA had its own _____.

JOHNSON: No, USIA used the State Department Board of Examiners, so we were thrown in with the others.

Q: But now, you had applied specifically to USIA?

JOHNSON: Yes.

Q: And I suppose the cone system was operating and other people were trying to be an admin officer or a political officer or whatever it happened to be?

JOHNSON: Yes.

Q: Right, okay. So, everybody knew before which career they were trying to get into?

JOHNSON: They were trying—exactly.

Q: Exactly, okay. So, some weeks later you got the happy letter?

JOHNSON: Some weeks later I got the happy letter, and then they said that there would be a—the next step would be the background or security check. I had the foresight to tell my neighbors that somebody might come around asking questions and that I was applying for a job with the government so it would be okay to answer the questions. It was months before somebody actually came around. After the Diplomatic Security Agent came around, one of my neighbors walked up to me and said he was so glad I told him that people were going to come around asking for me because if I hadn't, he would have told them Cynthia's a nice girl and it's none of their business. I had neighbors who were very protective. So, yes, the agent came and did the interview and then, again, months and months of radio silence, and I guess I had some sense that something was going to happen soon because I started getting my apartment organized. By then my sister Betty had moved out and had gotten her own place and I had the same place that she and I had

shared. I had started sorting things and—not that I had that much—but what little I had. Then, I got a call asking if in two weeks I could be there for the junior officer class.

Q: Of course.

JOHNSON: I had told people at my job that I was applying to the Foreign Service, so I was able to give them two weeks' notice, and my landlord as well. I already had one of my friends, Florie's older brother Orville Brathwaite, who was looking for an apartment, lined up. I told him that I might be moving. Adding, "Since I am not sure about this job, I thought that maybe you could take this apartment and if this doesn't work out, I might come back home." He's still there. I went to see him the other day; my old apartment is still there, a fourth floor walkup in a brownstone.

Q: So, this would have been 1979?

JOHNSON: '79-'80. I came into the Foreign Service in 1980, in February of 1980.

Q: February of 1980.

JOHNSON: Yes. So, from the time that the whole thing started was basically about two years and change for the whole process to work out, and in that time I'd worked at two different branch libraries of Brooklyn Public Library. Working for the public library is fun, too, because I got to go to different branches; I didn't just stay in one particular branch. When you're a librarian they'll move you around. So, it was kind of like the Foreign Service; you stay there for a few years and then, when there was a need somewhere else then you'd go somewhere else.

Q: So, what did your family think of this?

JOHNSON: Oh, well, the first thing my father asked me was does that mean I'm going to be ambassador one day, and I said please God, I hope not. I said I just want to do culture; I don't want to do all that other stuff. But I did have some chargé duties at different points.

Q: So, nobody thought you were a nut case or anything for wanting to spend your life overseas?

JOHNSON: Oh, no. Some people thought I was joining the Foreign Legion, or something like that. There were all kinds of jokes.

Q: Or the CIA.

JOHNSON: Oh, that too, yes, yes, yes. But no, again, because so many of our friends were first generation West Indians Americans, traveling and working and living overseas was not a big deal. During the Vietnam War we had friends who sent their sons back to Jamaica or Barbados or wherever so that they could avoid the draft because they said oh,

no, I don't think so. Living and working overseas was not a big deal for a lot of folks. They thought it was a great adventure. Many said they'd come visit; not all of them did. But it was still fun.

Q: So, you packed your life into a trailer or suitcase or whatever and moved to D.C.?

JOHNSON: Packed everything into storage and packed my suitcase, which got stolen off of the train.

Q: Oh, no.

JOHNSON: Yes. So, that was an auspicious start.

Q: A good start.

JOHNSON: And then, the house I was living in on 6th Street, with another childhood friend also got robbed. Dr. Marciana Wilkerson-Ford was living in D.C. so I roomed with her. Several weeks before I was to leave on my first assignment, someone broke into the house and stole a lot of our stuff, so that was not a good year, 1980. Lost my suitcase, lost stuff, you know, they came in and stole jewelry--easily "fenceable" things.

Q: Join the Foreign Service, make it a good year, huh?

JOHNSON: Yes. I joined the Foreign Service and went overseas so that I could be safer because clearly New York and Washington had crime problems.

Q: So, what was it like joining the Foreign Service in February of 1980? What was your entering class?

JOHNSON: The entering class, I believe it was 19 people, and I want to say nine women, 10 men or 10 women, nine men. There was a large cohort of women.

Q: And this is, again, it's-

JOHNSON: In USIA.

Q: -Foreign Service or just USIA?

JOHNSON: Just USIA.

Q: Just USIA.

JOHNSON: There were 19 of us, three of us, women of color who came in through the minority recruitment program. Two of us stayed in the Foreign Service all the way to retirement. The other dropped out after her first overseas tour. In that particular class there were maybe half a dozen or so who left. One woman left before she even went

overseas because her husband couldn't get into the Foreign Service. He decided he didn't want to be a trailing spouse. And then, he got offered a good job elsewhere and she decided to leave. There were several people that within the first couple of years left the Foreign Service, but most of us stayed in and continued on to retirement.

Q: Well, that was pretty progressive for 1980 if it was half women, half men.

JOHNSON: Yes. Ambassador John Reinhardt was the director of USIA at the time.

Q: And where was the class held?

JOHNSON: It was at 1776 Pennsylvania—no, 1750 maybe, Pennsylvania Avenue. It was in the 1700 block of Pennsylvania Avenue. The building doesn't exist anymore; everything got torn down and the IMF (International Monetary Fund) built a new building in the spot. We had classes in that building, as well as another spot at 1425 K Street, NW. That building was also torn down and replaced sometime in the 1980s. Later,

we joined the A-100 class at State Department and finished up our orientation there with them.

Q: Oh, so first you did a separate USIA-specific orientation-

JOHNSON: Yes.

Q: -Which was what, a few weeks?

JOHNSON: Yes. I can't remember how long it was now, but at some point, we joined the A-100 class.

Q: Before that, do you remember what you did during these initial five or six weeks?

JOHNSON: Oh, goodness.

Q: I mean, the kind of thing, I don't mean the specific lesson plan.

JOHNSON: I mean, just a lot of talking heads as I recall, and just understanding how USIA was organized. Of course, at that time it was called USICA and then they changed the name back because this was the end of the Carter Administration going into the-

Q: Called USICA? I don't remember-

JOHNSON: Yes. U.S. International Communication Agency.

Q: I don't even remember that.

JOHNSON: And people hated the name change and then they changed it back to USIA shortly thereafter. So, USICA didn't last too long, thank God.

Q: And then you went over, and were they still doing the A-100 classes in Roslyn at the time or had they moved to the new campus?

JOHNSON: Yes, yes, they were doing it in Rosslyn and then we went out to somewhere in West Virginia, Coolfont, I think, and did some training out there.

Q: So, all 19 of you joined a class which must have been a much bigger class.

JOHNSON: Quite large, yes. So, we did that-

Q: So, how did they make you feel? I mean, were you part of the- obviously part of the same team like you should have been, or were you- feel shunted aside as-

JOHNSON: Well, it was very clear that it was a different culture. I mean, we were included but already we saw the difference in orientation, and I think they thought we were kind of airy-fairy culture-vulture types, and they were the real serious people.

Q: Interesting.

JOHNSON: And I think there was disdain, a slight disdain going in both directions—because it was just two different cultures.

Q: Well, at the end of the A-100s people usually get their assignments.

JOHNSON: Yes.

Q: Was it the same thing for you?

JOHNSON: Yes.

Q: Was there an opportunity to bid or express a preference?

JOHNSON: Yes, yes. We got a list and we had to figure out where we wanted to go. And so, I decided I wanted to go someplace where if this didn't work out I wouldn't be able to afford to go on my own on a librarian's salary. I had always wanted to learn French, and I didn't think I would be competitive for Paris, so I chose francophone West Africa—they had a lot of francophone West Africa posts on the list, and Abidjan was my first choice, I think, and that's where I ended up going.

Q: Abidjan, okay.

JOHNSON: Abidjan, Côte d'Ivoire.

Q: Did you already speak French?

JOHNSON: Not a word.

Q: Did you speak any other language?

JOHNSON: I had had a little bit of Spanish in high school, plus my parents were bilingual, they spoke survival Spanish. English was their mother tongue, but they spoke Spanish when they didn't want us to know what they were talking about with their friends, and so, I had taken Spanish in high school, junior high and high school. And in college, for my art history degree I had to take French or German. The chairman of the art history department was Dr. Hugo Munsterberg, and he said, "Well, if you want something easy you can do French but if you would like a challenge then I would suggest German." So, I took German, of course. I studied with Herr Hans Weber, and went on a junior summer abroad program that was SUNY-wide—so it was a group of students from all the different State University of New York schools that went over to Karlsruhe, which

is the seat of the German Supreme Court. We studied German and did lots of visiting to churches and museums and cool places, and took a bus trip into East German, into Berlin, and visited museums in both West Germany and in East Germany. East Germany had much better ice cream than West Germany, in my opinion.

Q: Really?

JOHNSON: But other than that, I preferred much of what I saw in West Germany simply because East Germany seemed gray and a bit strange. When I looked at the vibrancy of West Germany and the drive from West Germany, that corridor that went into Berlin, as far as I could see there was nothing. That's because they didn't want anyone living or working close to this highway, so it was hard to get a sense of what East Germany was like. When we went into East Berlin and it was a lot quieter than West Berlin, which was active, bustling, all kinds of things going on. East Germany was very calm and quiet. People were very friendly and nice, but the streets were kind of empty. It was an interesting experience.

Q: Well, good, I'm glad you mentioned that, you had not mentioned previously. Had you had other, to digress a moment, had you had other overseas travels before you joined USIA?

JOHNSON: In college, one of our spring breaks we went up to Montreal, and I've been hoping to go back ever since; it's just never worked out. One of these days I'll get back there. It was so neat; it was a beautiful town. But other than that, this trip to Germany and then traveling around Europe was my first major trip. We had some time after the formal program so a group of us went to Florence and to Paris before we headed home. I think we went home through Luxembourg, and two years later I returned. The first time I went was in 1975 on the college program, and then two years later, in 1977, I returned. Oh, that was the other thing. At Barnard College they closed the campus in the summer, so we worked longer hours during the school year, and then we got the summer off with pay, which was wonderful. Of course, I went back to Europe for another summer with two friends, and we did a little bit more traveling, and one of the friends, Vesper Gibbs Barnes, had relatives in London. After visiting Germany and France, we went to London and stayed with her relatives. So, yes, that was pre-USIA travel. Those were affordable trips because I could get cheap fares to Europe and get a EurRail pass and travel around.

That's why I decided to try West Africa because I would never be able to afford to go there on my own.

Q: Yes. So, you got our assignment right at the end of the class and then was there further training you had to do?

JOHNSON: Oh, goodness, I'm trying to remember, it was so long ago.

Q: Certainly, language training.

JOHNSON: Yes, that's right, French. So, I got Abidjan and six months of French instruction. I was amazed that the first month in French was spent learning to make the sounds that don't exist in English. Then, we did five months of intensive study. And I remember when I started, I said I cannot believe, I'm pinching myself, they're paying me to learn French. Oh, joy! That was a lot of fun. And I didn't do too badly; I got my 3/3, went overseas to Abidjan, and the first day I was there I said please, don't talk to me in English unless I look like I'm totally clueless and don't know what you're saying because I really want to be able to understand and communicate effectively in French. Folks were really great about helping me. The hardest part, of course, is always speaking on the phone, but after a while even that got a little bit easier.

Q: But to continue with the training for just a little, this was still at FSI (Foreign Service Institute); they hadn't built the new campus yet?

JOHNSON: Right. It was in Rosslyn in one of those high-rise buildings.

Q: And you were assigned just to Abidjan as what, cultural affairs?

JOHNSON: ACAO, assistant cultural affairs officer.

Q: Okay.

JOHNSON: And in junior officer training, I did a rotation in the embassy, working in different sections.

Q: And did they give you training to be an assistant cultural affairs officer?

JOHNSON: I'm sure they did; I cannot remember. I mean, it's all a blur. I'm sure there was something. We had consultations where I visited the offices that supported the various cultural programs overseas. And there were also area studies classes that provided us with information on the countries and the socio-political situations in the region. And then, of course, there was the informal thing. At the time, there were a number of African-American women officers who had been in the service for a while already, and they looked out for the three of us newbies. In the next class that came in behind us there were a couple more African-American women and so, we formed a little group and the more experienced officers took all of us under their wings. They tried to

explain the universe of, okay, avoid this person, this person's kind of strange. If they offer you this assignment, know that's not a good one for you. You know, that kind of thing.

Q: That's mentoring.

JOHNSON: The mentoring that has become more formal, but at that time there weren't formal mentoring programs, so this was just a very informal kind of thing of them trying to help us understand this new culture and universe that we were moving into.
(Note: Around this time I believe I joined the Thursday Luncheon Group, an affinity group for African-Americans in international affairs.)

Q: Okay.

JOHNSON: Can we pause?

Q: Let's take a pause for a moment.

JOHNSON: A pause for the cause?

Q: Okay. So, we paused about the time you were getting to Abidjan. So, anything else about training you want to say before we move on to Abidjan?

JOHNSON: Training is such a blur. I remember going to Coolfont and having—doing all those exercises and things, but beyond that I cannot remember anything else. If my memory improves, I'll let you know.

Q: But did you make a lot of good friends in training who, I mean, somehow the people in your A-100 class are often ones that you can run into without having seen them for 30 years and all of a sudden you're a friend again.

JOHNSON: Oh, yes, yes, absolutely. And not just in my A-100 class, but folks that I met during language training; several of them I'm still in touch with to this day, and close friends with a couple as well. So, yes, throughout both the A-100 training and then the language training I met some interesting people and formed some lifelong friendships.

Q: Okay. So, Abidjan; how did you get to Abidjan in those days?

JOHNSON: Oh, Pan Am. Remember Pan Am?

Q: I remember it well.

JOHNSON: And it was interesting because the French national who worked in the public affairs office, Madam Capdupuy, her husband ran the Pan Am operations in Abidjan. Her husband was the manager, making sure the planes and everything was in good working order.

Q: So, New York to Dakar to Abidjan?

JOHNSON: New York, Dakar, Robertsfield in Liberia, then Abidjan. I cannot remember where it went after that, but it hopped along until it got to South Africa; Johannesburg, I think, was the last stop. And then it reversed and came back in the other direction.

Q: I remember there was a Lagos stop.

JOHNSON: Yes. So, I guess it was Abidjan then Lagos…

Q: I think it used to stop in Kinshasa as well, but I'm sure they changed it various times over the years.

JOHNSON: Yes. But yes, I remember Dakar, Robertsfield, Abidjan.

Q: And who met you at the airport?

JOHNSON: Who met me at the airport? My sponsor was Sue Pryor, now retired Ambassador Sue Brown, who at that time was the administrative person in the public affairs section—it was called Centre Culturel Americain. She managed the budget for the USIA office. She was my sponsor and she picked me up and took me to my apartment in a building that was right across from the lagoon. I had a view of the lagoon and Hotel Ivoire on the other side of the lagoon. The Hotel Ivoire's claim to fame was that it had the only ice-skating rink in sub-Saharan Africa. Yes. Felix Houphouët-Boigny was the president at the time. This was before he built his cathedral in Yamoussoukro. Abidjan was the capital at that time, but at some point it moved. Years later, the capital became Yamoussoukro, which was his hometown. Subsequently they built a cathedral that rivaled all the European cathedrals. And of course, there was some controversy around that because of the different religions practiced in Cote d'Ivoire; Catholicism was not necessarily the majority, but such is life.

Q: But that was after you had left already?

JOHNSON: Yes. I was only there for two years. I was supposed to be there three years, but in my second year there was a little kerfuffle next door in Benin, and the PAO (Public Affairs Officer) had to leave and so, they needed to fill that spot with someone who was familiar with the region and who spoke French, so they sent me to be PAO in Cotonou, Benin, two years into my career in USIA. And I was like, what? I don't know anything about this organization; how can you send me out there? And they said don't worry, we

have regional people who will help you, and you can always call us up if there's a problem.

Q: Okay. But we can't skip over Abidjan that quickly.

JOHNSON: No.

Q: So, you got there, and what was your impression of it? Presumably, you got there in the morning sometime; if I recall, most of those West African flights were the red-eye-

JOHNSON: Yes, it was definitely an overnight flight—I arrived the next day.

Q: And suddenly, you arrive in this city which has got to be a culture shock.

JOHNSON: Oh, yes. Yes and no.

Q: What was your first impression?

JOHNSON: It was interesting. First of all, we drove from the airport on a highway that went through different neighborhoods, so I saw some of the people who lived there. What struck me was how it reminded me of walking through my old neighborhood, because I saw people on the corner, people just sitting around chatting in groups.

Q: The old neighborhood in Brooklyn?

JOHNSON: Yes, yes. I mean, there were-

Q: How interesting.

JOHNSON: There were just people everywhere and a lot of activity, and there were a lot of guys hanging out. It felt just like back home. But of course, yes, there were lots of differences. The nice thing is that when I was in training, one of my classmates, Pamela Seaton, lived in a building where one of her neighbors worked at the Ivorian Embassy. Her name was Jeanne Soumah and Pamela introduced us. There was also an International Visitor who came through while I was still in French language training, and the desk officer at USIA told me that, Patricia Isimat-Mirin was going to be here from Abidjan, and that I should meet her. It so happened I was going to be in New York the weekend that she was in New York, so I met her and her interpreter for breakfast at a café near their hotel. I had just started French language training, so I didn't speak any French, but we somehow managed to have this very nice conversation with the help of her interpreter. So, there were two people who already were helping me understand a bit about Cote d'Ivoire before I got there. Jeanne Soumah invited me to her home one day and taught me how to make groundnut (peanut) stew. Ironically, the tomato and peanut butter sauce with chicken, cabbage, carrots, onions and spices ended up being my

husband's (Stephen C. Johnson) favorite dish. He loves peanut butter in any way, shape, or form. She taught me how to make that dish, and we had a really nice time.

Jeanne had lots of brothers and sisters, and her sisters needed some hair care products. When I was getting ready to leave for Abidjan, Jeanne gave me hair care products to deliver to her sisters. So, when I got to Abidjan, I called up and they arranged for me to visit. I guess someone picked me up, and I went there for Sunday dinner, which is when all the siblings from all over town would gather at the parent's house. Jeanne's father ran a pharmacy in Koumassi, a suburb of Abidjan, and it was near their home which was right off the main highway going toward the airport, so it was actually easy to find, and I could make my way there on my own after a couple of trips. That's where I would often go on Sundays, so I became like part of the family, and that was nice. Plus, the International Visitor that I had met, Patricia Isimat-Mirin, was a lawyer, a magistrate, she was in the legal profession, and so when I got there, again, I got in touch with her. She was so surprised that I could actually speak French when I got there. We became friends as well. And so, that was really a nice way to start off my first tour of duty. Those were two nice connections to have made. They made my time in Abidjan so much more interesting because one was a contact of the office through the International Visitor Leadership Program, but the other person, the family, they were not, and it turned out one of the sons ended up marrying President Felix Houphouët-Boigny's daughter, and I got to go to the wedding and the reception and everything, so that was cool.

It was an interesting family, too. Both of the parents were what they call "Metis" as they were half African and half French. They had grown up in orphanages in Guinea, and that was an interesting thing. I'm not sure about all that history, but that's where they had ended up and somehow made their way—it's not clear to me now as I can't remember all of the sequence, but they ended up in Abidjan. I think that the mother, Mrs. Soumah, was a midwife but she also made clothes, and she made two beautiful outfits that I still have; one of them I need to expand because I've grown a little.

Q: Out of the African fabric?

JOHNSON: Kente cloth. Beautiful. One was kente cloth and one was just regular fabric. And the father, Mr. Soumah, was a delightful gentleman, a great sense of humor, and the mother was a sweetheart. I also became friends with one of the sisters, an artist named Henriette Berger. We stayed in touch for years and years after I left, and every now and then we reconnect, but I haven't heard anything from them in ages, and I lost track of Patricia Isimat-Mirin. I mean, we stayed in touch for a long time, but with all my moving around and then she moved around, she left Abidjan eventually and went to work

elsewhere; the last address I had for her was somewhere in Congo and then she just sort of disappeared.

I met a lot of interesting people through both of them.

Q: Just to be clear, we're now in the end of 1980?

JOHNSON: End of 1980, 1981.

Q: You arrived at the-

JOHNSON: I got there in December of 1980, so 1981 is when I was getting to know all these different people.

Q: Well, that's interesting that they would send you out right before Christmas. Usually they let you wait until afterwards. Was it one of these things that was oh my god, you have to get there right away?

JOHNSON: Yes, isn't it always? So, I was like okay, whatever, let's go! We want to start this adventure. When I got there, it was a beautiful sunny day and the next day Harmattan started and everything was gray, you know, it was all dust!

Q: Oh, no, all covered with dust and everything? Yes.

JOHNSON: Yes. The Harmattan lasted for, I guess about a month or so. Flights got canceled because of the dust, yes.

Q: So, what's your introduction to the embassy? Do you remember? Here you are, a brand-new Foreign Service officer going to their first embassy, the first day, and what happens?

JOHNSON: Well, a car comes and picks me up to take me to the Centre Culturel Americain, because we were not co-located in the embassy. The embassy was located in the Plateau section of the city—the downtown. The cultural center was in Cocody, a suburb of Abidjan and about halfway to the university, as I recall.

Q: Oh, really?

JOHNSON: We were in the suburb called Cocody, and Cocody was, oh, maybe a 20-minute drive, depending on traffic, on the other side of the lagoon. It was closer to the Hotel Ivoire. The center had a library on the ground floor and a meeting room, like a multi-purpose room, and the offices were upstairs. And basically, it was a large villa that had been converted into a cultural center. My office used to be a closet and they had knocked out walls to build it. I was in one corner, the regional librarian sat next to me, and then, no, the regional post management officer (RPMAO) was next to me then the librarian. Stedman Howard was the RPMAO or the regional budget person who traveled

around and made sure all the posts were doing as they should with their budgets and that everything was adding up. The regional librarian, Cynthia Borys, was also my upstairs neighbor in the apartment building. So it was the three of us—the trainee/junior officer, the RPMAO, and then the regional librarian in this reconfigured office space.

Q: RPMAO?

JOHNSON: Regional Post Management Assistance Officer, RPMAO. I think that's what that stood for. It was basically the person who made sure we did everything correctly so we didn't go to jail. That's what he used to jokingly say; I'm keeping you out of jail, keeping you honest. Abidjan, because of its infrastructure and so many flights coming in and out of there, had a lot of regional people there, not just with USIA. The mission also included the U. S. Agency for International Development; it was a big regional office. The embassy was downtown in the area called Plateau, and my apartment was in Plateau. But many of the staff that worked in the cultural center, the American officers, lived in Cocody as well. But I didn't mind living in Plateau, because I was in an apartment building with a lot of other single embassy employees.

Q: Was it an embassy apartment building?

JOHNSON: I'm sure it was not owned by the embassy because, as certain people liked to say, the State Department isn't in the real estate business. I always thought that was kind of strange, and I thought, "you'd rather pay rent to someone all the time than just own the building?" But anyway, whatever!

This was a building I think that was newly constructed and rented to the embassy. The woman who lived next door to me, Linda Gagnon, was a secretary in the economic section at the embassy, and the regional librarian, Cynthia Borys, also lived there on another floor. A couple of gentlemen who worked in the embassy also lived in that building. It was a three- or four-story building. I can't remember how many stories it was, but it was very nice. There were two apartments per floor.

Q: A nice apartment?

JOHNSON: No, more than nice, it was lovely. I was living large. It was a nice apartment with big picture windows so I had this panoramic view of the lagoon and Cocody. It was light and airy. And let's see, how many bedrooms? I think it was a two-bedroom apartment. Nice bathrooms, nice kitchen tiles. Beautiful. After coming from an old brownstone where I had to walk up four flights of stairs, this was really nice. So, I was not complaining. I was just like oh, I better do a good job so they don't send me back home because this is fun. It was a very nice apartment and all the homes, of course, that

the embassy officers lived in were lovely with beautiful gardens and nice layouts for entertaining because all of the USIA officers did a lot of entertaining.

Q: How was the USIS structure there?

JOHNSON: There was a public affairs officer, Terry Schroeder, there was an information officer, Jim Haley, and a cultural affairs officer, Mark Glago. There were four of us American officers, and then the specialist was the administrative person, Sue (Pryor) Brown, who kept the budget and made the trains run on time. There were five Americans that were assigned to Abidjan for Abidjan and then there were the two regional people, yes, the two regional officers. So, there were seven of us. And yes, seven Americans in total that worked out of Abidjan.

Q: So, what was your job?

JOHNSON: Well, as assistant cultural affairs officer for exchanges, I worked at a number of things, but first I did a rotation with the information officer and then I did a rotation through the embassy. I think they sent me to work with the political officer for a little bit. I ended up helping update some bio files or something like that. And then, when I came back from this rotation, that's when I started learning about the different exchange programs and how to work with the different people who had been nominated for an international visitor program or for an academic exchange program. Some of them were quite nice and understanding of this new person who was trying to make her way. It just so happened that before I left New York, one of my childhood friends, Lee Hill, who was married to a guy who worked in banking, Duane Hill, introduced me to an Ivorian who worked for Citibank. Jean Ekra was his name. He was in New York for business and they introduced me to him as well. So, that was a third person. I met a bunch of people before I got to Abidjan so that when I got to Abidjan, I reconnected with them. I wasn't as friendly with him and his family as with the other two people, but I'm remembering now that through him I met an American woman who was working at Citibank, Laurel Pekar Tahija. She ended up moving to Indonesia and married an Indonesian. She settled there and later on , she served on the Fulbright Commission in Indonesia, doing all kinds of cool stuff. We intermittently hear from each other. I met a lot of interesting people through all of these little connections and networks.

Q: You said exchanges and you've mentioned Fulbright; was that the main program?

JOHNSON: Fulbright. Actually, I did more with international visitors because every year for a number of years the post sent a group of representatives from the national assembly on a special program, so that took up a lot of time, working on that one. Then there were the individual and multi-regional and regional programs. Some of them were in French-only, some of them were for people who spoke English. As for the academic exchanges, we had Fulbrighters who came over from the States, and then there were Ivoirians who went over to the U.S. The Cultural Affairs Officer was in charge of the Fulbright program, but I helped from time to time. There was also the Hubert Humphrey Fellowship, and I'm trying to remember what other exchanges I might have worked on. I

think those were the two, Fulbright and Humphrey, I vaguely remember that we worked on others in addition. But I think the thing that took up most of my time was the international visitor program.

Q: Well, that's not surprising because at the time, I think, it was a big program.

JOHNSON: Yes, yes.

Q: And did you actually get to meet the international visitors?

JOHNSON: Oh, yes, yes, because I had to prepare the messages with all their bio data and facilitate getting all the ticketing and orientation and whatever. I remember this one guy who was kind of snippy, but most of the visitors were quite charming and genuinely interested in whatever the program was about.

Q: So, you were meeting a lot of these people, the real up and comers of Ivorian society.

JOHNSON: Yes.

Q: So, this must have been kind of neat.

JOHNSON: Yes, it was. And because I was so new at the time, there were many things that I didn't really know about the programs. It's like any new situation or job—you're just trying to drink from a fire hose and figure out which end is up. There's not a lot of time for reflection because you're just trying to keep up with what it is you're supposed to do and meet the deadlines and all of that. But yes, later on things started to fall in place and you realize, "Oh yes, I can do this!"

One of the first things I did when I first got to Abidjan was travel to the interior. They sent me off with a camera with the officer who was in charge of the ambassador's self-help program. Roger Freeman worked in the economic section and managed that program. We went and visited the projects that the embassy had funded. In this self-help program, the embassy would get requests from towns or villages that wanted to build a school or a dispensary or a small clinic. If the government agreed to staff the clinic or the school, then the embassy would give money so that the villagers could purchase the cement, cinder blocks, and supplies that they needed to construct the school or clinic. The villagers would do the heavy labor of constructing the building. When the school would be finished and there'd be the teacher and everything, we would go up to see the finished

product and there'd be a ceremony to celebrate the opening and I took pictures and made some sketches.

Q: Oh, nice.

JOHNSON: -so that then I got to do some paintings.

Q: And did the ambassador go along for the opening or-?

JOHNSON: Usually it was the self-help officer and myself. Well, on that first trip it was the self-help officer and myself going; the ambassador didn't go. I think there were certain projects that the ambassador went to, but this particular trip was basically to inspect and see the progress on certain things that were in the train, and then also to see a couple that had been completed. I guess they were not deemed worthy of the ambassador going. I'm trying to remember what was going on then. Nancy Rawls was the ambassador, but I can't remember if she was out of the country during that time when we made that trip. I think she was away. Ambassador Rawls was a delightful person. I remember she took me aside and said, "Now, Cynthia, if you're going to survive in this business, one thing you must understand is when you go to receptions you must always stand on the carpet because these tile floors and marble floors are very hard on your feet and knees so, you'll be much more comfortable if you stay on the carpet."

Q: What a nice piece of advice. Was this a career person?

JOHNSON: Yes. She started out as a secretary and worked her way up and became ambassador. After that, I can't remember where she went when she left Abidjan but she was beloved. She was an economic officer, I think, by cone, and had also served in Kenya. Ambassador Rawls came up through the ranks during the time when you couldn't be married and a female officer, so I guess she had made a decision that this was going to be her life, and so, that's what she did. She rose through the ranks and was much loved. She was a delightful person. I think it was while she was there that she became ill. Maybe that is why she was not in the country when I arrived. But I remember her as being a very warm, thoughtful, kind person who cared about all her junior officers and took time to encourage them. Sadly, Nancy V. Rawls died in 1985.

Q: Well, that's great. As a first tour officer, would you have had much contact with her?

JOHNSON: Not a whole lot, but we went to events at the ambassador's residence and as instructed, we got there 15 minutes before the guests were to arrive so we could get our marching orders. So, that was when she would just chat with people. There were a couple times when I was doing my rotation in the press section when "The Washington Post" correspondent, Leon Dash, called and wanted to have a sit-down with her and so, the first time, I called her secretary and made the appointment. Then I found out I was supposed to consult with the IO and PAO and do this, that and the other. Well, we sorted it out and he still went in and talked to her because why not? But I remember that was like oh no,

you cheated; you can't just call up the secretary and put it on the schedule. You've got to talk to the PAO or the IO. Everything has to go through channels.

Q: Everybody wants to be in the loop.

JOHNSON: Yes. That's one of the things that I think the military does a better job of, having cookbooks and manuals that walk people through what they're supposed to do and how they're supposed to do it. I've always felt that the State Department and USIA did not do training as well as they could because years later, when I was in Latin America, my husband Steve and I worked on a media training project, I learned a lot about how the military trained its PAOs. The USG had never offered any public affairs training for the Latin American military in Spanish. My husband was a reservist out of SOUTHCOM (Southern Command), and he worked on that. There's a manual, a public affairs manual, that the military has, and what he did was take this US Army manual and adapt and adjust in consultation with SOUTHCOM and they came up with a version in Spanish. We were in Uruguay at the time—he worked with Uruguayan public relations people and they came up with a product that would be helpful to the military there. And I said to myself, "Why don't we have a public affairs manual or an IO (Information Officer) manual or a CAO (Cultural Affairs Officer) manual that tells us all the things we need to know?" USIA created something for foreign journalists, as I recall, some kind of a handbook as part of some of the programming we did back then. But I'm sure that now there are much better tools than what existed when I started out.

Q: Oh, I'm sure there are, yes.

JOHNSON: I worked in public diplomacy training for a while and yes, that's in a different phase of my life. But yes, it would have been helpful as a new person to have had some kind of guide that says okay, you're working in the press office and these are standard operating procedures; this is what you do when a journalist calls, this is what you do X, Y, Z. And the same thing for exchanges, this is what you do when organizing an international visitor program or this is what you do with the Humphrey program.

Q: Exactly, exactly.

You mentioned a "Washington Post" correspondent; was there actually one in Abidjan?

JOHNSON: Oh yes, Leon Dash, yes.

Q: Wow.

JOHNSON: Yes. And we still keep in touch. There was an AP correspondent, Susan Linee, and then later on Joe Campbell, who's now teaching at American University, at least the last time I ran into him that's what he was doing. Let's see, Jack White, who worked for "Newsweek" came through several times. Clifford May of The New York

Times at one time, I think, was also based there. Yes, so there were several American correspondents living and working out of Abidjan.

Q: Quite a center, wasn't it?

JOHNSON: Yes. Again, because it was easy to get in and out, there were quite a few media outlets there; Reuters was there, Agence France Presse, of course. Yes, so there were a lot of regional people there.

Q: Who was the head of, it was called USIS still at the time?

JOHNSON: Yes, Terry Schroeder was the public affairs officer. Jim Haley was the information officer. And when Jim left, Gil Sherman replaced him. I think Jim was there a year before Gil Sherman replaced him. Mark Glago was the CAO. That was the other thing; people who had previously served there, folks put me in touch with them, so before I left the States, I had a chance to sit down and talk to a few people who had served there. Harriet Elam-Thomas, I think, had been the CAO there and I had met her during my Washington orientation and training assignment. She later became our ambassador in Senegal.

Q: She's recently out with a book.

JOHNSON: Yes, yes, which I've yet to get; I've been remiss. There's just too much going on.

Q: Which is also, to digress, it's also a University of Nebraska Press, which mine _____.

JOHNSON: Oh, okay.

Q: So, we have something in common.

JOHNSON: Oh, yes. Oh, my goodness. Yes, and she's had a number of book events here and each time I either was out of town or had a conflict and couldn't make it to it. I tell her to keep sending the invites to me; I'll eventually make it to one.

Q: So, you were assistant cultural affairs officer mainly working on IVs of people coming to the States.

JOHNSON: Yes.

Q: But were there musical combos and jazz groups and all those kinds of things going on under your direction as well?

JOHNSON: Well not under my direction—I would help the CAO with those events. Normally, what happened is ARS-Paris (Africa Regional Services-Paris) would organize

tours for musicians. Many of these musicians were based in Europe. So, the first musician that I was involved with programming was Don Cherry. I can't remember where he was living; I think he was living somewhere in Europe. Other artists that came through, I think Johnny Copeland came through, but he came through from Stateside. He was a Texas blues guitarist and singer. Don Cherry was a composer and jazz trumpet artist. Yes, working on those programs was fascinating. When the performers came, they would do jam sessions with local artists and they did their concertizing for specially invited audiences.

Q: Would you be involved in setting this up?

JOHNSON: I would help. It would be the CAO who was in charge and I would do whatever they told me to do, helping with either the publicity or with some of the setup and site arrangements.

Q: Were these people popular in-?

JOHNSON: I remember there was a lot of excitement and I was like Don Cherry; who is Don Cherry? I felt like I was totally ignorant because I didn't know who this person was, but I learned quickly. And he came and not only did he play his own instrument, which was trumpet, but he also played some of the African instruments. And in later years, I did a series of paintings inspired by jazz musicians and Don Cherry was one of them. The piece that inspired the painting was a piece from his Improvisation Symphony. In my artist talk for that exhibition, I discussed how Don Cherry showed me that as a Foreign Service officer doing cultural programs, it's just as important to listen and understand the culture in the place where you are, understand the music, and to recognize the value of the things that are going on where you are. It is just as important to do that as it is to share what your own culture is all about, because this is a two-way exchange. And so, you need to take time to understand what's going on around you. You and your audience will have a richer experience if you take time to understand and not always be in transmit mode. So, that was for me—in the very beginning of my career—that was an important lesson. When I observed how people reacted to him and how they reacted to his embrace of their culture and recognition of the value of their culture, it was an important lesson. That's why a lot of times down the road I really didn't have a lot of patience for people who wanted us to just go out and beat people over the head with U.S. policy without taking into account well, maybe there is a valid reason why they take issue with this policy, and

you need to take time and understand what it is and figure out where the common ground might be. So, blasting and being in transmit mode all the time isn't always to our benefit.

Q: Well, how great that you could, so early in your career, have an artist that can help you learn those kinds of important lessons that can help you out.

JOHNSON: Yes.

Q: Did you also get artists?

JOHNSON: Visual artists?

Q: Yes.

JOHNSON: I'm trying to remember.

Q: Seems that would have been your thing in particular.

JOHNSON: The Art in Embassies Program existed, but I don't think we got that involved with it. I just honestly don't remember knowing about it when I was in Abidjan. I did continue to paint and did a little exhibit at the American Cultural Center.

Q: Oh, really?

JOHNSON: And in fact every place where I've served, I've done an exhibition. What I found is that people appreciated the fact that I was taking the time to really look for what was unique in their country and study and observe the surroundings. Before I left the U.S., my Foreign Service colleague Rosemary Crockett said something along the lines of, "Now, just don't go around taking a bunch of pictures. Folks don't like that. Ask if it's okay to take the picture before you take a picture." So, I decided I was not going to ask anything; I would just do a little sketch and not put in faces, keeping it anonymous. So, actually, that's what I started doing. I'd just see something and maybe I'd do a little sketch right then and there, but a lot of times I would draw something later based on what I remembered. What was nice was when I went on those trips with the self-help officers, I was the official photographer, so I did end up taking lots of pictures and it was okay to

take them. Based on those photos, sometimes I would do paintings that were composites of different things that I had observed, along with something from another photograph.

Q: So, you ended up doing Ivorian-inspired art while you were there?

JOHNSON: Yes, exactly.

Q: And did that sort of meld with your earlier Haitian-inspired?

JOHNSON: Well, yes, I mean, because as I continued going from place to place people kept saying oh, that looks like Haitian art. Yes, well, yes.

Q: Oh, but that's fine.

JOHNSON: The Caribbean influence. What can I say?

Q: Right. And for a first tour officer to be giving art exhibits at the cultural center is pretty unusual I would think.

JOHNSON: Yes. And I designed a few covers for the little newsletter that we sent out. The bulk of the content came from ARS-Paris; they put together articles in French and we would insert locally generated articles that the Ivorian staff would write. During my time there, I did the cover art for a couple of issues, like for a holiday cover and things like that.

Q: And that went out to the Ivorian public?

JOHNSON: Yes, yes.

Q: And did you have a- you mentioned a librarian, there was actually a librarian in the cultural center.

JOHNSON: Yes.

Q: So, you must have felt right at home.

JOHNSON: Yes, absolutely. And it was fun talking to my upstairs neighbor, who was the USIA regional librarian, and finding out what was going on in the other libraries in the area she covered.

Q: How were Americans regarded in Cote d'Ivoire at the time?

JOHNSON: Positively. And I think there was a lot that was happening here in the U.S. I remember some of our exchange grantees and some of the people who wanted to pursue academic studies in the U.S. said a number of the professors at some of the schools they had attended in France had studied in the U.S., so they wondered, why they should get it

secondhand from them? They wanted to go to the U.S. and learn it for themselves, first-hand. So, there was a lot of interest in studying at U.S. universities. Our CAO was a very practical man. He would often be very honest with the folks who were considering undergraduate programs in the U.S. He would say, "Well, think about it; is this going to be the best use of your resources? It is expensive to study in the U.S. It's not like in France or here where there's low or no cost to your education. You're going to be making a major investment, and what you might want to do is postpone and go for your graduate education rather than for undergraduate." He would talk to people and find out what their goals were and try to help them figure out what made the most sense for them. Sometimes it was, yes, because we did student advising as well as the exchanges. We had a student adviser who was actually from Benin but he was living in Cote d'Ivoire. He and the CAO would have these conversations about what would make the most sense to tell students. I remember this conversation that he had about it's all good and fine to want to go to the U.S. for an undergraduate degree, but you have to understand that it's very expensive, and if you don't have the wherewithal for that, you might be better off doing your undergraduate here or in France where it won't cost you as much, and then you go to the U.S. for your graduate degree, because that's probably where it will make more of a difference and be more beneficial to you.

Q: Were you also advising students?

JOHNSON: No. I was not.

Q: I don't know, you're right out of school; it would seem to be logical.

JOHNSON: I mean, I could talk to them about the college experience and that kind of thing, but I had so much else going on that-

Q: You felt like you were busy.

JOHNSON: Yes, yes.

Q: Compared to your previous jobs?

JOHNSON: It was a different busy because there was so much new to learn. I'd worked in libraries for so long that there were certain things that were just kind of automatic. Maybe it's a different institution but the basic work is the same, make sure the books are in the shelves in the right way, do special programs with people. In the public library, one summer we had a project where filmmakers and cartoonists came in and all the kids got to make animated cartoon videos. Back then the technology was a lot clunkier than it is now. It was multimedia kind of work. In each job there were varieties of things to do but it was basically the same. After a while, after you've worked in a public library or in a

university library there are just certain rhythms that are natural, whereas with the Foreign Service, everything was new.

Q: Yes. Was it pretty much a 9 to 5 kind of job? Or lots of overtime? Or weekends?

JOHNSON: Lots of overtime. Going to events in the evenings and sometimes even on weekends. Attending things that the ambassador and the DCM (Deputy Chief of Mission) or the political counselor or the economic counselor didn't want to go to but they felt someone should go to. I got these interesting invitations to sporting events and other things. It was all new to me, so it was fine because I was just getting to know the people and places.

Q: You get to go as "the" American embassy representative.

JOHNSON: Right, right, right. And get to meet new people and experience new things. It's all a blur now—it was so long ago, my goodness.

Q: Your French must have gotten pretty good too.

JOHNSON: Yes, and it was wonderful to be able to go to Sunday dinner at my friend's house and practice there with them too, and get a bead on local gossip and that kind of thing as well. I learned colloquial phrases and what was popular with folks in my age group, learning what people in my age group were into in the society over there. Because of course, a lot of our contacts were older professionals, but a lot of what we were looking for were the middle managers who were on the rise, and so yes, it was good to get together with them and also meet folks who were doing their public service. It was a volunteer service; the French government had this thing that I guess it was the equivalent of something like an AmeriCorps, where you go and work for the French government overseas instead of doing military service.

Q: Like a Peace Corps kind of thing?

JOHNSON: There were young people from France who were there and there were folks from different countries who were there working in multilateral or UN organizations. So, I met all kinds of folks. Yes.

Q: Yes. Do you remember what was going on politically in Cote d'Ivoire at the time?

JOHNSON: Well, I got there just after they had had elections, so there were still election posters all over town.

Q: Did they have real elections in Cote d'Ivoire?

JOHNSON: As real as they could be. There were people running for the national assembly. I don't think there was any challenger to President Félix Houphouët-Boigny, but I do think that there were some competitive races for national assembly and maybe

for some of the other local municipalities and things like that. Those elections had just finished up.

And then, I remember that I got there after whatever scandal Henri Konan Bédié had been involved in, and he was sent off to work at the World Bank or the IMF because he had done something inappropriate and had earned the nickname Monsieur Dix Pour-cents, Mr. Ten Percent. So, he was in the States and there were all kinds of rumors about who was jockeying for position to succeed Houphouët who was getting on in years. Apparently Houphouët wanted Henri Konan Bédié to succeed him, but because he had behaved badly and had to be sent off there were questions about whether he would be able to come back and assume a leadership role. There was always lots of political intrigue, much of which at the time was like a who's-on-first kind of thing.

Q: Was the economy humming along? Were things available in the markets?

JOHNSON: Actually, the economy was humming along. Things were going pretty well. But there was the start of a crime wave. The security situation was beginning to get dicey. I remember my sister Betty visiting me and we went to a club with some friends in Treichville. Someone grabbed her chain, some jewelry that she was wearing, and ran off. The security officers were beginning to tell people that there were certain places we shouldn't go because of an increase in crime. That was maybe '82, 1982. That was around the time when I got the call and was sent over to Benin. And a few months into my time in Benin—I would go back to visit because it was just up the road—there was an incident where the Italian ambassador was killed in a restaurant robbery; some guys went into a restaurant in Treichville. They shot up the place and he ended up getting killed. After that, there began to be more restrictions on people's movement because of crime. I think that was also the period when they started having trouble with droughts and the Akosombo Dam in Ghana. The water levels were so low that there were 12-hour power outages in the region. By then I was in Benin, but before I left Abidjan they had started to have some security problems, and as I would go back and forth I'd hear stories about places where I used to go without thinking about it, and they were advising people not to

go there because of the problems. There were even some home invasions in Cocody, I think; I can't remember the details now.

Q: At the cultural center was there any security to get in and out in those days?

JOHNSON: No. No, no, no, no. There was a watchman who stayed there overnight, but I think they'd just close up the gates and he would be inside the compound or inside the yard there. We didn't have any security guards at our apartment building either.

Q: Marines at the embassy, I presume were there?

JOHNSON: Yes, there were Marines at the embassy. And there was a Marine House where they'd have TGIFs (Thank God It's Friday happy hours) and the Hash House Harriers would gather there on Saturdays after their run. Yes, it was a popular spot.

Q: Did you interact a lot with people at the embassy?

JOHNSON: Sure, yes. So, Jim Haley was the IO for, I guess, a year, and then he left and Gil Sherman came in with his wife, Dona, she as Consul. They loved to entertain, and so I spent a lot of time hanging out with them and going to events they had at their place. One year when I was going on home leave, my home leave address was in San Francisco, and Dona Sherman's parents lived in Berkeley. I remember one year I took their twin daughters home to their grandparents and the three of us traveled up to Paris, overnighted, and then flew to San Francisco, where I took the girls to Dona's folks. I think we flew to San Francisco. I know Gil had relatives in New Jersey. But I think we went to San Francisco because the girls spent the summer with their grandparents in Berkeley. So, yes, everybody socialized. And the Shermans were very plugged in to lots of different people in the Ivorian community as well as the expat community and the American community. I remember one time they had a dinner party with Jack White from "Newsweek" and Leon Dash and some of the other correspondents and it was a raucous affair. It was a lot of fun. And another time it would be French nationals and some of the folks from the States, one of the regional officers based in DC who was married to a Frenchman. So, there were always these interesting mixes of people at their house and I spent a lot of time there. I learned how to cook some interesting dishes because they had served in India and they had brought the housekeeper, a woman who

helped with the children. I learned all kinds of things that I still employ in the kitchen to this day. Unfortunately, both of them died in the ‘90s. Way too soon!

Q: And you got around the country a bit, obviously. You said, you talked about the-

JOHNSON: Travel to different parts of the country.

Q: To different parts. How did you travel? Did you have a jeep and C-rations in the back?

JOHNSON: With the lumbering embassy vehicle, Chevy Blazers or whatever those big tuna boats were. We’d stay in different hotels in different places. We drove on a lot of dusty roads. But they had a pretty good infrastructure, a lot of paved roads. There were some off-paved-road places, but there was an interesting thing that Houphouët-Boigny did every year or every so often. He had the government organize celebrations of the national day in a different part of the country every year and they would pave the road to that place. So eventually they had lots of paved roads throughout the country, more so than in some of the neighboring countries.

Q: The northern part of the country is Muslim?

JOHNSON: Yes, majority Muslim in the north and majority Animist in the south and then Christians sprinkled throughout.

Q: North-south tensions at all?

JOHNSON: At the time I was there, no, but the tensions that I remember were the usual scapegoating of foreign labor. At that time there were accusations that people from Burkina-Faso were misbehaving, so there were some tensions with the laborers who worked on the pineapple plantations and in the cocoa fields. I remember lots of newspaper articles accusing some of these workers of criminal activity, so there were some problems.

The north-south tensions I think occurred after I had left the region, actually. I think they got really bad during the time when Mr. Konan Bédié was president and things kind of fell apart. It was interesting because Benin, before it was called Benin it was Dahomey, and that country had had a lot of coups and political upheaval in the early days after independence. But eventually they sorted things out and went through their revolutionary, socialist, People's Republic of Benin period. They eventually ended up sorting things out and coming up with a democratic system that worked fairly well and was held up as an example of people figuring out how to work out their differences and come to a system that was representative; whereas Côte d'Ivoire after independence had Houphouët-Boigny, who basically kept things on an even keel by bringing people into the government if they had the potential to oppose him or compete with him. He brought them into the government and converted them to his way of thinking and governing. But after he left the scene, there was a lot of instability because the leaders had to figure out a

new modus vivendi; it was not always easy. Two countries, different paths, but one got all of the upheaval out of its system early and the other had to go through it later. It was an interesting study in contrasts.

Q: It is, indeed.

Well, is that a good place to end on Cote d'Ivoire? Or do you have some more things you'd like to say about it?

JOHNSON: I can't think of anything else.

Q: Think about it again and we'll_____ with you.

When did you finally leave Cote d'Ivoire?

JOHNSON: I think it must have been late 1982 because I was in Benin from '82 to January of '85. So, I want to say I came home around Thanksgiving time or something like that and then went to Cotonou. So, it must have been the end of '82 through the first month of '85. I was there two years as well, but it spanned '82 to '85.

Q: Well, it sounds like an interesting two years and we'll take up-

JOHNSON: That it was.

Q: We'll take up there next time and see if we want to move on to Benin or if you remember some more things about Cote d'Ivoire-

JOHNSON: If I am able to, yes, if I'm able to find some of the papers from my time in Abidjan that might spark some other memories.

Q: Yes. No, that's great. That's a very interesting first tour, and we'll leave it there for now.

JOHNSON: Okay.

Q: Hello. This is Peter Eicher. It is May 23, 2018, and I'm interviewing Cynthia Farrell Johnson. This is the second interview session.

And Cynthia, last time we went through your early life and your first tour in the Foreign Service, but let me ask you to start with, have you thought of anything you'd like to add from last session?

JOHNSON: Yes, as a matter of fact I did think of something afterward. We talked a little bit about my father and his music collection and the fact that he worked with Paul Robeson's arranger and accompanist, Lawrence Brown. And I forgot to mention that his collection of recordings, which were early recordings of Mr. Robeson, and much of the

sheet music and books that are probably long out of print, all of these documents were donated to the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture. We had thought about donating them to a university or a music conservatory, but when they began announcing a search for documents and things of that nature, we contacted the music curator at the National Museum of African American History and Culture and she came over to the house and looked through his music collection and selected just about everything having to do with spirituals and African American music. We were so excited. When we went for the donor reception on the Saturday before the museum formally opened, which would have been September 17, because it opened on the 24th of, what was it, 2016, I guess-

Q: I think so, yes.

JOHNSON: Yes. We found it on the top floor in the music section where they were displaying all kinds of artifacts like dresses worn by Marian Anderson and sheet music by other musicians. There was a piece of—clearly a reproduction—of one of the pieces of music that Mr. Brown had arranged, but on the bottom it had a return address label that my father often put on his material to make sure it didn't wander off, so that was-

Q: What a wonderful family legacy, to have that in a museum ____.

JOHNSON: It was really neat. It was my youngest son who was with us who actually found it because I had walked right past that area and didn't notice it. And he said oh, Mom, come back, look; there's Granddaddy Arthur's papers! And so, there was that one item on display and the rest of his collection is in their music library, so we're really happy that it's there for anyone who has a need will be able to access it because as it turns out, some of Mr. Brown's arrangements, I don't think they're in print. If anyone

wanted to use those in a performance they could ostensibly go there and, I guess, get a reproduction. I'm not sure how that works but at least it's there for the public.

Q: It's there, it's for the public for posterity, and how great to actually have something on display, because I'm sure a lot of people donated things which were not, as well.

JOHNSON: It's just unbelievable the amount of material they were able to collect. And I've been there, I think, three times and spent three hours each time and still haven't seen everything.

Q: Yes. I've been twice and feel like I've barely scratched the surface.

JOHNSON: I'm scheduled to go with my brother-in-law next month so maybe I'll get to see a few more things.

Q: Yes. And see if that one is still there on display-

JOHNSON: Yes, exactly.

Q: -because they do change the displays-

JOHNSON: I'm sure, yes.

Q: -as they should, so.

JOHNSON: Sure, yes.

Q: Well, that's a great piece of legacy and I'm glad you remembered to mention it.

Anything else on the early life?

JOHNSON: I honestly cannot think of anything right now. My memories of my first assignment was that there were so many wonderful people who were willing to spend time with me and explain how this new universe I was entering worked. That's one of my enduring memories of my early assignments, both in Benin and Cote d'Ivoire, that there

were so many people who went out of their way to help me and to explain how things worked in the Foreign Service.

Q: Well, after your first assignment, which was Abidjan, did you feel like you understood the State Department and USIA? I mean, you were at an African post thousands of miles away.

JOHNSON: Hardly.

Q: Or did you just feel like you had a little bit of it?

JOHNSON: Hardly. I felt like I'd just begun to understand certain things when I got this phone call from Art Lewis, the director of the Office of African Affairs at USIA. It seems like it was the middle of the night. He called saying that the public affairs officer who had been assigned to Cotonou, Benin, had been involved in some kind of incident and was required to leave the country. There was a vacancy and he wanted me to replace that person. Now, I'd only been in the Foreign Service two years so I thought maybe these folks had lost their minds because I was just beginning to get the hang of being a cultural affairs officer and they wanted me to go to this other post and run everything. Sure, it was a small post, I wasn't going to be supervising another American, but I would have a substantial Foreign Service national staff and there would be lots of programs. There was an English language program that was separate from but under the aegis of the American Cultural Center. And our relationship with the People's Republic of Benin was a bit difficult, that's why the other PAO had to leave.

Apparently, the embassy and the PAO residence were a couple blocks from a military base and the government had designated a certain area where they eventually wanted all embassies and international organizations to go and establish themselves. So, I think it was a Thanksgiving dinner, maybe they had a little bit too much to drink and several people made a wrong turn leaving the public affairs officer's home and ended up driving into the military base by accident, so that caused a kerfuffle and the Americans were asked to leave. So, they had to replace folks. Since I was close by in Abidjan and I spoke French and I was somewhat familiar with the region, they said, "You can do this!"

Q: Well, let me stop you there and ask a couple of details. First of all, we're talking about what year?

JOHNSON: 1982.

Q: 1982.

JOHNSON: So, this was the end of 1982. I had arrived in Abidjan December of 1980 and I think this might have been the fall of 1982. So, I hadn't even been two years in Cote d'Ivoire for two years.

Q: Wow. And at that point was the normal transfer process to bid on six assignments and-

JOHNSON: Yes.

Q: But they circumvented that in your case?

JOHNSON: Because it was an out of cycle opening. I was due to be in Abidjan another year because it was a three-year assignment. So, this was all very unusual.

Q: And it was to be a two-year assignment in Benin or a three-year assignment?

JOHNSON: I believe so, yes, two years.

Q: Okay. So, they called you and how much notice did they give you? Or did they even give you a choice?

JOHNSON: Well, yes, when Arthur Winston Lewis, Director of the Office of African Affairs, calls you and asks, it's not really that you can say no. I think what happened was, it's all a fog now, but I believe I came back to the U.S. for consultations and to talk to different people in the USIA Office of African Affairs. They assured me—because it was a time of transition in telecommunication connectivity—and while we didn't yet have direct dial to and from Africa, it was on the horizon. So they said you can always pick up the phone and call. And then there were regional people; there was a regional financial person that they called the Regional Post Management Officer, RPMAO, and there was a regional English teaching officer. The RPMAO was based in Abidjan; the regional English teaching officer was in the country next door, in the neighboring country's capital of Lomé, in Togo. I'm trying to think if there were some other regional people. Yes, the regional librarian was also based in Abidjan. So, those three regional officers, they said, they would be coming through on a regular basis. I could also contact them if something came up and I needed help. So, I packed my bags, packed up my apartment and off I went to a new adventure in Cotonou, Benin.

Q: Do you remember how much notice they gave you?

JOHNSON: I don't think there was much notice because I vaguely recall that I was home around Thanksgiving, and then I went to post. Maybe it was a few weeks. It wasn't a lot of time.

Q: And I would imagine that Cotonou at the time was one of our smaller embassies.

JOHNSON: Well, come to think of it, if the incident happened at Thanksgiving it must have been around Christmastime that I was home. So, yes, so it must have been somewhere toward the end of '82, but I remember that I did arrive in '82 and my

assignment, let's see here, I left in '85, January of '85—but, I really only spent two years in Benin.

Q: Two full years, yes.

JOHNSON: Yes, '83 and '84 were the full years and just a tail end and the beginning of the other two.

Q: So, unlike your first assignment, which was a three-year assignment which got cut short, this was to be a two-year assignment?

JOHNSON: Correct. And it was a two-year assignment because at that time it was considered a greater hardship post because of the difficult bilateral relationship and other factors that go into what they designate as hardship or greater hardship. Certainly, no bullets were flying or anything like that; it was just that we didn't see eye to eye with the People's Republic of Benin on a range of issues. I was sent there and basically my message to the government was if we could not do our cultural and educational programs there was no point in us having a cultural center, so we needed to find a mutually beneficial way to coexist. And I'm sure they were perplexed at this young kid coming in and taking over this operation. I think I was younger than all my employees at the time, which was also interesting. But everyone was very welcoming, and we did some good stuff.

Q: Well, okay. Well, put it in context for us in several different ways. I mean, first of all, how big was the embassy and how did USIS fit in?

JOHNSON: The embassy, it was a small embassy. When I got there we had a chargé d'affaires.

Q: Do you remember who it was?

JOHNSON: Charles Twining.

Q: Okay.

JOHNSON: Charles Twining. There was a consul, a management officer; oh, we were a very small contingent. And probably the USIA cultural center was the busiest in terms of interacting with Beninese because the chargé and the political officer would engage the

government, and I think the political officer also did economic reporting, if I'm not mistaken. It's been so long.

Q: So, we're talking maybe half a dozen Americans?

JOHNSON: Yes, yes.

Q: And Marine guards?

JOHNSON: No.

Q: No. Okay.

JOHNSON: Too small for Marines.

Q: Peace Corps?

JOHNSON: Yes, but I don't think they were there when I arrived. I'm trying to remember. When relations improved later on, toward the end of my tenure, the Peace Corps established an office and programs.

Q: And AID, I suppose? Or if the relationship was bad, maybe not.

JOHNSON: Not when I first got there I don't think so, but by the time I left, things had turned around. Myron Golden, based in Togo covered USAID programs in Benin when the relationship improved. At the end of my time there, a USAID officer was assigned—Modupe Broderick—and coincidentally, his wife, Amelia Fitzjohn Broderick, replaced me. Eventually, there was an ambassador. George Moose was our ambassador.

Q: Oh, right, okay.

JOHNSON: And then, Peace Corps, I'm trying to remember; I want to say Jean DeMarteau was the Peace Corps director who happened to have been a French instructor at FSI when I was learning French. What I can't remember is if he came while I was

there or after I left. He must have come while I was there. Oh, it was so long ago; it's hard to remember all the details.

Q: Well, of course. So, very small and then USIA, was it co-located with the embassy?

JOHNSON: Yes. It was a compound with the PAO residence, the cultural center and the embassy. So, I lived right behind walls separating the two buildings and I had a very short commute, which was wonderful, the shortest commute I've ever had in my life.

Q: Was it only you living on the compound or was _____?

JOHNSON: I was the only one on the compound. The others had homes in different parts of Cotonou, and the ambassador's residence was a little ways away. When we identified a building and moved, the new building that we moved to was in close proximity to the ambassador's residence, and in an area where the government had wanted all the embassies to end up one way or the other. It used to be the embassy of what was then Zaire, now Congo.

Q: So, was this a purpose-built embassy, or was it just a group of buildings that somehow the U.S. had taken over?

JOHNSON: We had been there for a long time, so I'm not really sure. It was rented from the family of a former Beninese president.

Q: Okay. It's not a fair question except that now you have all of this security and high walls, and I presume we're talking about something very different back in Cote d'Ivoire in 1982.

JOHNSON: A little bit more accessible. But because these three buildings were together, I'm not sure if it was purpose built or not. I mean, they were all connected, and it was like a compound so one could imagine that it might have been.

Q: And since you mentioned your house, was it a nice, palatial thing suited for a PAO?

JOHNSON: I'm assuming that at one point it had been the ambassador's residence maybe because it was on the compound, and it was right next door to a former president's house, former president Christophe Soglo. He was still alive when I got there and he and

his family were still living in the house next door to the embassy compound. It would be interesting to go back and see if one could find out the history of how that all came about.

Q: Yes, and if it's still there.

JOHNSON: Because the three buildings being connected, it would make sense that that would have been an ambassadorial residence because the embassy is right next door and the cultural center is on the other side.

Q: So, it sounds like it was pretty nice for a second tour officer.

JOHNSON: Oh, I was living large. It was lovely. And it was great for entertaining because we did a lot of entertaining back in the day; receptions for visiting scholars and other kinds of activities just to bring people together because that was one of the other things that I was encouraged to do when I left Washington, to try to do more activities that brought people together, either at the ambassador's residence or my residence, to see if we could improve the relationship by having more interaction with a cross-section of the Beninese population. At that time, the Beninese needed to get permission from the government to go to a foreign diplomat's residence. It was very Soviet-like.

Q: Oh, goodness. Okay.

JOHNSON: But the people of Benin are very warm and outgoing with a wonderful sense of humor. They made jokes about everything, including all the restrictions, and they were quite irreverent sometimes. They would get whatever permissions they needed for official business to attend the dinner in honor of a visiting scholar or someone we had come as a speaker who was participating in a conference or special event. We would have lovely gatherings. And my relatives visited, my older sister came at one point, and then my younger sister came and then my mother. The only person who never made it to Africa was my father, but everybody else came through. So, of course, we had parties to celebrate their visits and folks came because that was what was expected.

Q: Yes, that's very nice. But now, it must have been hard to give a social event if everybody had to get permission from the government to come.

JOHNSON: Yes, in the beginning it was, but then they started relaxing all of the restrictions. I guess there were conversations between the chargé and folks in the foreign ministry and other parts of the government because little by little these restrictions started getting lifted and it became easier and easier to organize things and have people come. The Beninese government liked the English language program; the officials didn't want

that to go away. So they were willing to ease up on all of the restrictions to facilitate those kinds of programs continuing.

Q: And obviously as a public affairs officer you were encouraged to reach out and entertain as much as you could and so forth; did you have a budget for that?

JOHNSON: Yes, we had a representational budget and that's what we used it for. And obviously, when my family came to visit that was personal so I did it on my own dime, but things were not super expensive so it was affordable—one was able to do a nice job without breaking the bank, because as a new officer I didn't have a huge salary anyway.

Q: Well, exactly. And I often heard through my career that there just was not enough representation money available, which is one of the reasons I asked the question.

JOHNSON: Well, that was the difference between State Department and USIA. USIA probably had a bigger budget for representation given that we organized concerts and we hosted receptions for art exhibitions, or musicians who were visiting. There were all these cultural events that needed food, or at least libation. So, our representation budget was always healthy, and oftentimes we co-hosted events with other officers in the mission because they didn't have as big a budget and if there was an intersection of interests and goals then we would partner with them and we could pick up the bill for the representation. State Department had more people, so there were smaller amounts to go around and most of it ended up with the ambassador.

Q: Of course.

JOHNSON: So, yes.

Q: And the kinds of restrictions you had on people coming to the embassy, did that also apply if you wanted to go out into the local community?

JOHNSON: Yes and no. Oh, gosh, it's been so many years. I remember that if I wanted to go to the interior of Benin there was a protocol for requesting permission to travel outside of Cotonou. For office visits in Cotonou and things like that, I don't recall that I had to do anything beyond calling up to make an appointment. I honestly don't recall that

it was an issue. It was only when traveling outside of Cotonou that I recall there was something one had to do, you couldn't just get in a car and drive.

Q: Yes. And you are now public affairs, not just cultural, so you also handled the media and the press?

JOHNSON: Yes.

Q: I suppose there probably wasn't a lot of international media residing in Benin at the time?

JOHNSON: None. None, none, none that I can recall. I think there were stringers for certain news outlets. And when there was a major event, maybe somebody would come through. For example, at one point there was a bit of a tiff between Ghana and Nigeria over guest workers or something like that, and they started throwing out people who weren't Nigerian. There were these truckloads, literally, truckloads of people coming through on their way to Ghana. It was a big mess, a humanitarian disaster. I think we ended up with some correspondents coming through to cover that. But most of the time it was engaging the local media.

One of the highlights that I recall was when the Voice of America French-language radio personality, Roger Guy Folly came to town. It was so funny; the day he arrived we were in the office talking with the staff. This elderly gentleman had driven over from the neighboring city of Porto Novo to hand carry a letter he wanted us to send to Roger Guy Folly. So, we said well, why don't you just give it to him yourself? We made his day.

Q: Nice when you can do that kind of thing.

JOHNSON: Yes, yes.

Q: But you don't recall having to set up press conferences for the ambassador or that kind of thing?

JOHNSON: I'm sure we must have done something along those lines, but nothing really stands out because there wasn't really a lot that happened. And whatever we organized the staff took care of it and it went off without a hitch. Usually it's seared in your

memory if there's a disaster, and I don't have any media-related disasters that I can recall from Benin.

Q: You mentioned the cultural center. Now, that would have the library and-

JOHNSON: Yes.

Q: -and the local stuff would be working there and so forth?

JOHNSON: Yes.

Q: Was that very similar to the kind of setup you had in Abidjan?

JOHNSON: Yes, very similar. In both places the library was in the cultural center. In Benin everything was on one floor, so there was one part of the building with the library and the other part had our offices. In Abidjan, the library was on the first floor and all the offices were on the second floor. So, it was a pretty similar configuration.

Q: And could people come freely to the library?

JOHNSON: Oh, absolutely.

Q: Even with the restrictions they had on coming to the embassy?

JOHNSON: Yes. Go figure. I think we did English classes; where did we do the English classes? We must have done English classes somewhere in the vicinity. Terrible one cannot remember details. But it was okay for people to do English classes and it was okay to use the library. And that was Benin.

Q So, then, you once again would have spent most of your time on the cultural side?

JOHNSON: Yes, we did have a Fulbright professor come, so we did have some academic programs as well.

Q: Come pass through or come for a semester or a year?

JOHNSON: Came for a semester. A professor whose name I can no longer remember, but she came from an HBCU (Historically Black Colleges and Universities), Lemoyne-Owen College. She came and the local state-run university provided an apartment. And that was a first, I guess, under the People's Republic of Benin. That was another indication that things were easing up because she came to teach at the university and that was okay.

Before I got there, one of the very hard-line, more-Soviet-than-the-Soviets interior ministers had been given a position in the hinterlands running a prefecture. I guess the position of Prefect was the equivalent of a governor. The rumor was that he had

pretensions to the throne, so the Prefect was sent out there to cool his jets. That coincided with things easing up. Actually, when I eventually made a trip to the interior and called on him, he was all sweetness and light, very charming and welcoming. There were all kinds of interesting dynamics that occurred there. I think him being moved out and other people coming into the government looking at what could be done to improve Benin's economic and political standing in the world, motivated a lot of the change. The leaders began to look around to see who was benefiting from what and decided well, maybe we shouldn't be so mean to the U.S. because perhaps they could be more helpful to us in achieving our goals for development. I think that turned out to be the case because after I left things continued to open up and Benin became a more stable democracy as opposed to what had occurred in previous years. In the past, every few years there was upheaval and there had been multiple coup d'etats. So, things turned around which was interesting because when I was in Cote d'Ivoire, the Ivorians would look down on Benin. When I told my Ivorian friends that I was going to Benin they just shook their heads, oh, boy. The Beninese had had a turbulent political history, while everything had been very stable in Cote d'Ivoire. Ironically, after the death of Felix Houphouët-Boigny the political situation in Côte d'Ivoire became a lot more volatile. And during that period Benin seemed to have figured out a modus vivendi and a way to move forward without all that political upheaval.

Q: So, how did you go about your work? This must have been hard as a second tour officer arriving in a new country. What do you do, get on the phone and just start calling university professors and radio stations?

JOHNSON: Well, the wonderful thing about USIA was the locally engaged staff. They knew everybody, and they outlined a plan, saying, "Okay, we're going to go visit this person, this person and that person." You make your rounds, meet people, and the fact that I was an artist and I set up a studio in one of my extra bedrooms fascinated people. Since I was single and I had all these bedrooms, I turned one into my art studio. And when the folks at the newspaper found out that I was an artist they wanted to come and see my art and see the studio and wanted to take a picture of me painting. That was a nice introduction to people—oh, here's an artist diplomat. I think that overseas, people have a little more regard for artists than they do here in the U.S. In other countries, visual artists often are part of the intellectual class and sometimes have a little bit more influence on social and political issues than they do here in the U.S. It depends, but on the whole, I would say we visual artists have less influence here at home. Being an artist was something that helped open doors and helped me meet people. I guess it put me in a non-threatening light as someone approachable because I was actually travelling to different parts of the country and then painting things that I saw, things that were unique to the country. I told people that those were my postcards to myself so that I would remember the things that caught my eye that were different from other places where I'd been. Folks were flattered that someone was taking the time to actually look and see what was unique about their country.

And there was a lot that was unique in Benin. There were three different museums—one in Porto Novo, one in Abomey, and one in Ouidah. They represented a fascinating history

for each of those regions. The museums told the story of the different kingdoms and political forces in the country. So, yes, it was unique.

Q: Did you paint people or scenes or all of the above?

JOHNSON: Yes, a little of everything. I'm not a portrait artist, so I wasn't painting people in a realistic manner. A lot of times I just would paint people with no faces and viewers would always ask, "Why are there no faces?" It was generic. Because I don't go out and then sketch or take pictures and then reproduce what I've seen in a sketch or the picture. I make these visual notes and then I do these composites of things that strike me or scenes that are memorable. You can tell it's from that country but not the exact location.

Q: Well, it made you a little bit of a celebrity too, I suppose.

JOHNSON: I guess, a little bit, yes.

Q: Did people recognize you on the street?

JOHNSON: Oh, goodness. I don't recall ever being stopped on the street.

Q: No paparazzi following you around, huh?

JOHNSON: No, no, no, no. No, no. Folks were very polite. There were folks who would know who I was if we were in a gathering and maybe I hadn't met the person but they knew who I was because they had seen a picture in the paper or someone had said oh, you should meet Cynthia.

Q: And if you were sitting in a small town or a village sketching, would this attract a lot of interest?

JOHNSON: Well, I usually didn't sit in a small town or village and sketch, oftentimes because we were traveling around to, say, visit self-help funded projects. This is the fund that the ambassador has to help local towns or villages, say, build a dispensary, a clinic or a schoolroom or something like that, and the government agrees to staff it and we help. We give money to buy the supplies and then the townspeople or the villagers build the facility. So, when we would go for the ceremonies to open those buildings, we would, of course, take pictures and that was cool and sometimes I'd just keep snapping. And then, later on in the hotel I might take out my sketchbook and do some sketches of things that I remembered.

Oh. The other thing we did when we traveled—this was really back in the day—we would take a projector and a generator and go into the interior. There was a limit to what

we could show because we didn't have lots of French language films, but Charlie Chaplin movies were always fun. We did a tour like that one time, which was a lot of fun.

So, yes, whenever we traveled, sometimes riding along in the car I would be sketching as I looked out the window if something caught my eye. But usually I didn't sit in any public place and sketch.

Q: Traveling must have been kind of rough.

JOHNSON: Oh, yes, I've had my share of washboard roads, but then again, driving around New York City is also like traveling on washboard sometimes. Even down here in Washington, DC, it can get rough because they're always digging up the streets and putting all kinds of wires underground every time you turn around, so, yes, it can be a rough ride.

Q: Constantly, yes.

JOHNSON: Constantly.

Q: Was all the travel by car? Did they actually have a Beninese airline that would take you up to the north?

JOHNSON: Oh, the travel was by car because usually we had multiple stops. In Cote d'Ivoire I did take the train up to Ouagadougou. On one trip we took the train, on another trip we did fly. But mainly it was by road because there were usually multiple stops. If we were going to go to the interior of the country it didn't make sense to just go to one place, so we did a circuit and visited multiple places.

Q: I presume there were no big, divided highways taking you anyplace at that stage.

JOHNSON: In Cote d'Ivoire they had a fairly good highway system because one of the things President Houphouët-Boigny insisted on was every year when they had their national day celebration, he wanted it to be in a different part of the country and therefore they would pave some roads to and around that city or town. As a consequence of that, Cote d'Ivoire had quite a bit of paved road; in contrast, not so much in Benin at that time. Whatever paved roads there were usually two-lanes, except in the city where there might

have been wider boulevards, but usually going out to the interior it was definitely two-lane highways.

Q: And it was a very poor place, I imagine.

JOHNSON: Yes, it was. But they were resourceful and creative in doing as much as they could or getting as much as they could out of what they had.

Q: Did you find it to be kind of a grinding, depressing poverty?

JOHNSON: Well, let's put it this way. I always thought it was very depressing driving around in the interior watching these young girls with heavy loads on their head walking from Point A to Point B with either wood or water or something, packages, whatever. It looked like a very hard life. In the city it was less obvious. But yes, there were times when I wondered about the quality of life.

Q: What was the economy, do you recall?

JOHNSON: Their main economic activity? Well, they had a port in Cotonou, so I know there was a lot of transshipment, to northern countries like Niger and Burkina-Faso or to Nigeria. Because of problems in the port in Lagos, I think sometimes shipping would come to Cotonou and then go overland to Nigeria, as it was a short drive from Cotonou to Lagos or other parts of Nigeria. There was a lot of activity in the port. I'm trying to remember what else. I mean, they did have-

Q: Subsistence farming maybe?

JOHNSON: Yes. I know that in Cote d'Ivoire they exported cocoa and pineapples and things like that, and they must have done that kind of farming too, but I don't think on as large a scale as in Côte d'Ivoire. I don't recall that there were these huge plantations and things of that nature.

Q: How about ethnic difficulties in a country that small? Was it pretty homogenous?

JOHNSON: Well, since the ethnic groups ran east to west and the countries were divided north to south, there were more Muslims in the north and Christians and Animists in the south across West Africa. But I don't recall that there were tensions and discord in the same way that there might have been in some of the neighboring countries. I just don't recall that being an issue.

Q: And even ideologically, were there active political parties? You mentioned a Soviet-style system that was pretty closed.

JOHNSON: Yes. There was a political party. I would imagine afterward when they changed some laws and became more democratic there were multiple parties, but I think,

since it was patterned after Eastern European-style, Soviet-style politics, I'm thinking it must have been a single party.

Q: Well, that was still the era, or at least the end of the era, of one-party states in much of Africa at that time, I guess.

JOHNSON: I'd have to go back and look that up. But I'm assuming that it was just the party of the revolution.

Q: So, did you have a big international visitor program?

JOHNSON: I think we had a modest one. Being a small country, we didn't have huge numbers, but we did have people who traveled. I'm trying to remember if we had or if we participated in the Humphrey fellowship program, because there were some programs you really had to have good English for, and I just can't remember what the state of play would have been in terms of the academic exchanges. I know we had people come over and we must have had some who had good enough English to travel, but nothing comes to mind. But yes, we did have international visitor programs because they would have escort interpreters who would facilitate those trips. And as I recall, people were able to get permission to travel as time passed and the relationship improved.

Q: And that was something that all different sections of the embassy would make nominations for?

JOHNSON: Yes.

Q: Did you have some kind of a committee or something to decide?

JOHNSON: Usually, because we were so small, it wasn't hard. The chargé, the political/econ officer and myself and the staff would make recommendations. The locally engaged staff would make well-reasoned recommendations, but then so would the chargé and political-econ officer. So, it wasn't hard.

Q: Do you recall any problems in a closed society like that? You were talking about government permission for everything; if you invited somebody could the government just say no, or would people be afraid to say yes because it would offend the government?

JOHNSON: I'm pretty sure there were some people who could not participate because of that in the beginning, but it seems to me that by the time I was leaving that policy had relaxed to the point where it wasn't an issue anymore. But yes, in the beginning there

were certain people that we didn't even bother to invite because we knew they weren't going to be able to make it. But over time that changed.

Q: Was it the opposite problem sometimes where the government would pressure you to send their favorite brother-in-law or something as a visitor?

JOHNSON: Again, nothing comes to mind, although I am sure that it happened. But I can't think of a specific instance. If it wasn't a brother-in-law, maybe someone who was favored, but if they had a legitimate position in the government, kind of hard to justify saying no if that was the person who was going to be in that position for a while and was destined for greater responsibility.

Q: And as a result of these programs, do you find that they worked? Did the people who'd come back have a closer relationship with the embassy, seem to have a better attitude towards the United States?

JOHNSON: Oh, yes. And to be perfectly honest, most of the people that we dealt with seemed to have, even during the worst of times, seemed to have a degree of admiration for the U.S. And while the official line was to be standoffish, as it were, that's just not the way the Beninese people were. They were basically very warm and polite people, and, how should I say, the restrictions on interaction went against their traditional culture, which was one of engagement. I don't really remember people having dramatic reactions. There were some folks in Cote d'Ivoire who seemed more standoffish and when they came back were not particularly warm and friendly. So often it just depends on the individual.

Q: Yes. Yes, of course.

What kind of cultural programs did you bring over from the United States?

JOHNSON: Well, we had two tap dancers. And unfortunately, we could only do events in conjunction with Beninese cultural presentations. So, we had to have a warm-up act that was Beninese before we had our American act if we were going to do something for the general public. We had to work with the government. The officials would select the venue and they selected a venue for tap dancers that was totally inappropriate and didn't work very well. But we did have them at the residence for a reception. Sadly, that wasn't the greatest program, as it turned out.

Then, we had Memphis Slim come down from Paris because he was living in Paris and the ARS office, the Africa Regional Services office in Paris, arranged for him to do a tour through Africa. He came down, and of course a local musician had to perform first. By the time Memphis Slim got onstage, I think he did one number and it started to rain. It was in an outdoor venue, so that was the end of that. We had done it in conjunction with the French Cultural Center because they had the best venue for that kind of thing, but it

was outdoors. So, it was hard doing cultural programs because things always seemed to go south.

But we would have receptions, people would get together and it generated goodwill.

Q: So, how did the cultural programs work? Did USIS- I'm sorry, USIA headquarters in Washington just notify you that they had these performers available, were you interested; or did you have to solicit a certain kind of _____ for them to find?

JOHNSON: They would offer, yes. USIA would send out an announcement saying so-and-so is available these dates, and then ask who was interested and then they'd try to put together a schedule. We would throw our hat in the ring and sometimes we would get the performer we wanted when we wanted, and other times they just couldn't accommodate everybody. The two years that I was there, each year we had a performing arts cultural program, and they were okay. The things that I think really made a big difference was when we had a photographic exhibition of the works of Roland Freeman soon after the new ambassador, George Moose arrived. That brought people into the cultural center that previously had not been coming. That was one of the things that the new ambassador did. He lobbied to get people to come to our cultural programs and the government seemed to relent. We had other kinds of cultural activities along those lines that seemed to work well. I even did an art exhibition in conjunction with the local American chain hotel when they had USA Week. There was not much we could do, but the embassy tried to be supportive of their efforts. There were all kinds of restrictions on what you can do with a commercial entity, but I got permission to do certain things so that we could advance our goal of trying to engage more of the Beninese. We tried to be creative in reaching out to people.

Q: And did you do an exhibit of your own art?

JOHNSON: Yes, because they knew I was an artist they asked me if I could lend some of my pieces for something that they were doing, and I think I did.

Q: Did you have speakers coming through as well?

JOHNSON: Oh, yes, we had speakers. We had, I don't even remember the topic, but we had Dov Ronan from Harvard University who came through. And we had another professor come through. I can't remember the subject matter, but we did have several professors who came through and gave lectures and we had dinners or luncheons. Some of them we did on our own, some of them we did in conjunction with other entities, like UNDP (United Nations Development Program) and other organizations, depending on the topic. We had speakers, we had cultural events, we had academic programs; we were able to do the range of normal activities.

One of my fondest memories in Benin is of a woman named Betty Fabo, an African-American woman who had married a Beninese diplomat. He had been ambassador of Benin to Zaire. By the time I got there he had died, and her children were going to

school, in Canada or the U.S., I can't remember which place. She took me under her wing and introduced me to lots of different people because she was an institution there. She was instrumental in our getting the building for the new cultural center.

One of my objectives, one of the things I was required to do before I left, was to move the cultural center from its location next to the embassy to a different building away from the military base. That's what had been agreed to with the Beninese government when I was assigned there. So, in my final year we spent that time negotiating the lease for that facility, and that was such a large facility it enabled us to have everything under one roof, the English classes, the library, event space, the offices and everything. And it was a beautiful facility. One of the final activities or acts was with my successor. Amelia Fitzjohn Broderick arrived before I left so the two of us stood in front of the new entrance and they took our picture and we used that for the locally produced newsletter that we sent out to highlight the opening of the new center and the arrival of the new director of the American Cultural Center. So, that was nice.

Q: Did you find there was excitement about some of these programs that you had in a little country like Benin? They may not have gotten a lot of visitors.

JOHNSON: Sure. Yes. Oh, definitely. Folks were always interested in what was happening at the American Cultural Center and the French Cultural Center. The French Cultural Center, of course, was much busier and had a lot more going on than we did, but those were the two places where there was a lot of activity. There was also, of course, a USSR embassy and cultural presence. And Chinese were also active there. I remember going to a dinner at the residence of one of the Russian cultural diplomats and we had meatballs made from bear meat. And I also remember going to the Chinese embassy for a reception that the Chinese cultural person organized, and I had sea cucumbers. I had a wonderful adventure there. In addition, one of the favorite local dishes was *agouti*, bush rat with *sauce feuille* or greens. Some people made it very well and some people not so much. When I would travel to the interior I'd get to compare.

Q: And they would sell it from little _____ by the side of the road.

JOHNSON: They'd hold it by the tail on the side of the road, yes. Agouti. Oh, boy, yes. I got to try all kinds of interesting and different foods.

Q: But it was a pretty small diplomatic community?

JOHNSON: Yes.

Q: Certainly, compared to Abidjan.

JOHNSON: Sure, sure, there were many more diplomats in Abidjan. I think some of the diplomats who were accredited to Benin were resident in Lagos and would come over from time to time. But there were French, the Chinese, and the then-Soviet Union who

had representation. I can't remember who else was there, and there must have been several more, but those off the top of my head are the ones that I remember.

Q: And the French, of course, the most influential? Or were they having a tough time because of the Soviet-style government as well?

JOHNSON: I think they were influential because of the colonial relationship and so many Beninese having studied in France or had family had migrated to France. Many Beninese were also international civil servants working for the UN and other international organizations, so there was that too. A lot of people left the country after the revolution when they weren't in agreement with the turn that the government had taken. And so, that was the other thing. But when the restrictions and policies started to change, some who had left started coming back, and they were all talented international civil servants or technocrats, so they definitely had something to offer the government.

Q: And of course, it was a French speaking country, so did all the speakers and so forth have to be French speakers?

JOHNSON: Yes.

Q: Which would make it a little bit harder to find people, I suppose.

JOHNSON: Well, that's why the Africa Regional Services office in Paris was such an important resource, because they often would find expat Americans who were working in international organizations in Europe and who were fluent French-speakers. Many times, they found people and programmed them in francophone Africa. They didn't do as much for lusophone Africa, but they had a stable, I think, of Portuguese speakers that they were able to find as well. But I think there were probably more French speakers than Portuguese speakers available.

Q: I would think so, yes, I would think so.

JOHNSON: Yes.

Q: The- now I had another question on the tip of my tongue, but of course, I've forgotten what it is. I wanted to follow-up on this. Never mind. We'll come back to it. Oh, I know, I recall; I was going to ask you about traditional leaders. I know a lot of the countries still

have chiefs and obas of one type or another; were they still influential in Benin and did you deal with them as part of your work?

JOHNSON: I did not deal with them as part of my work. But they were influential. They kept a low profile. But no, I don't recall people identifying them to me. I just don't recall that that was something that occurred.

Q: How about being an African American diplomat in an African country at that stage? Did you find that had any impact at all or affect your work?

JOHNSON: I think at that point the fact that I was a young woman was more of a thing that raised eyebrows than my being African American. Because when they thought of an American diplomat, they thought of an older, white male, not an African American woman, and certainly not a 20-something. So, I think it made for interesting interactions because I had a different view and set of interests and curiosities, probably, than someone who was not of African descent. But I was an American, so I was seen as an American and a foreigner, not as an African. I was seen as an American first and foremost. There were always connections that we made just from familiarity and getting to know each other, and the fact that I took a genuine interest and had a genuine curiosity and wanted to be there. I think those were the things that mattered more to people. And of course, my family, my parents, who were born in Panama, and their parents were from Jamaica and Barbados had an effect. When I got to Benin, I discovered that Augustin, the cook, managed the PAO residence. He stayed with the residence; PAOs came and went, but he was always there. Augustin made a traditional Beninese dish and it was really amazing because this was a dish that very much reminded me of something my grandmother, my Barbadian grandmother, Myrtle Agnes Lavinia Seale Farrell, used to make. It was called *amiwo* in Benin, and in Barbados it's called *Cou Cou*. It is like a cornmeal mush. In Barbados they boil onions and okra and then slowly pour in the cornmeal to make this dish, and you have to get it to a certain consistency. It's almost like polenta; well, polenta may have come from there. Who knows! In Benin, instead of okra they used tomato and then they serve it with either roasted chicken or roasted fish smothered in onions and tomatoes. My grandmother made it with salt cod smothered in onions, okra, and tomatoes. So, these two dishes were very similar, and I said oh, now I know where Cou Cou comes from; it probably comes from Benin.

The other interesting thing was in Benin there was this back and forth with Brazil involving formerly enslaved Africans. When they were freed in Brazil, many of them were repatriated to West Africa, so there are communities in Nigeria, Benin and Togo that have people with Portuguese names, like D'almeida and De Souza, all these types of names. In the town of Ouidah there's a Brazilian quarter, and they make *feijoada* in Benin, but it's not made with black beans; over there, *feijoada* is made with black-eyed peas. There was all this back and forth. It's fascinating when you look at food and culture and history. I believe it's the Brazilian writer, Antonio Olinto, who wrote a novel called The Water House. It's about one of these African families from Brazil that returned to Nigeria, and the matriarch dug a well in her house, selling water from that well in her neighborhood. It became a very prosperous family, and the family eventually moved to

different places along the coast of West Africa. When I read the book it reminded me of the migrations between Nigeria and Lomé, Togo, involving folks with Portuguese names. That was the other interesting thing about Benin.

Ouidah served as one of Africa's biggest slave trading ports. People always think about Goree Island in Senegal and Cape Coast in Ghana, but Ouidah was also an important port for the slave trade. And one of our U.S. speakers who came over was actually the mayor of Prichard, Alabama, the site where the last illegal slave cargo landed in the U.S. That town had a neighborhood, and I guess it's still there, called Africatown. When the ship got there slavery had been abolished and I don't remember all the details of it, but I believe the surviving Africans escaped to Prichard. Mayor John Smith came over to Benin and was trying to establish connections because Prichard was going to have a festival and wanted to invite Beninese performers to participate. That was also an interesting opportunity for more exchanges. I want to say that-

Q: That was not a formal program; he just came over himself?

JOHNSON: Actually, he came over as a U.S. speaker to talk about local politics in the States. It must have been focusing on democratic institutions, political parties and the

like. He was a Republican, African-American mayor of this small town that had a historic connection to Benin.

Q: Was he a French speaker too?

JOHNSON: No, I was his interpreter.

Q: Oh, lucky you.

JOHNSON: Oh, yes. I think we had several interpreters, but when he met with the president, I interpreted for him, which was an adventure because I'm not an interpreter, but that's what I had to do.

Q: So, you met with the president as well.

JOHNSON: Yes.

Q: Let me ask before I ask you about that, how about, go back for a moment; you said people were interested in you as a young woman, a diplomat. Were there other women who were diplomats in Cotonou at the time?

JOHNSON: Yes, the political-econ officer.

Q: Oh, okay.

JOHNSON: So, there were two of us at the-

Q: Two Americans.

JOHNSON: Two American women.

Q: And others? Or was this something that was uniquely American at the time?

JOHNSON: The cultural attaché at the French embassy was female, Danielle Robin, and there was also a political officer at the French embassy who was female, Christina Vasack. The director of the French cultural center was male. I think the other country diplomats were male. So, the French and the Americans had female diplomats, yes. We were a small group, and we got together periodically. I remember the political officer at the French embassy was a huge fan of Humphrey Bogart's "Casablanca." We had fun conversations about that movie. It's fascinating the random things one remembers.

Q: And how about in Beninese society and in the government and the universities; were there reasonable numbers of women?

JOHNSON: Yes, there were. There were quite a few women matriculating at the university. I remember I gave a talk there and there were quite a few women in the class.

I'm trying to remember the people I dealt with in the government. Not a lot of women, but there were some, but I can't think of anyone other than in the media; the media outlets were government-controlled. There were some women in charge of the government's radio station. But in the foreign ministry it was all male. The education minister was male, yes. There weren't tons of them in the public sector. I think they were too busy making money. The women over there were astute entrepreneurs.

Q: Running the markets and so forth?

JOHNSON: Yes.

Q: As most African women do.

JOHNSON: Yes. I think that they were more interested in commerce. They could calculate exchange rates each day from Nigerian naira, dollars, francs, whatever; you name it, they could calculate it in their heads for you. So, they were focused on that, entrepreneurial.

Q: Right. Now, this would have been during the early years of the Reagan Administration.

JOHNSON: Yes, yes.

Q: And generally, did you see any effect of that? I mean, I guess you would have switched from the Carter Administration to the Reagan Administration.

JOHNSON: Yes. When I came in, it was the end of the Carter Administration.

Q: Yes. So, did you see an improvement in relations as a result of Reagan's policies or just the opposite or no difference?

JOHNSON: Well, it seems to me by the time I got out into the field, the transition had already occurred, so I didn't have anything to compare it to.

Q: Okay. But this would have been at the time of a lot of sanctions on South Africa.

JOHNSON: Oh, yes, that was a hot topic, yes.

Q: That was a top topic and the U.S.'s policy was not very popular at the time, as I recall.

JOHNSON: No, it wasn't. I mean, it was an issue, but there were just so many things going on, I found that folks were often more concerned about local matters. They were concerned about that, but they were more concerned about the bilateral relationship and how that relationship was affecting life in Benin or Cote d'Ivoire and issues that were of importance to them locally. Yes, there was a lot of criticism of constructive engagement,

as I recall. A favorite saying of one of my journalist friends was, “To make an omelet you’ve got to break a lot of eggs.” They thought the U.S. should have been more aggressive in taking on apartheid. Anyway, we agreed to disagree many times, but that wasn’t a major stumbling block that caused us to not engage people. They just registered their discontent and we moved on.

Q: Did you have American political leaders? I mean, did the assistant secretary for Africa stop by? Did congressmen and senators come by?

JOHNSON: We did have CODELs, and in Cote d'Ivoire we even had Maxine Waters come through when she was still in the California State Assembly. She came through with a group of African-American women who were professionals, judges, lawyers, community activists, and they were doing a tour through West Africa. They visited Lagos, they visited Ghana, and then they got to Cote d'Ivoire and nobody in the group spoke French. For some reason, I ended up being their control officer and having to interpret for them. I remember spending all day interpreting, and then there was an evening event and I was so tired I said I am just too tired, I could not continue. They found someone else to help out. But I met her and interpreted for her. When I came home on leave at one point, I met with her again. She had then been elected to Congress, replacing Congressman Hawkins who had been a long-time representative from that district, and I did visit her in her office. Congresswoman Waters was very gracious, introducing me to her staff and telling them that, “Cynthia had been my interpreter in Cote d'Ivoire. “That was fun. It’s interesting to see nowadays “Auntie Maxine” is still reigning and making the headlines.

Q: That’s a great connection. That was in Cote d'Ivoire, of course, but-

JOHNSON: That was in Cote d'Ivoire.

Q: -powerhouses of West Africa.

JOHNSON: -Benin we did have a CODEL. Congressman William Gray from Pennsylvania.

Q: He was; he was very active in African affairs.

JOHNSON: He did visit, and it was a short one, but apparently uneventful because I don’t remember anything untoward or crazy, nor do I remember anything major. He met with who he came to meet with, and it was short. But he did come through. I think he might have been our only CODEL. Off the top of my head I do not recall any other VIP

visitors like him. We didn't get a lot of visitors in Cotonou; we got many more in Cote d'Ivoire.

Q: And Chester Crocker would have been the assistant secretary for Africa, and you don't suspect he stopped by either.

JOHNSON: That doesn't ring a bell.

Q: Okay. Well, I had stopped you when you were about to begin a meeting with the president.

JOHNSON: Oh. No, that was about the mayor from Prichard, Alabama, John H. Smith.

Q: And president who?

JOHNSON: Kérékou , Mathieu Kérékou. We had a courtesy call. I don't think it was a very long meeting. I interpreted for the mayor and there was someone else interpreting for President Kérékou, and I think Ambassador Moose was there. I'd have to go back and look. Actually, I still have some of the pictures from back in the day when Mayor Smith visited. Yes, Ambassador Moose and his wife, Judith Kaufmann, were in those photos. So yes, the ambassador would have been present.

Q: But that's exciting, being a second tour officer and meeting with the president.

JOHNSON: Yes. And actually, I met President Houphouët-Boigny as well at the wedding of his daughter to my friend's brother. So, I met Houphouët-Boigny and Mathieu Kérékou, but under different circumstances.

Q: What was your impression of Kérékou? Was it a very formal meeting at the palace? How did it go?

JOHNSON: Well, it was as formal as those things should be, but he was charming, very pleasant, genial, as I recall. It was a pleasant meeting and he was, I think, flattered that this mayor from the U.S. wanted to actually establish some kind of relationship and invite Beninese performers to participate in a festival his city was organizing. I think something actually came of that, because by that time I think I was getting ready to leave, or I left soon after that visit. Later, when I inquired I learned that performers had actually traveled

to Prichard. I don't know how they financed it or arranged it, but some folks did go from Benin to Prichard, Alabama.

Q: That suggests that the U.S. had pretty good access in Benin, despite whatever strain there was in relations if you could get a mayor from a small Alabama town in to see the president.

JOHNSON: I think by that time it must have been the second year I was there and things were totally different from when I had arrived the previous year; they were much more open, there was much more fluid exchange, and there were fewer restrictions on contacts.

Q: And had Kérékou recently taken over or was he the same one who had had the tough line?

JOHNSON: Oh, he had been there, and yes, he had been there with the tough line, but things evolved, because he evolved. And when he ran in a competitive election he was re-elected because I think that morphing from the hard line to being more liberal, people appreciated the change. It all worked out well for him.

Q: Yes, yes. Was he a good image of the African big man who you read about in African novels?

JOHNSON: The fact that he evolved the way he did perhaps made him different. I mean, he was not like Senegal's President Senghor, who really actively groomed a successor because he had a life beyond politics and didn't want to die in office. He had other things he wanted to do.

Q: Kérékou you're talking about?

JOHNSON: No, I'm talking about President Leopold Sedar Senghor. President Senghor didn't want to die in office.He groomed a successor and then moved on.

Q: And Kérékou was-

JOHNSON: President Kérékou became more liberal, open, but he still wanted to maintain a role in governing, so I guess you would say he was more typical of the leaders who want to continue on in some way forever. After I left, I lost track of all the comings and goings. Every now and then I'd hear something. After I left, folks told me about the elections and how he had been re-elected, that things had changed significantly, and that

there was a lot more freedom than there had been in the Socialist Republic days, shall we say.

Q: Well, tell me a little bit about your local staff; who were they and what did they do? I mean, not the names so much as the-

JOHNSON: Yes. Well, we had someone who was like a budget assistant/manager, and he doubled as a cultural assistant because he knew all the cultural movers and shakers and all the musicians and creative types. Then, there was a photographer/information assistant who knew all the media types. We had an office manager, a librarian and then the driver who knew his way around every corner of the city and the country. It wasn't a huge staff. The person who ran the English program was an American from Los Angeles, whose husband was in international development. I can't remember which organization he was with. He traveled a lot. But she ran the English program. It seems to me they had built a home in Togo, but he died suddenly—well, after I had left, and I think she ended up returning to the U.S.

Q: So, the local staff were very skilled very well-connected-

JOHNSON: Oh, yes.

Q: -_____ with the programs?

JOHNSON: Oh, they were critical. The program would not have functioned without them because they helped me understand the cultural context, the history, and who was who. They were essential to the functioning of the cultural program because of their knowledge and connections. Sure, I went out and met people that maybe some of them didn't know, but for the most part they were the real backbone and they were the institutional memory, so they were critical to the success of the program.

Q: Yes, I think often they don't get as much credit as they deserve.

JOHNSON: No, they don't, and especially during the difficult days they probably got some flak from the government and might have been harassed, who knows? They never

complained, though, they just went about doing their jobs and doing it to the best of their abilities, and that was pretty good.

Q: I wanted to ask when you were talking about meeting Kérékou, you would have been a member of the country team; did you go with the ambassador when he presented his credentials?

JOHNSON: Oh, goodness. I cannot even remember that. I don't think so. I think it would probably have been the political officer.

Q: Probably would have been memorable if you-

JOHNSON: Yes. I think it was the political-econ officer who probably would have gone with him.

Q: Okay. I guess in some countries they take more people with them than in others, so, yes.

JOHNSON: Yes.

Q: But as a member of the country team, were there country team meetings that you went to?

JOHNSON: Oh, yes. Yes. Oh, I forgot to mention, there was also a consul.

Q: Oh, of course.

JOHNSON: Of course, yes. We did do visas.

Q: Was this an issue? I mean, was there a line-up around the block for people to get visas?

JOHNSON: No, no.

Q: No?

JOHNSON: No. It was not like, say, Mexico or the Philippines where it's a case of thousands, both in the consular section and applying for visas. No. There were a modest number of people applying for visas.

Q: And the relationship between Benin and its big neighbors and small neighbors, I guess, as well? I mean, you mentioned the one incident with the Nigerians, but that was more a crisis they had with Ghana than with Benin.

JOHNSON: Yes. I don't recall that there were major issues with neighbors, large or small. There seemed to be a peaceful co-existence. Now, in the fog of the passage of time

I may have forgotten some major kerfuffle, but nothing stands out. There was so much cross-border commerce that I think even if they wanted to seal the borders they never could. I remember one Saturday afternoon the UN Food and Agricultural Organization director took us on a canoe trip, and we traveled some of the different lagoons that connected Benin and Nigeria so that we could see what it was like. There was all this traffic on the lagoons coming and going, back and forth. Yes, there was a lot of cross-border activity.

Q: I seem to remember a little town on stilts in the water.

JOHNSON: Ganvie. Ganvie, yes. And the story of how Ganvie came to be—according to one of the staff or someone who was telling it—it might have been someone from the foreign ministry when we took the mayor of Prichard, Alabama to visit. I think we took him up to Abomey where there was a museum, and then we went to Ganvie. And as the story goes, there was a fight between one ethnic group or tribe and the Abomey kingdom's warriors. These warriors chased their foes to the water's edge. However, the Abomey kingdom warriors believed they would lose their powers if they went onto the water. So the group that was being pursued got into canoes and went out into the middle of this lake where Ganvie is now located because Abomey's warriors could not follow them out there. That is—according to the lore that I recall I was told. That's how this village got stood up in the middle of the lake.

Q: Ah.

So, how was living in Cotonou? Was it pleasant?

JOHNSON: Oh, yes. I was perplexed as to why it was considered a greater hardship post because Cotonou had nice cafes and restaurants, it had cultural activities all the time, and the people were gracious. The city had supermarkets and open air markets where you could get just about anything you needed to survive. Yes, there were certain things that we Americans were accustomed to that you couldn't get, but you know, you adapt and use whatever's available. And it was quite comfortable. We didn't have a crime problem to speak of. I can't remember that there were any crime problems, but that's often the case in these very strictly controlled environments.

Q: You get good French cheese and baguettes and things?

JOHNSON: Oh, absolutely. I'm not a wine drinker, but I'm told that there was also good wine to be had. So, yes, it was a comfortable place and as long as you took the normal

precautions in filtering water and washing vegetables properly, things like that, all would be fine.

Q: And a beach?

JOHNSON: There was a beach, but I'm not a beach person, so when I had some free time I liked to paint or read or visit with friends.

Q: Did they have fancy Western hotels?

JOHNSON: One.

Q: One. Okay.

JOHNSON: Cotonou had traditional, more modest hotels. But I met a lot of interesting people so oftentimes on Sunday afternoons I'd be invited to dinner with different families. As a matter of fact, one of the families that took me under their wing, their son now lives in Tampa, Florida, and we're still in touch.

Q: This is a Beninese family?

JOHNSON: Yes.

Q: Okay. Were the Americans pretty close knit in a small post like that?

JOHNSON: Oh, sure. We did a lot of social activities together, and I think at one point one of my colleagues was trying to lose weight, so we'd go walking together to

incentivize his new healthy-lifestyle program. So, we did stuff together, too. I was kept pretty well occupied.

Q: The markets must have been interesting?

JOHNSON: Oh, yes, definitely. They had a very big market that was like a regional market. And it was filled with beautiful fabrics. Of course, it was easy to find tailors to make clothes, so that was always nice.

Q: Interesting embroidery, as I recall, too. Didn't they do the great animal scenes?

JOHNSON: Yes. They had the picture writing appliqué.

Q: Yes, applique, the _____.

JOHNSON: Yes, the Benin cloths, which were quite beautiful and colorful. Actually, I just donated some to a school in Anacostia.

Q: I had one hanging in my office for a long time and I can't remember where.

JOHNSON: I still have mine. I kept several. I still have two hanging in my home. Yes, there were beautiful textiles there. As a farewell present, the Felihos, that same family

whose son lives in Tampa, they gave me this beautiful tablecloth with my name woven into it.

Q: Oh, wow.

JOHNSON: I still use it. I use it at my art markets and people always want to know where I got it, and I say sorry, you can't get it here.

Q: So, getting pretty close to the end of your time in Benin. Have we left out something we should talk about?

JOHNSON: I cannot think of anything else, but when I go home and rummage through papers and pictures something may come to mind.

Q: Okay, well, that's alright.

JOHNSON: I'll try to make a note of it.

Q: We can pick it up after.

You were there for about, what, a year-and-a-half or less, you would have already been thinking about the next assignment?

JOHNSON: Oh, yes. I was bidding, and I was desperately trying to get to Brazil. Because of all of this interaction—we had had visitors come from Brazil and Haiti as part of an African Diaspora conference. I was fascinated with the Brazil-Africa connection. There was an international African Diaspora conference of some kind and historians and experts from all over attended.

Q: In Benin?

JOHNSON: In Benin. Actually, there was a professor from Howard University who came. Joseph E. Harris was his name. He had also visited Cote d'Ivoire when I was there. So, yes, there were lots of people who came through, and Brazil was always a topic of conversation because of the connection between Brazil and Benin. For those reasons, I was bidding on all these Brazilian posts. Then, I saw that the information officer job in Panama was also open, so as an afterthought I put it on the list. I figured I'd never get it because Panama's a pretty nice assignment; everybody wants to go there. Well, I think it seemed there were more people who wanted to go to Brazil than to Panama because HR ended up calling me up and saying I'm so sorry we can't give you any of the assignments you bid on in Brazil, but would you mind going to Panama? Since it was last on my list, I suppose they figured I really did not want the job. And I was like, whoa, whoa, would I

mind going to Panama? No problem. That's how I ended up going to Panama from Benin, but I went by way of Washington because I had to do language training.

Q: Language training for which-?

JOHNSON: Spanish.

Q: Ah.

JOHNSON: Yes, because even though my parents spoke Spanish, their parents were from the Anglophone West Indies. English was their mother tongue and we always spoke English at home. My parents only spoke Spanish when they didn't want us to know what they were talking about. So, I had to have Spanish language training. Since I had already studied German and then French, I think there was this thing in my brain that turned on for language learning, so it wasn't that hard. And Spanish was a lot easier to learn than French.

Q: So, this would have been 1984?

JOHNSON: '85.

Q: '85, beginning of '85 you would have transferred back to Washington for language training.

JOHNSON: Yes, after home leave. The way I went home was from Paris, I flew to visit friends in Bangkok and then visited other friends in Taiwan. My home leave address was San Francisco, so I took the long way home, but it was great!

Q: It's a nice way to do it.

JOHNSON: It was great fun.

Q: Good way to see the world.

JOHNSON: Indeed, because I figured who knew when I'd ever get to Asia, if I'd ever get assigned to Asia, because I had also tried to get assigned to Germany since I spoke some

German but that never worked. I decided to go home through Asia because I might never get there on my own.

Q: Yes. Speaking of travels, let me digress a little bit. You said Benin was a hardship post, which means you would have gotten an R&R (rest and recreation) from there.

JOHNSON: Yes. And I think I ended up going home for the R&R.

Q: I mean, I would guess that probably the R&R point probably would have been Paris, I would guess.

JOHNSON: Yes, it was, but I think it was cheaper to go back to the States.

Q: Back to the States, yes.

JOHNSON: Because Pan Am was still flying, so I think I ended up going home.

Q: Okay, well anyway, let's get back to language training. Was that- was the new FSI campus open by that time?

JOHNSON: Well, I didn't go to FSI because they were, as usual, in a hurry for me to get to Panama, so I went to one of the language schools at DuPont Circle where I had one-on-one instruction.

Q: Really? I didn't even know they do that.

JOHNSON: Yes. USIA did that because your assignment in USIA starts when you begin language training. We have to have a 3/3 in the language of the country you're going to unless it's a 2/2 designated country or some other kind of designation. With the cultural and media work, if you can't speak the language, you can't do the job. So, the way USIA organized assignments was a rolling assignment system, and your language start date was the start of your new assignment.

Q: So, this would have been a three-year assignment or a two-year assignment.

JOHNSON: It was a four-year assignment.

Q: Four-year assignment, right from get go without any extensions or anything?

JOHNSON: Yes. If it was not designated a hardship assignment in USIA, it was four years. At that time Panama was not a hardship. It was a four-year assignment. I started language training at this language school. The first day I went there the person who was doing intake was a native French speaker, so we started chatting in French. At one point she looked at me and said you know, this is so weird, talking French to an American with

an African accent. We had a good laugh. I enjoyed speaking with her whenever I had to take care of any business at the school's office.

Q: So, it was a private language school-

JOHNSON: Yes.

Q: -and you had one-on-one?

JOHNSON: Yes. And I had two different instructors by the time I finished. Actually, I had three by the time I cycled through. One was from Honduras, one was from Argentina and one was from Uruguay. As it turned out, when I was assigned to Uruguay, Edwina Albornoz, the Uruguayan professor, moved back to Uruguay when she retired. We got together in Uruguay years later.

Q: Oh, fun.

JOHNSON: So, I did the language training. After three months, I went and tested at FSI and they said well, you know, you're really a borderline 3/3. We could give you a 3/3 or a 2+/2+; what do you prefer? I said I would feel more comfortable with another month. She laughed and said, "You're the first person who has ever asked for more language training." But I knew that I really needed to feel comfortable in the language before leaving the U.S. because I was going to be the information officer, which meant I was going to be talking to radio, TV, and print journalists. I needed to feel comfortable and confident. So, they gave me another month.

I remember when I got to Panama, it was early July—maybe the first, and of course the big event was the Fourth of July reception with a cast of thousands. I had such a headache because, as I did everywhere else, I said don't speak to me in English unless I look totally confused, because I really need to get this language under my belt. People used lots of colloquial language and they had a different way of speaking from the Argentines, Uruguayans and Hondurans. So it took a little bit to adjust, but eventually my ear became attuned to the rhythms and speech patterns.

Q: Was it just language training or did you have other kinds of training as well while you were in D.C.?

JOHNSON: I'm sure there were some area studies and the consultations, and I read "Path Between the Seas."

Q: A good book, yes.

JOHNSON: Oh, a fascinating book. Of course, I had all my relatives whose brains I could pick about what they remembered from their time in Panama. I had that institutional memory of life in Panama. I was well aware of some of the sensitivities and things that could push people's buttons. That was helpful because, as it turned out, things

deteriorated pretty quickly after I got there, and it wasn't because I got there. But I got there in July and-

Q: Family must have been pretty excited about you going to Panama.

JOHNSON: Absolutely. I had gone there in 1975, December of '75, so it was almost 10 years later that I went back. I got there in July and in September, there was the incident with Hugo Spadafora where he was killed and his decapitated body was found—his head was never found.

Q: Tell us who he was.

JOHNSON: Hugo Spadafora was what people called a romantic revolutionary who had fought alongside Omar Torrijos, who was the military strongman who had run things in Panama after Arnulfo Arias was ousted, if I'm remembering the sequence of events correctly. General Torrijos negotiated the return of the Panama Canal with the Carter Administration. After the change of regimes when the military took over, I guess Hugo Spadafora went off to support other insurgencies. I think he supported some revolutions in Central America and Africa. I want to say somewhere in lusophone Africa. I can't remember the details now. He eventually returned to Central America. I can't remember if he was living in Panama or Costa Rica, or simply traveling between the two countries regularly. At any rate, he came from a fairly prominent and well-connected family in Panama, and he was a harsh critic of General Manuel Antonio Noriega, who had succeeded Omar Torrijos as the strongman in Panama. Some time in September of 1985, when he was near the border with Costa Rica, he was murdered. To this day I don't think anyone really knows who did it, but of course the opposition in Panama accused the Noriega regime of having orchestrated his murder. His family became very vocal in their opposition to the Noriega regime, and since some of them had been educated in the U.S., his brother started lobbying people on the Hill about the human rights abuses that were occurring in Panama and that his brother had been murdered. As you can imagine, it became quite an international incident and tons of journalists flocked to Panama to find out what was going on and who was this Hugo Spadafora, why was he murdered, and who did it.

Q: And you were-

JOHNSON: And I was the press officer.

Q: Press officer, right.

JOHNSON: Basically, from that day until I left it was non-stop crazy. There were all kinds of events with people coming and going and all kinds of journalists coming through. Some journalists were seasoned foreign correspondents, understood the nuances of the situation, and how to manage their way through the complex politics and political landscape. Others were reporters on city desks that hadn't done foreign work before so, trying to help them understand local ways was challenging at times. I quickly learned

who was reliable and who was a bit strange or who needed help or was totally unreliable. And it was quite an interesting adventure.

At the time, when I first got there Sigrid Maitrejean was the public affairs officer (PAO). I can't remember when she rotated out, but when she left, the gentleman who had been the cultural affairs officer (CAO), Terrence Kneebone, became PAO.

Q: Maybe you can explain that for researchers who might be listening to this interview in years to come, what was the structure of the office?

JOHNSON: The office structure? This was a much larger office than the one I had been in over in Benin. We had a public affairs officer, an information officer (IO), which was yours truly, Mr. Kneebone was the cultural affairs officer, and we had junior officer trainees come in at one point, so these people would have been like I had been as a first-tour officer in Abidjan. We had the equivalent structure. The people who came in as trainees were assistant cultural affairs officers. We had a library and we were in a round building (Edificio Gusromares), which was interesting; the library was on the first floor and our offices were on the second floor. And let's see, who else? We had lots of locally engaged staff, lots of Foreign Service National Employees, as they were called back then. They were either Panamanians, or individuals of other nationalities who were hired locally.

Q: So, who would have been in charge? Were you in charge here or was there somebody above you?

JOHNSON: No, no, no, the public affairs officer was in charge. The cultural affairs officer was a higher ranked officer, so when the PAO wasn't there the CAO was the acting public affairs officer and then I was third on the totem pole, which was fine with me.

Q: But with divided portfolios.

JOHNSON: Yes, because I did media relations and he did all the cultural and academic work. Of course, we collaborated because my team did the PR (public relations) for the cultural programs and things of that nature. That was basically the configuration.

Panama was interesting because at that time Southern Command was located in a place called Quarry Heights near Panama City. It was in what was still the Canal Area, which had not yet reverted to the Panamanian government, so I guess you could call it The Canal Zone, but already there were reverted areas that had passed from Americans to the Panamanians and there were still military bases in the country. At the time, there was Fort Kobbe, Howard Air Force Base, and Rodman Naval Station on the other side of the Bridge of the Americas in another part of Panama City. And there was Fort Clayton and Quarry Heights on the same side of the isthmus as the Embassy. Fort Clayton was an army base and Quarry Heights was where Southern Command had all of its offices. It seems to me that everything on the Colon side, which would have been the

Atlantic/Caribbean side of Panama, had been reverted to the Panamanians already. Fort Amador on the Pacific side, which is the Panama City side, I think that was also held by the U.S. until 1999. The railroad had already been turned over to the Panamanians. So, there had already been transfers. By 1985, there was quite a bit that had been reverted. Everything eventually reverted to the Panamanians I guess, what was it, in 2000. I can't remember the year now. But at any rate, at that point there were still areas that were controlled by the Americans. In addition to being responsible for coordinating media relations for the embassy, we also worked with the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID). I think it was a regional office, but there were some USAID programs in Panama as well. We also had to coordinate media relations with Southern Command, so I got to know the people in the public affairs office at Southern Command as well and worked closely with them.

Q: Was there a sense that the transfer of the canal was going well, were the Panamanians stepping right up and doing a good job? Or were there lots of complaints that things were not operating properly under the new management?

JOHNSON: You always have folks who complain, saying things are not being managed properly. And there were problems with the railroad because years later, after I left, the Panama Canal Railway Company was taken over by two private companies (Kansas City Southern and Mi-Jack Products). But at that time, the railroad was part of the Panamanian government-run infrastructure and there were some problems in terms of maintenance and safety. By the time I left, embassy management was telling us we shouldn't ride on it because of the safety concerns. It was such a beautiful ride, taking that train from Colon to Panama City or vice versa, because it ran right along the edge of the canal. It was a beautiful ride. I always felt it was a great touristy kind of thing to do, and I think early on, when friends visited, we would go over to Colon that way and then my uncle would meet us at the train station and we'd go back to Panama City by bus, which was much less interesting.

Q: So, you still had relatives in Panama?

JOHNSON: Yes. I had an aunt and uncle who lived in the outskirts of Colon City, which is on the Atlantic coast. Before it was Colon it was called Aspinwall and it was set up in a grid, so it was very logical and well laid out. My parents, when they came to visit me, told me there was a hotel there, I think it was the Washington Hotel, and that when they were living there it was off-limits to people of color, they couldn't go in. That crazy Jim Crow stuff going on there as well!

Q: In Panama or in the Canal Zone or both?

JOHNSON: Yes, in the Canal Zone, but it filtered out to the surrounding areas. The restrictions were not characterized as black and white but rather gold and silver designations. The gold payroll was made up of engineers and professionals, so mostly white Americans. The silver payroll was for the laborers, which ended up being the Panamanians and the West Indian laborers who had come over—people of color. There

were gold and silver water fountains, gold and silver bathrooms, and gold and silver commissaries. I remember my grandmother bitterly complaining that after a long day of working in someone's house on the Zone, she would go to the commissary and would be standing in line, but if they ran out of something at the gold commissary, the ladies from the gold commissary would come to the silver commissary, get what they wanted and go to the head of the line and you better not complain. So, there were many Panamanians who had very negative memories of life on the Canal Zone under that gold and silver regime. You could well imagine how that influenced attitudes toward the U.S. years later.

Q: And when you arrived, was that racism still a problem?

JOHNSON: No. The Silver & Gold System didn't exist anymore. That disappeared long before I got there. But the vestiges of it have persisted. But a lot had changed. I think part of the reason why Omar Torrijos was so popular was because he railed against those kinds of things. The only other person that my Grandmother Myrtle resented more than the people who instituted that very unfair system, was that of former President Arnulfo Arias. He was a Nazi sympathizer and was not very nice to the West Indians. She had nothing nice to say about him and his supporters. I found it really ironic years later when I went back that in the opposition there were people of color supporting Arnulfo Arias' party. Life is so full of ironies.

Q: Well, Cynthia, I've kept you talking now for just about two hours, so this might be a good place to call it a day. And rather than start peppering you with questions about Panama we can do that next time.

JOHNSON: And then that way I can read through my EERs (performance evaluations) and also see if there's anything noteworthy.

Q: Yes. Okay, well, that's great. So, I will now end this session.

Q: Today is July 11, 2018, and this is Peter Eicher continuing the oral history of Cynthia Farrell Johnson.

Cynthia, hello, and I think where we left off last time you had just left Ivory Coast and were going back to the U.S. for some training orientation before your new assignment in Panama.

JOHNSON: I left Benin because it was-

Q: Oh, I'm sorry.

JOHNSON: That's okay. It was Ivory Coast, Benin and then back to Washington for some language training. And because they wanted me out there quickly, rather than go to

FSI they sent me to one of the language schools for one-on-one quick immersion Spanish study.

Q: Right. I remember you talking about it. And just to get it in right at the beginning, can you tell us about what year and about what month this was?

JOHNSON: This would have been, oh goodness gracious, when I left Benin, it was January of 1985. And I had home leave, so it would have been some time in the spring. I don't remember which month but-

Q: That's close enough.

JOHNSON: Yes. It was spring of '85 because I arrived in, must have been the first, on the first or second of July in Panama, which was interesting because, of course, there were the Fourth of July celebrations at the ambassador's residence and I was meeting all these people and processing all this chatter in Spanish. I had to change gears and get my head into Spanish mode. People spoke very quickly and used all kinds of idiomatic expressions or as they call them, "*modismos*" unique to Panama. I had a huge headache after the first reception. But the senior press section Foreign Service National Employee, Judith Salazar de DeLeon, was wonderful, a true lifesaver. I would look at her and she would explain or translate or just get me through some of these exchanges if I looked totally mystified. As I introduced myself, I always told people even if they spoke English to please speak to me in Spanish so that I could really get up to snuff quickly because it was essential. That was an important thing to do because so many people in Panama were bilingual. Many of the descendants of the West Indians who came over to work in the former Canal Zone were totally bilingual in English and Spanish. I would tell them to please speak to me in Spanish so that I can improve my Spanish, and if I look like I'm totally clueless then you can explain it to me in English. Folks were great. I think some people appreciated that because it meant that I was truly interested in immersing myself in everything and understanding as quickly as I could what the lay of the land was and how people communicated. That was my baptism by fire, two or three days after arrival, doing the Fourth of July with a cast of thousands at the Ambassador's residence.

Q: You have the- at least an outsider like me might have the feeling that in Panama English was almost an official language or a second official language.

JOHNSON: Kind of-sort of, because everything at the Panama Canal Company was done in both languages. And actually, it was interesting because most folks know that the French started the big dig and they wanted to do sea level. But it wasn't until after Ferdinand de Lesseps' company went bankrupt that they had other engineers, the American engineers, come in to figure out that no, we were going to have to do water elevators because sea level wasn't possible with the mountains. Sometimes the canal literature for tourists was the three languages, French, Spanish and English, and when we would go on the tours and things like that it would also be multilingual. It was truly a crossroads, and of course, there were many Asians and South Asians who had also migrated to Panama. Everybody ended up there; Middle Eastern immigrants were also

present. There was a large Arab population, especially in the free zone on the Colón side—many of them had businesses in the Colón Free Zone.

Q: And this was all related to the canal?

JOHNSON: Yes. In a way, since they were involved in shipping and receiving and redistribution in the region.

Q: And at that time, it was still the American Canal Zone?

JOHNSON: Yes. There were still parts that were considered American territory. They had already started reverting some installations. They called it "*areas revertidas*" or the reverted areas. There were lots of areas that had been turned over to the Panamanian government, especially on the Colón side, and that was sometimes a source of controversy because there were some people who were very critical of the Panamanian government for not doing more with the reverted areas. They felt like more could have been done to benefit the average citizen. The railroad, for example, had been turned over to the Panamanians, and it had a lot of maintenance issues. In fact, before I left, the embassy had put out a warning to Americans not to use the rails anymore because they said it was unsafe, which was unfortunate because it's a beautiful ride right along the edge of the canal from the Pacific side to the Atlantic side, and there were beautiful views of the canal and of Gatun Lake and other places that you won't see from the road. Toward the end of my time there that was often cited by the opposition as an example of the country being unprepared to take over the canal and it was also a complaint of those in the United States who were not in favor of the treaty. The critics would say, "Look what they did, they trashed the railroad; how can you expect them to take care of the canal?" There was a lot of brouhaha over that. There was still the Canal Zone, but the U.S. had turned over quite a bit of territory and the march toward treaty implementation in the year 2000 continued. There were so many statements made by Panamanians that ended with "in the year 2000," because there were all these preparations and aspirations for what would happen at that point in time.

It was an interesting time to be there because there were all kinds of back and forth, and because the zone had been a physical division of the country. I remember one Panamanian describing it saying that it was like having the Berlin Wall in the middle of their country. I had been to Germany and I had been on both sides of the Berlin Wall, so I totally understood not just the physical barrier, but also the psychological and emotional issues that went along with that kind of a division in a country. So, yes, I understood.

Q: Was it set up in a way that Panamanians could not really travel in and out of the Canal Zone?

JOHNSON: They could cross the Bridge of the Americas to go to the interior of the country. Again, because a lot of that area was already reverted to the Panamanians, I didn't experience Panama the same way those who grew up there had experienced it. But one of the sore points, at that moment, was the U.S. effort to negotiate a mutual legal

assistance treaty, an MLAT, with Panama, and there was resistance. I remember sitting in a meeting with, I guess it was the economic counselor, who was complaining that it was so difficult to convince the Panamanians that having this mutual legal assistance treaty would allow them to prosecute baddies and have extraditions from the U.S. and things like that, because it would be mutual. Catching folks who they wanted to prosecute or protections that they wanted for themselves in agreement with the U.S. were part of the deal. It would benefit Panama and it would benefit the U.S. because the Feds could go after people who were, I guess, tax dodgers or folks who had engaged in other kinds of bad behavior and were using Panama to hide out or cover their tracks.

There was all this back and forth and then finally I said, "Well, you have to remember that there's a lot of sensitivity here about anything having to do with law and law enforcement, because Panamanians who committed any kind of infraction in the Canal Zone were dealt with using American legal systems, and they felt that their sovereignty was ignored. They felt that Panamanians were not treated fairly under the American legal system in the Canal Zone." I reminded them that there was a lot of resentment of a foreign legal system being imposed on them, and there was concern that if there was a mutual legal assistance treaty that somehow the U.S. legal system would begin to encroach, overwhelm or take over; I'm not quite sure what, but there was suspicion because there was no trust. There was resentment because of the historical relationship and how badly some people felt that they had been treated in the past. I also reminded my colleague that on the Canal Zone for a time there was that silver and gold system that was basically a Jim Crow system. So there were resentments and mistrust caused by that kind of thing, too. All of that had to be taken into account, and he had to figure out how to have a discussion where he could really demonstrate the benefits and take into account their concerns. They were eventually able to do that and in the public affairs programs, we had speakers who would come to Panama via a satellite connection, which nowadays is done with Skype. Back then, we had big satellite antennas on the roof and wires and all kinds of carrying on to have these conversations with legal experts in the U.S. explaining why and how a mutual legal assistance treaty would benefit Panama. At some point, I think, they eventually worked it all out. But that was an example of how something that on the face of it seemed simple and in both country's interest, but if you didn't take into account the history and some of the sensitivities, it could be difficult to achieve the goal. That whole zone issue was an irritant. Another issue was that there had also been a violent confrontation in 1964 when over 20 Panamanian students had died, and that also contributed to the resentments. In short, there was a lot of baggage.

Q: This was even after the agreement to revert the Canal Zone, there were still bad feelings? Or was it getting better at the time you were there, the process was going forward?

JOHNSON: It was improving as the process went forward, but those feelings were still there, and there was still wariness, I believe, just based on some of the comments that people would make; they weren't really sure. When the people in the U.S. who had opposed the treaty started raising issues and being critical, there were some Panamanians who said well, you know, there's a treaty but these Americans may find a way to wiggle

out of it. The Panamanians believed this because of the trust issues and some of the experiences they had had in the past.

Q: Now, the embassy, of course, was in Panama City, not in the Canal Zone?

JOHNSON: Yes, it was in Panama City.

Q: Was it like a separate governor or something in the Canal Zone?

JOHNSON: In the Canal Zone you had the Panama Canal Company and its infrastructure, but then you also had an army hospital and American military bases. The bases were fenced in and off-limits to Panamanians and you had to have I.D. and other things to access those areas. So, yes, there were areas that had been reverted, but there were still areas that were restricted. But little by little things were being turned over. But at the time I got there in 1985, the U.S. Air Force still had Albrook Air Force Base and the U.S. Army still had Fort Clayton. And then there was Gorgas Army Hospital and the Southern Command headquartered in Quarry Heights. So, there were those three military installations, and there were some others that I'm not remembering now because it's been a while. It seems to me that the Air Force had Howard Air Base next to the Rodman naval facility on the other side of the Bridge of the Americas. There were several military installations in the Panama City area, plus the Canal Company's territory or area as well.

I'm trying to think, on the Colón side, there had been a hospital, Coco Solo Hospital and a naval base, and there had been Rainbow City. My father was born in a place called Camp Bierd. His family later moved to Silver City. I think it eventually morphed into Rainbow City (but it is now simply called Arco Iris, rainbow in Spanish). I think all of the Colón installations were reverted and turned over to the Panamanians by the time I got there in 1985. When I was there it was mostly on the Pacific side, on the Panama City side, that there were still major military installations plus the canal—what was left of the Canal Zone, the canal company's area.

Q: Right. So, that's the context, but as far as this affected your job, you were dealing with the Panamanians, or were you also trying to build programs and relations between the Canal Zone and the Panamanians?

JOHNSON: The Canal Company had its own public affairs people, but obviously we coordinated things with them, and we coordinated with Southern Command and with the public affairs officer at Fort Clayton. There was a lot of coordination that had to go on. They would let us know when things were going to be happening that we needed to be aware of that would maybe attract the media. Since I was the information officer doing all the media stuff, the press releases and coordinating press opportunities, things like that, I needed to be in the loop. We, in turn, also tried to keep them abreast of what we were doing and get their input if there was something that we thought might affect them

and what they were doing. All the different public affairs units had to work together; we were good friends, and we got to know each other very well.

Q: So, you got a new experience in dealing with the military?

JOHNSON: Yes, yes, definitely, definitely. And there were all kinds of rules as to where they could go and how they could dress if they were coming into town. It was very complicated. A lot of times it was easier for us to just hop in the car and go up to the military base or go over to Southern Command. As for the Canal Company, we also worked closely with them on things that we knew they would be interested in and sometimes we did joint programs and activities. It just depended on what was going on and what the needs were.

Q: So, let's move the focus now to your job and what you were doing and how your job fit into the embassy structure and into the USIA structure in Panama. You were the information officer; was that the top position?

JOHNSON: Oh, no, no.

Q: Okay, well, tell us.

JOHNSON: There was the public affairs officer, who was in charge of everything relating to media, culture, academic exchanges and the like. There was a cultural affairs officer, and the cultural affairs officer had an assistant. The assistant was usually a person who was new to the Foreign Service. They were often referred to as a junior officer. So, let's see, there were- PAO, IO, CAO, ACAO; I'm going to say that sometimes there were five Americans because there'd be a junior officer and an ACAO for exchanges. It just depended. Sometimes it would be just four, and then other times there'd be five of us. But the public affairs officer was in charge, and as information officer, I was an embassy press spokesperson, but obviously the public affairs officer was also a spokesperson for the embassy. It just depended on what was going on and who was available, or what the crisis of the day happened to be. Sometimes it was the ambassador who was the only one who wanted to make public statements and we just supplied context and background, things like that. So, it would vary.

Q: Do you remember who the ambassador was at the time?

JOHNSON: Ambassador Briggs, Ted Briggs. But that wasn't his real name. It was Everett Ellis Brings and I later learned that he was the son of a diplomat.

Q: Was he a career person?

JOHNSON: He was a career ambassador. And he was there, I believe, for the first couple of years, and when he left a political appointee was named, Arthur H. Davis. Ambassador Davis had made his fortune as a commercial developer in Colorado. He had first served

as ambassador in Paraguay, and that was a tragic experience for him because his wife was returning from the U.S. in a Lloyd Air Boliviana flight that crashed, and she died.

Q: Oh, no.

JOHNSON: It was really heartbreaking. I cannot remember how long after that he came to Panama, but I would imagine maybe it was a year or so. When Ambassador Davis was in Paraguay, he had been very vocal in his opposition to the then-military dictatorship that was there and had been very committed to human rights and supporting people who were fighting for—not violently fighting—but struggling for a democracy so that everybody's voice could be heard and officials could be freely elected. He supported those who wanted the government to be run by and for the people, not run by the military. He had supported efforts for peaceful change and respect for human rights and that kind of thing in Paraguay, so perhaps that's why he was subsequently tapped to come to Panama. It seemed he was sent there to bolster those struggling for representation and a voice because it was during the time when the situation was not going well and there were concerns about human rights. General Noriega was running everything and was not playing nice, shall we say.

Q: So, Noriega was the president while you were there?

JOHNSON: He was the head of the military. When I arrived, who was president? It was Nicolas Ardito Barletta, but he only lasted until September of 1985. Eric Arturo Del Valle replaced President Barletta soon after my arrival. Basically Noriega was the de facto president; he put in whomever he wanted as president and if the person didn't do as he instructed they got sacked.

Q: Oh, so he was the real power-

JOHNSON: He was the power.

Q: Okay.

JOHNSON: There was a president, but the president served at the pleasure of the general. And because of that, I think perhaps maybe that's why folks in Washington decided to send Ambassador Davis to replace Ambassador Briggs when Ambassador Briggs rotated out after he had been there for three years.

When I got there in July, things were not the greatest. And I think the last time we met we talked a little bit about some of the upheaval. I got there in July and then in September, one of General Noriega's critics was murdered. His name was Hugo Spadafora, and his decapitated body was found near the Costa Rican border. To this day no one knows what happened to his head. It was horrible. Panamanians were just beside themselves because that kind of thing just didn't happen there. They had had traditions of arguing and fighting and coups and all kinds of things, but that kind of brutality had not been part of the mix, so that caused a lot of problems and unhappiness. The Spadafora

family, as I recall, was fairly prominent. Hugo Spadafora, a medical doctor by profession, was described as a romantic revolutionary who had fought alongside or supported General Omar Torrijos in his overthrow of the elected government. General Torrijos subsequently took over the Panamanian government, and then Hugo Spadafora went off to fight in other conflicts in Central America and Africa, I believe, in Nicaragua and Angola. Again, I'd have to look it all up because it's been so long. But that was his reputation. He was a handsome, charismatic, romantic revolutionary. The opposition was always insulting General Noriega; they called him *cara de piña*, "pineapple face" because he had a face pockmarked by acne. They made fun of his physical attributes rather than focusing on his bad behavior. As a consequence, there were people who felt that because Hugo Spadafora had been critical of what Noriega was doing and he was viewed as being a more attractive person, both physically and in his idealism, that there was some jealousy. After Hugo Spadafora was murdered, there was an onslaught of journalists from every corner of the globe coming to find out what was going on in Panama, why all this was happening. At the same time, because the Spadafora family was fairly prominent, I believe his brother, Winston, traveled to the U.S. and apparently had some connections with the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. I think he knew Jesse Helms and some of his staffers. He was pressuring the U.S. to do something to help move along an investigation, a serious investigation into what had happened, and he also wanted the U.S. to sanction the Noriega regime for human rights abuses. There was all of this percolating and bubbling up all over the place, and journalists came and wanted to know what was going on in Panama.

Q: That's the American journalists included, of course.

JOHNSON: Yes, American journalists and-

Q: And would they normally come see you as the public affairs officer?

JOHNSON: They would come see the public affairs officer, and I would set up briefings with the economic counselor, the political counselor, and other folks in the embassy, whoever could provide them with both on the record or background briefings, depending on the terms of the discussion. Sometimes the political officer only wanted to do a background briefing, and other times they negotiated quotes and things like that at the end. The public affairs officer and I spent a lot of time orchestrating and scheduling these briefings. Sometimes we took people to the briefers' offices. After a while there were so many folks wanting briefings that we asked the embassy staff to come over to our building and use our conference room because it was impossible to fit all the journalists in the offices in the embassy. In addition to the briefings, we would also try to connect them with Panamanians, other Americans and other individuals, or even other embassies with knowledgeable staff to give them context. There were folks who would come in and maybe they wanted to know about, well, what was going on with the opposition and who should we talk to, so we would give them information on the different organizations and who the spokespeople were. If they read a newspaper, if they could read Spanish, they could figure out whom to interview on their own. Unfortunately, some were not bilingual and that was challenging. Those who could read newspapers, watch TV and listen to the

radio, they could quickly figure out who they needed to talk to, but sometimes there were folks whose language skills were not that good, so we would try to help them and say, well, you should talk to these folks, or you go to this person, or try to access this organization because there are English-speakers there.

Q: That's quite a service.

JOHNSON: Basically what we were trying to do was give them as much information as possible and point them to professors and other folks who could give them context. Some of them would come with the story already written in their heads, and they didn't want to be confused with the facts, but we did our best to try to give them as much useful information as we could. So, yes, that was basically one of the big tasks we had, but it wasn't all crisis all the time. There were other mission goals and objectives and policy issues that we were there to work on. The first year I was there, one of my tasks was to work with some of the local organizations that wanted to address issues of drug abuse and how best to make public service campaigns about the dangers of illicit drugs and this kind of thing based on what our experience in the U.S. had been with some of the PSAs (Public Service Announcements) and things like that. They wanted to know how some of the Stateside organizations intervened and what were the best practices.

Q: And did you know that?

JOHNSON: Some of it I knew from just being aware of it, reading about it, and then other times we would get experts to come down or we would find information with the help of the librarians. This, of course, is the pre-internet days, so I contacted librarians and they did a little bit of research using the tools that were available at the time. We also had this resource called the wireless file. USIA headquarters sometimes would commission articles or would write articles based on requests from the overseas offices or posts. The post would say this is a major issue and we need some information, and then we'd get the articles and distribute them accordingly. We'd also get books. We had a program where there were books that were translated on political, social, cultural, all kinds of issues. We would distribute these books to people who we felt would benefit from having that material. We used the resources of the day to try to provide the information people needed; our librarians were always busy. But we also would try to get speakers to come down or to do those satellite conversations, or even conference phone calls when you couldn't get satellite time. A disembodied voice on the other end of the line would talk to a group of people and field questions, and that worked pretty well, too. So, we used all the different resources that were at our disposal to support local efforts to prevent drug abuse and to support the local groups that were also trying to organize themselves to do that.

One of the other things I remember when I had first arrived was that we organized cultural programs. I guess there must have been a gap and the cultural affairs officer had not yet arrived because there was a lot of turnover that summer. I think the cultural affairs officer and I were arriving around the same time, but I got there first. The previous cultural affairs officer, I believe, had already departed. So, the PAO asked me to meet

with a group of people who ran a jazz organization; they hosted cultural programs and they wanted to meet with someone to talk about collaborating on something because periodically, we would bring performing artists to the country. The leader called up and the PAO gave me the information and said please call them back and arrange a meeting. These two gentlemen come in and I guess they looked at me and I was about, what, 26, 27; I was not yet 30, and they probably figured now, who on earth is this kid and what is she going to do for us. Years later, during the course of a conversation, they said, "We remember the first time we came to see you, we weren't quite sure, he said, who is this young thing, what is she going to do for us?" But they came in and explained that they were trying to put together a jazz festival and wanted to see if perhaps the embassy could bring a performer to Panama since we usually had somebody come each year. They made a pitch for a jazz musician or an artist along those lines. I took notes and we talked about what the possibilities were and what we could and couldn't do, and I don't know how it happened, but as we were talking, I guess we got to talking about relatives in the U.S. and that my parents had been born in Panama. During the course of the conversation, I found out that one of the gentlemen, Bat Gordon, was the uncle of a young lady that I had gone to college with in upstate New York. Paula Lazarus Franklin lived in New York City at the time. Talk about a small world! It was so funny. We ended up having a wonderful relationship with that group. Bat Gordon, a musician himself, played saxophone and the other gentleman who had come with him was Roberto Mariette. Mr. Mariette was vice president at the local Chase Bank, so I think he was the management person in the jazz organization. We became fast friends and we helped them do all kinds of programs. Last year when I went to Panama I went to see Mr. and Mrs. Mariette; they're still there and like all of us, a little bit older; he's retired. It was nice to reconnect and see them again after all these years because they were very active in the country's cultural life. His wife, Jeanne Marie, was a teacher at the Colegio LaSalle, one of the best high schools in Panama City. And again, those odd things in life…my older son ended up going to a Catholic high school from the La Salle tradition here in Washington, D.C. It is funny how all these little things happen in life, these coincidences that occur as we journey through life make it interesting.

Q: You've talked about American journalists coming down; did you deal with Panamanian journalists?

JOHNSON: Oh, yes. I dealt with three groups of journalists; American journalists, foreign journalists, because we had Japanese and European, Spanish, basically people from all over, and then the main audience, the group of people I worked with most frequently, were the Panamanian journalists. We had the usual scandal sheets, we had serious newspapers, and then we had the regime newspapers and media outlets. Lots of variety!

Q: Was it a free press?

JOHNSON: It was a free press alright—freewheeling. There were pressures brought to bear sometimes on journalists who were critical of the regime and cartoonists sometimes had a difficult time. One cartoonist even ended up being jailed. Yes. It was a difficult

time for those who were critics of the regime. And the independent radio and television outlets had to be really careful. Toward the end of my time there, those who survived basically engaged in a degree of self-censorship just, as you can imagine, trying to walk that tightrope between really telling what was going on but not going too far and being hyper critical to the point where they would get shut down. There was this balancing act of trying to be as honest as they could be with the public without getting crosswise with the generals, which is always a delicate and difficult dance. There was a lot of pressure on all media outlets as things got worse.

Q: And would the opposition media ever look to the American embassy as a protector?

JOHNSON: Well, yes, and we tried to work with everybody and have a good relationship with everybody, and also speak out, call people out when something wasn't right to the point where the PAO eventually was declared persona non grata. But because we did not recognize the illegitimate Noriega regime he stayed. That was an unusual experience.

Q: Hang on a second; the PAO was-

JOHNSON: The public affairs officer-

Q: That was you, right?

JOHNSON: No. I was the information officer.

Q: Oh, I'm sorry, okay.

JOHNSON: What happened was when I arrived there, Sigrid Maitrejean was the public affairs officer, and she left, let's see, I think she must have left in '86, and the gentleman who had been the cultural affairs officer—this was really unusual—but because the situation there was so tense and difficult, and he was really good at what he did and knew the country and all the players, USIA headquarters made the decision to promote him, basically, move him up to be the public affairs officer. So, for one year I worked with Sigrid Maitrejean, and then the last few years the PAO was Terry Kneebone, Terrence H. Kneebone. Somewhere along the line in 1988, Terry must have made some public comment that General Noriega didn't like because both of us were giving briefings and he often gave interviews. He must have said something that General Noriega didn't like, so Noriega declared him persona non grata. But that was at the time where the United States Government had decided that the Noriega regime was illegitimate, and that we were not going to have relations with them.

Q: It's an odd situation. Usually we wouldn't have an embassy if we didn't have relations.

JOHNSON: Exactly. It was just the most unusual situation. And one would have to go back and check. Maybe I could look around to see if I can find any articles or anything written about it because it was just crazy! Terry was declared persona non grata, as was

the economic counselor, David Miller, and several other people. Those individuals all got bodyguards 24/7 or whenever they were out and about to make sure that the military didn't grab them and put them on an airplane out the country.

Now, when you're in a country and you're not recognizing the regime, but you still have to do business; I mean, it was just so strange.

Q: Yes. I've never heard of such a thing, and I've been in diplomatic circles for 40 years.

JOHNSON: This was like nothing I had ever experienced nor have I experienced since. But I'm telling you, that's what happened. I don't even know what got us on this. Terry made some statements that they didn't like and they declared him persona non grata, but he stayed and continued to work and do what public affairs officers do, and I continued to do what information officers did. Now, what was interesting is because I was involved in community organizations, the Society of Friends of the West Indian Museum, and—

Q: This was in your personal capacity or your official capacity?

JOHNSON: It was in my personal capacity because I was a child of West Indians who had left Panama. I was curious about that community and got to know people in it and they embraced me. I embraced them and tried to be supportive of their efforts to preserve their history. The group supported a small museum and like all museums everywhere in the world, the government didn't always support it in the way one would hope they would. The museum depends on the kindness of the citizens who care about whatever the museum is trying to preserve. So, they had activities like a festival every year to raise money just for the upkeep of the building. The government did give some funds for the museum, but it didn't always cover everything. The Friends of the West Indian Museum provided paper and office supplies and cleaning supplies, you know, odds and ends and things that the government budget didn't quite cover. Many of the people who were involved with that were supporters of the Noriega government because they felt that the opposition did not care about the people of color and the less advantaged or less wealthy people. They equated many in the opposition with the elites and the well-to-do, what they called the rabbi blancos, the people of European descent who controlled the economy and who had been very powerful in past governments. So there was this tension. But it wasn't like all of the opposition was white and all of the supporters of the PRD party, the government's party, were all Afro-West Indians or people of color. Both sides were mixed, but a lot of the people who were active with this group, the Friends of the West Indian Museum, were connected to folks who had important roles in the Noriega regime. It was a way to have a line of communication and understand the thinking and the attitudes and the concerns of the people who supported the regime and the people who were working in the media that was controlled by the government. I felt that my job was to understand everybody and to have some type of respectful relationship with everybody. I was fortunate in that I was able to do that and able to give feedback to some of the policy makers and decision makers, letting them know that some Panamanians were upset about a particular policy decision for this reason or for that reason. I also had relatives there, so I would go over to the Colón side and spend a weekend with my

relatives and their friends and I'd get an earful about what they thought; some of them supported the opposition and some of them supported the regime. So I was able to get valuable insights from friends and relatives as well as from the usual embassy contacts that you would have in the media and in the university and in professional organizations and things like that.

Part of my job was to expand the circle of contacts so that our office could get a better sense of what was going on in the country. The mantra for most public affairs officers is seek first to understand, because you can't communicate effectively if you don't understand what is important to the people of that country. The process is first you understand what is important to your audience, and when you understand, then you inform, and you advocate. After that, you evaluate; find out whether you really succeeded in communicating your message and changing minds, attitudes, or behaviors. If you didn't, then you try to figure out why you were not successful. It's a constant cycle of seeking to understand what's going on and whether or not what you're trying to advocate is sticking or if what you are saying is alienating people. And then making the necessary adjustments, because what you are always doing is seeking some kind of common ground, trying to find what is it that we agree on and what is it that we're going to eventually agree to disagree on.

Q: Well, tell me about that, because it raises the question trying to get a message across; is this the message of the moment on whatever the public issue of the moment was, or did you have a set of grand strategic objectives that you were constantly trying to influence people on?

JOHNSON: Yes. I mean we were working on both long- and short-term issues. Every year all the embassies go through the exercise of trying to figure out how best to focus resources. The plans we make are based on what Washington says are the policy goals and objectives. We are told what we need to focus on writ large, but then you have to look at what's going on in our country and what makes sense, given the local context.

Q: So, in Panama, would this have been things like promoting democracy and a better relationship with the United States, any of those broad kinds of things? Or-

JOHNSON: Certainly those broad kinds of things. This was also the time when the U.S. had developed the Kissinger Report (https://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007/978-1-349-10364-5_9) that included the Central American Peace Scholarship (CAPS) program. There was an effort to make U.S. education accessible to not just the wealthy but to young people of limited means who showed promise but who maybe didn't speak English. Henry Kissinger led a bipartisan group that traveled to the different Central American countries to evaluate the situation and meet with a variety of groups and people. Remember, in 1985 there were the Contras and all this upheaval in the region. The Kissinger Commission studied this whole situation, and one of their prescriptions was that the U.S. really needed to reach out to young people who might not be the traditional scholarship recipients or Fulbright or exchange students. Based on that, Congress funded CAPS, and it was administered by the U. S. Agency for International

Development (USAID). Given that USIA, and overseas USIS, usually managed academic exchange programs, our office worked in tandem with USAID to help with the testing and the preparation and everything having to do with the CAPS program. It was an exciting time. Young people from the different provinces in Panama were able to compete for these scholarships. I believe they went to the U.S. and first got English language training and then were able to go on and begin their undergraduate studies. Now, as I recall, that program, because it was administered out of USAID, it was vulnerable. Eventually, it seems to me that USAID downsized significantly because of the ongoing tensions. I can't remember the details, but doing business became much more difficult because we were not recognizing the Noriega regime. I had thought the office was shut down at one point.

Q: And we didn't ignore that we- when they tossed them, they were actually tossed?

JOHNSON: I'm trying to remember when or if that occurred. Because I think the decision to not recognize the regime came late in my assignment there. I would have to go back and see if I could figure out a timeline, because I am pretty sure that USAID was hampered in its ability to function normally before I left.
(Note: A subsequent data search did not uncover evidence that the USAID office was shut down in Panama during this time.)

Q: The _____ of the whole context of U.S.-Panamanian relations, which we've talked a little bit about, but to put it in the broader context, you mentioned the contras, and this was during the Reagan Administration and the height of the Cold War; was Panama at the time on the Western side, if there's such a thing, in the Cold War? Was it an ally in that sense and just another unfortunate dictatorship that we were willing to put up with because they were pro-Western rather than pro-Russian?

JOHNSON: Yes, Panama was an ally. And I'm trying to think now, not only was Panama an ally in terms of the whole Central American issue, at the time when I first arrived there, Panama was seen as a partner in the war on drugs and the DEA (Drug Enforcement Administration) was working with the military on interdiction and that kind of thing.

Q: With the Panamanians?

JOHNSON: Yes, the U.S. worked with the Panamanian military on interdiction, as I recall. One of the criticisms from some of the opposition's leaders was that Noriega was heavily involved in the drug trade. They said that he acted as if he were an ally of the DEA. He had received some awards and recognition from DEA for some of the big busts, I guess, or for taking down some networks. The opposition was critical of the U.S. relationship with General Noriega because they said, "You don't understand; he's just playing you guys for fools. He's doing all kinds of other bad stuff on the side and he'll just give up a few just people to make it look like he's helping you but he's not." There were all kinds of accusations being thrown around. In the beginning there was this

working relationship with the Panamanian military, but then that started to change, deteriorate, as the crisis grew and—

Q: Which crisis are you talking about?

JOHNSON: The political crisis in Panama and the crisis in the relationship because of the U.S. criticizing human rights abuses and some other things that had occurred. All of a sudden Panama went from being an ally and cooperating with the U.S. to us not being quite sure what's going on, and then hostility.

Q: It's interesting on the human rights side because this would have been the Reagan Administration when human rights was not really on the front burner of the agenda certainly in Central America.

JOHNSON: Yes. But I think murdering people so blatantly stirred things up. And it was the Panamanian opposition that was arguing that human rights abuses were occurring, and that the U.S. couldn't turn a blind eye to it.

Q: And at this stage the U.S. still had not branded Noriega as a drug kingpin?

JOHNSON: That came later. Maybe I should try to come up with a timeline. I was there for four years, so I really should try to figure out the timeline because when I got there it was one thing, and then after Hugo Spadafora's murder things started to steadily decline in terms of -

Q: And that was right after you got there, a few months after you got there, yes.

JOHNSON: Yes. So, it was a downward spiral and it just kept getting worse and worse in terms of the tensions.

Q: Yes. You mentioned it was a four-year assignment; was it two and two, two years and two years, or was it four years from the start?

JOHNSON: It was four years from the start because with USIA, normally the assignments were three or four years. You only got a two-year assignment if it was considered a greater hardship post, a difficult post, but the average assignment was three years, and then for a non-hardship post it was four years.

Q: And Panama was-

JOHNSON: Panama at the time was a non-hardship post. Four years is, I think, a good amount of time, because you spend the first year trying to figure out which end is up, polishing up your language skills, getting to know people, and understanding the people. Then the second year you get a little bit better at knowing who's who and what's what. By the third and fourth year I think you can really be even more effective because the third year you're hitting your stride and then the fourth year you're getting ready to move

on because you have to start bidding and looking for other things and you start to check out. That does not mean that you didn't do your job during that last year, but you have one foot there and you're trying to figure out where you're going next. Or if you already have your assignment then the place where you're supposed to go is telling you that you have to be there yesterday and you can't do training and this, that and the other. So, the last year is never as productive as one would like. Those two middle years, the second and third years, you get a lot accomplished, and then the last year you start to wind down and prepare for your successor, hopefully to be able to pass on some knowledge and history, context, things that help them transition into the job effectively.

Q: So, if you had a declining relationship between the United States and Panama over most of the four years you were there, how did that affect your work?

JOHNSON: That declining relationship made every year's work a little more complicated and challenging. I was just looking at some of my evaluations and remembering that time. It reminded me that by the time the last year rolled around there were days when we took turns sleeping in the office because we were getting phone calls and doing interviews with journalists from Australia and New Zealand and other places. For us it was the middle of the night and whatever we needed in terms of reference material would be in the office. So it was better to stay in the office and take the call there in case we needed to look something up. It was easier than trying to take a bunch of files home. It was almost like a 24/7 duty cycle taking turns providing the media with material.

Q: Kind of a crisis atmosphere?

JOHNSON: Yes, it was. It was crazy.

Q: And why would you be getting calls from Australia?

JOHNSON: Because they wanted to know when we were going to invade.

Q: Okay.

JOHNSON: The tensions kept ratcheting up and there always seemed to be some incident that made the news and so, increasingly we got more incoming calls from all over the globe asking what's going on in Panama. CNN had people down there, so there were endless inquiries. Ed Bradley came down and did a "60 Minutes" piece. I mean everybody was coming through!

Q: When somebody like "60 Minutes" came down did they rely on the Embassy at all?

JOHNSON: Well, they were pretty self-sufficient, but yes, we would brief them and I did go over and talk with Ed Bradley; he had some questions and I think we gave him the names of people who had expertise on what he was trying to find out. It got to the point where we had little forms that we filled out so we knew who we had talked to and what we had suggested, just to not only keep straight who had come through, but to be

consistent. We didn't want to play favorites either, and we wanted to remember what we had done and who we had helped, as well as how we had helped them, so that if they needed a follow-up we knew what we did and we could say oh, then you need to see so-and-so or you need to call thus and such a person. It got really complicated and we had to try to keep some decent records just so that we knew which journalist we had talked to and what we had recommended. It was quite an adventure!

Q: Forms and records, let me digress for a moment on that. This was before significant computer systems at embassies.

JOHNSON: Yes, they were installing and just beginning to use computers in the offices. Although we did have computers, you couldn't do the kind of sophisticated things that one can do now. We were feeling our way through, trying to figure out how to keep records on local contacts. We had a distribution record system called DRS, where we entered someone's information and what kinds of material they were interested in so that we could consistently send them what they wanted and not send them stuff that they had no interest in. All those kinds of databases were just beginning to become established electronically, but we were still using forms and paper for certain functions because it was just easier.

Q: And just word processors, I suppose, not computers at the desks. The Wang machines maybe?

JOHNSON: Oh, gosh, yes, Wangs.

Q: Still in '85.

JOHNSON: Yes, we were still using those kinds of computers. In 1980, when I went out to my first assignment, we were using Wangs. They were just coming into State Department and to USIA, although in Benin we still were using typewriters a lot because we didn't have many computers. There was more hardware and computer support in Panama, but still it was the early days. Fax was the thing. We figured out how to use that more during my time in Panama. When we had a reduction in force and lost one of our drivers who had done distributions, that was when faxes were starting up, so we were able to do some distribution via fax, which saved us because we couldn't send people out the way we had in the past. Only certain things ended up being sent out to be hand

delivered. Increasingly, things were sent out via fax. That also meant we ended up getting tons of incoming fax messages.

Q: Well, reduction in force brings us back to the deteriorating political situation. What happened that made us reduce in force?

JOHNSON: Oh, gosh. I honestly can't recall.

Q: And how did you manage to avoid being reduced?

JOHNSON: You know, I honestly can't remember. We were always subject to budget cuts because the government was said to be too big. It seemed like every year we had to cut the budget and cut the number of people on staff. State Department wasn't immune and USIA certainly wasn't immune.

Q: So, it was reduction in force in some of a budgetary _____ than a political _____.

JOHNSON: It was not only a political decision; it was one of these budget exercises from Washington that said you had too many people based on whatever formula they'd come up with, and so out the door went a certain number of people and we stopped doing certain types of activities because you can't do more with less, I don't care what they say. We began to use the technology to try to make up for the lost staff; we had to try to do as much as we could with fewer people in the midst of a lot of uncertainty. By the time they had the Panamanian elections in May of 1989 and things did not go well, that's when there was a reduction in embassy personnel because of the political situation and concerns about security.

Q: What do you mean, things did not go well?

JOHNSON: Things did not go well because of a number of issues. Jimmy Carter and a Carter Center delegation came down as elections observers. In the run up to the election there had been violence, and in fact, one of the bodyguards who had been assigned to guard the public affairs officer also worked as a bodyguard for one of the presidential candidates, Guillermo "Billy" Ford. Unfortunately, the young man was killed in an attack orchestrated by regime supporters. I regret that I cannot remember his name. The following week, there was a picture on the cover of ***Time*** magazine of that presidential candidate, Guillermo Ford, showing his shirt covered in blood but it's actually not his blood, it was the blood of the bodyguard who took the bullet for him. It was awful. It was awful.

Q: Jimmy Carter, was he pretty popular having negotiated the reversion of the canal?

JOHNSON: He was. Jimmy Carter led the delegation and he declared that the election was flawed and there was evidence of vote tampering and other bad behavior. The election couldn't be declared a free and fair election. After that, things really got bad, and

then the United States Government decided to draw down the presence of Americans in the embassy. So, I was considered a non-essential person and was sent home.

Q: But this was '89; it was pretty close to the end of your tour already.

JOHNSON: Yes. I was supposed to leave in July of '89, so I left a few months earlier, in May of '89. I missed all my farewell parties.

Q: Oh, sad. But I think we're getting ahead of ourselves. There's got to be more Panama stories. Let me ask you about visits; did you have a lot of prominent Americans _____ at the embassy?

JOHNSON: Yes, we had CODELs (Congressional Delegations).

Q: How were you involved in that?

JOHNSON: We had CODELs all the time, so yes. I was involved because we would have to do the media relations and press opportunities or try to control the crazy number of people in the domestic and international press corps and mobs of folks wanting to interview any American visitor. It was news and they were doing their jobs, and we were trying to help them do their job, but also maintain some level of order. Oftentimes we would set up the press conferences where folks would come into the embassy or come into the USIS library or wherever it was decided the media opportunity would take place. Sometimes it was on the steps of a building coming out of a meeting. My boss, the public affairs officer, oftentimes was more involved with that and I would be working with our staff behind the scenes to set things up and make sure the microphones worked and things like that. He'd be out in front guiding and advising and doing things like that. But we also tried to help whoever needed assistance in terms of the Panamanian media who also needed access, because the other thing that happened was because we had all these international journalists and American media coming down, sometimes that crowded out the Panamanian media representatives that also wanted access. We were always trying to make sure everybody who needed to hear and be present could participate. Sometimes it got really crazy, as you can well imagine, because everybody wants what they want and they all want it yesterday.

Q: Of course. And the CODELs, I presume, going to a place like Panama they would tend to be pretty serious CODELs rather than touristic ones.

JOHNSON: Yes, although sometimes they had accompanying family members who wanted to go to a museum or visit the Miraflores locks Panama Canal visitor center. We could arrange that easily because we had a great relationship with the visitor center staff. Those were popular stops. And of course there were those who needed to go shopping.

And in the midst of all of this—I can't remember what year it was—Panama hosted the Miss Universe pageant.

Q: Ah, okay.

JOHNSON: Now I'm really going to have to go back and look and see what year that was, because that was also a wild time.

Q: That would bring in a lot of media for something very different from-

JOHNSON: Yes. I have to make a note to look up when Miss Universe was in Panama. (A subsequent check indicated that it occurred in July 1986)

Q: Were you actually involved in that?

JOHNSON: Oh, yes.

Q: Really? How would the embassy information officer be drawn into Miss Universe?

JOHNSON: Facilitative assistance. Since an American group was there, you know, when Americans come into the country we often get involved. Sometimes they need assistance with something. The group contacted the embassy ahead of time, and I think the Community Liaison Officer arranged for some of the embassy spouses to be chaperones for some of the young women in the U.S. contingent. We were involved in some way, shape or form. It was a big deal, and we were involved helping out with a variety of tasks. As it turned out, Cote d'Ivoire had a contestant and the gentleman who was in charge of that delegation was someone I had known when I served in Cote d'Ivoire, so that was fun getting to hear the latest news from Abidjan.

Q: Did we win the competition?

JOHNSON: Heavens no. It was Miss Venezuela. Don't they always win? I don't remember her name. But she was from Venezuela. (Note: It was Barbara Palacios.)

Q: Well, that must have been a fun diversion compared to the usual kind of thing you did.

JOHNSON: It was. Yes. There were fun times. It wasn't all sturm and drang. There were some really interesting visitors who would come through and activities that took place,

but it was a stressful political situation. The problems seemed at some point to suck all the air out of a room, and that was all that we dealt with after a while.

Q: Do any of the visitors particularly stick in your mind other than the several you've mentioned already?

JOHNSON: No. It was just so many people.

Q: The congressional delegations especially tend to kind of blend together in your mind as you go through different countries and different years.

JOHNSON: Yes. It's all a blur. The people who stick in my mind were some of the journalists who were very good and some who were very bad. And I don't remember all their names.

Q: American journalists?

JOHNSON: Yes. Some of them were really a joy to work with because they were competent and smart and interesting people, who didn't come with the story already written. They really wanted to know what was going on and wanted to fan out across the city and country in search of the truth. Just the other day I was talking to someone, I was trying to remember, there was a gentleman from ***The Miami Herald***. Again, I need to look that one up, too. He was so good. He traveled all over Panama when things were relatively calm and collected phone numbers from store owners and people in different parts of the country so that when he went back to Miami, if something happened, he could call around. He had a network of people he'd talk to, asking, for example, "okay, so what's going on in Los Santos, what's going on in Las Tablas, what's going on in San Miguelito." He did his homework and he set up a network of people that he could trust who weren't going to make things up but who were really going to give him the real deal. And I said yes, that's great thinking ahead! (Note: I believe it was Sam Dillon.)

Q: You've got to admire that.

JOHNSON: Yes. And then there were others whose names I do remember, like William Brannigan from, I think he was with ***The Washington Post***. He was really serious, conscientious, hardworking, and got out and talked to people. And Andrés Oppenheimer, who is still with ***The Miami Herald*** and he came through often. We got to know people, and they were all interesting. James LeMoyne used to be with ***The New York Times*** was another person who stood out. As did Julia Preston of ***The New York Times*** and Carla Robbins of ***U.S. News and World Report***; they were also regulars who impressed me with their tenacity and good humor. These were folks who really worked hard and went out and talked to a lot of different people. They weren't just taking it from one or two people. I think one of the most hilarious visitors we had in terms of media, was P.J. O'Rourke, who eventually wrote a book entitled, **Holidays in Hell**. I think he used to write for ***National Lampoon***. He wrote an article about Panama in his usual manner. I guess nowadays they'd call it snarky, but it was humorous. You know the saying, many a

truth is said in jest; it was fact-based, he didn't make stuff up, but he observed the absurdity of certain things. A lot of people were mad at him after his article came out because he was somewhat critical. I mean, he was an equal opportunity criticizer; he just pointed out things that from his point of view didn't make sense.

Q: Did you have to deal with criticism of the embassy?

JOHNSON: Oh, yes, all the time. I even got called the disinformer.

Q: Oh, really?

JOHNSON: Yes, because the Panamanian government-controlled media didn't like some of the press releases that came out of the embassy. But you know, it goes with the territory.

Q: Okay. Can be a badge of honor sometimes.

JOHNSON: Yes, yes. But I think most folks felt that I was always willing to give people a fair hearing and I shared information with anyone who needed it and even if they didn't want it I'd offer it to them and they could decide whether they wanted to take the press release or the interview or briefing opportunity or not. I tried to make sure we were inclusive and we didn't play favorites.

Q: You mentioned, I think before we turned on the tape, that you had some teaching moments we might call them that came out of your time in Panama. Do you want to talk about those?

JOHNSON: Well, one of the things that made it such an interesting assignment was that there were a lot of different offices, a lot of different agencies and organizations that our office had to work with. So, in the earliest of days I found it really useful to go and talk to people in the different offices and find out what their main goals were and what was most important for them, to see what we in our office could do to be supportive of their efforts.

Q: That's a good approach.

JOHNSON: It was one of these things where sometimes we could be helpful to them, sometimes there was not a whole lot we could do for them. But at least we had a good understanding of what their needs were and they knew what we could bring to the table in the event that they needed our media services. It was also important to let them know about some of the cultural activities that we helped promote. We were always looking for ways to include more of our colleagues in our activities. One of the things that I learned from that is the importance of reaching out, not just to the host country nationals that you're working with, but really getting to know your colleagues within the embassy community as well as other American communities in the country, whether it's the Panama Canal staff or the military or even the business community- the American Chamber of Commerce. Just get out and get to know people and understand what's going

on. Befriending the business community can be especially important; sometimes they are willing to help underwrite some of the cultural programs because it's in their interest as well to be involved in community activities. Bottom line—get out of the office as often as possible.

Q: Paid dividends over the years.

JOHNSON: Yes, yes. And then, there is another thing—representational events. At the time, the representational budget for USIS was separate from State. Now that we're in State, I am not sure if it has been put together in one budget or if public diplomacy representation is still separate. I have no idea what the situation is now. But at that time, because we had so many cultural events and other types of events where we needed to serve refreshments or do meals, we had a healthy budget. What I ended up doing a lot was when we had events I didn't only invite folks from my immediate office, like the Panamanian staff and folks within the U.S. Information Service universe, I would invite some of my colleagues from other offices in the embassy if I thought one of the Political Officers should get to know our guests. Or I would invite my colleague in USAID if I thought the person should get to know these contacts. Sharing was important, you know, bringing in people who I thought might have something in common, either personally or professionally or both. Having an interesting mix of people at a meal was important because you never know where those connections might lead.

Q: Building a team in the embassy is so important, whether it's- some people have more of a competitive spirit, which isn't always helpful for advancing U.S. policy.

JOHNSON: Exactly. It should be about sharing and including people. Again, back to that word, inclusion, trying to bring everybody to the table that might have an interest at some level.

In that same vein, I think the human factor is such an important piece that gets short shrift because so many times folks want statistical data—how much of this did you do, how many press releases did you send out, how many phone calls did you field or briefings did you do? So much of the work of public diplomacy is about building and maintaining relationships. I would say so much of diplomacy is about building and maintaining relationships. These aren't things that you can just turn on and off. My practice always was: I'm going to go visit people and get to know them when I don't necessarily want anything from them. I just want to understand who they are, what they do. I was told that this person is important in the university, maybe they're a key person in the journalism school and I should get to know them. So, just make an appointment and go meet this person and you start talking and you find out where your common ground is and all that good stuff. Maybe down the line you come across a book that you know would interest the person. Perhaps you talked about the subject or you know this person would be interested in it and you send it to them. You build a relationship so that down the line if you need that person's help, you're not cold calling someone that you have never talked to before. Rather, you're asking for assistance from someone that you have a relationship with and who understands you and you understand that person. Sometimes lasting

friendships can come out of that too, and it makes an assignment so much more interesting and rewarding.

Q: Well, it does. And I think you're absolutely right, it's a good point; I used to sometimes tell junior staff at embassies that you're only as good as your contacts so get out there and meet people, don't sit behind your desk.

JOHNSON: Unfortunately, I feel that our technology has made that harder when supposedly these were tools to make our work easier. I found that as email became more prevalent it was like we were always tied to our desks. Now, of course, with Blackberries, iPads, and iPhones and all of these devices, you can take it with you. But it feels like we still spend too much time on these devices and not enough on face-to-face engagement and getting to know people, things, and places in a way that helps us understand the local context. So many times people don't really say what they are thinking; you have to discern it. And often, the only way you can do that is by having these ongoing, face-to-face conversations and interactions.

Q: That's an excellent point.

JOHNSON: It's a variation on getting out of the office. But it's not just about your country of assignment. Sometimes there are needs in neighboring countries. Like when everything was going crazy in Panama, the neighboring posts oftentimes wanted to know what was happening? And so, some of the same information that we were sharing with the journalists and other people coming through, we would also share with our counterparts in the USIS offices in the region because they were getting some of the same questions from their media outlets. We would get press guidance coming down from Washington, giving us the official policy guidance and all of that, but sometimes folks wanted context and a little bit more of a sense of what was going on—local color. Being able to communicate with colleagues in the neighboring posts and visiting them and having them visit us, that was also helpful. Again, it is that human factor. It is all about all these connections. That is what makes us more effective in our work.

Q: Yes, absolutely. Good points.

JOHNSON: And my final lesson learned. I don't consider myself to be particularly fearless, or a wonder woman, but sometimes you don't have to be. Once in a blue moon we would have these very weird situations where the journalists who were visiting would be subjected to the ire of the regime and the police would harass and hassle the person, or the customs staff in the airport would give them a hard time. Once a journalist, Julia Preston, was coming in and one of my embassy colleagues was on the plane and saw her,

but then didn't see her in the customs area where you come in and they look at your passport and all that.

Q: Yes, immigration.

JOHNSON: The immigration line, yes, thank you. She didn't come out through immigration and the person who was supposed to meet her contacted the embassy. Somehow, we in the press section, got word. I believe the duty officer called us and let us know, and we started calling around. I called the contacts I knew who might be able to help. The PAO called the folks he knew, so the government knew that we believed their immigration people had stopped her. As it turned out, they put her on a plane the next day. We found that out because and it just so happened that the PAO was escorting his wife, Judy, to the airport because her grandmother died and she was getting ready to go back to the U.S. for the funeral. While there, he saw Julia Preston and he said to Judy, "I'm sorry, hon, I've got to go." He ran off to talk to the journalist and find out what had happened, and his wife made her way to her flight. She understood, stuff happens and that's part of the job.

On another occasion, I was coming out of our office building and came across an ABC News correspondent, Peter Collins. It turned out that Mr. Collins and his crew had been pulled over by the police near the entrance to our building. So, I just walked over and said, "oh, hello. How are you guys doing, what's going on?" The police just said everything was okay and then left. I didn't really do anything other than stop by to see what was going on, but Peter Collins thought that somehow I was responsible for the police leaving him alone—maybe, maybe not. Who knows? But there were little things like that where you see something happening and you just go investigate, and sometimes it helps resolve a problem.

We had a situation where the police, no, the military raided where a lot of journalists were staying. I didn't even remember this until I looked at one of my performance evaluations and saw them mention that the VOA (Voice of America) correspondent and I went over to the hotel—we were the only ones who were able to get in—trying to find out what was going on. The military had gone in and I don't know who they were looking for, but they were trying to round up some of the journalists there. I don't even remember now—it's been so long—I cannot recall what occurred other than that we went there and we talked to the hotel staff to find out what was going on, and the journalists who were being escorted saw that we were there and trying to be helpful. We were able to report what had occurred so that it didn't happen, with nobody noticing. I don't know that there was any long-term damage or hassle to any of the journalists who were there other than it was an unpleasant experience. But we tried to be where we needed to be to show that we were looking out for the media and trying to help wherever we could.

When I was looking through all of my old files, I found this note from the Committee to Protect Journalists, and it just said, "This is a short note to thank you for your help and good humor. They are much appreciated." The staff sent the note because we had ended up having lots of conversations with the committee members; as they would get reports

of people who were picked up, we would then try to find out where they were or what had become of them, so there was a back and forth with that organization. That was one ways that we often found out that something was amiss with some local journalist who had been picked up because someone had appealed to the representative of the Committee to Protect Journalists, saying that so-and-so was being held or harassed by the authorities. Other times, we would get the call directly because a lot of folks knew how to find us and knew where we were. But again, it's just about sometimes being there and showing that you care and that you're trying to be helpful that will make a difference and build good relations.

Q: Excellent point again.

Let's turn just for a few minutes to life in Panama. Did you like it there?

JOHNSON: Yes. I just loved it. It was wonderful. First of all, I hate winter, so I tried to have all my assignments in places that were warm. Having grown up hearing all these stories about Panama, it was a real delight to finally be able to spend enough time there to get to know the country, see the places that my parents had told me about and that my grandmother had talked about, and to get to know my relatives who were there. My father's family had all migrated, with the exception of one or two cousins, but none of my mother's family had emigrated. She followed my father up here, but none of her relatives ever had the desire to leave Panama. When I was growing up, it was extremely expensive to telephone or to travel to Panama. We certainly didn't have the money to make any trips to Panama or to do long distance phone calls back in the day. So, it wasn't until as a college graduation present that I cobbled together some money and my parents helped me get a ticket to go to Panama, to visit and get to know some of the relatives there. To be assigned there 10 years later was a dream come true. My first visit there had been in '75 after I had finished all my college coursework, so 10 years later to be working in the embassy in Panama, that was a joy!

Q I'm sure. Very neat.

JOHNSON: My uncle, Wilbert Larrier Barton, lived on the outskirts of the city of Colón with his wife Pearl, and my cousin Carlos and his family lived not that far from him up the road. On the weekends I would often visit them, spending the weekend there. We also had family friends who lived in Colón proper, and I had one aunt and uncle who did live in Colón in one of those concrete apartment buildings. I would go visit them when I went over to stay with my mother's brother—the folks who lived in Colón were actually the sister and brother-in-law of my Aunt Pearl. Here is another interesting thing; my parents were close friends with the Washington family of Colón. Some of the family members migrated to the U.S. As it happened, Gilbert Washington played the piano and accompanied my father sometimes when he performed. Gilbert Washington had three sisters who lived in Colón and ran an English-language school for many, many years, and one of the sisters taught piano as well. So, in addition to visiting my relatives I would also visit them because they were almost like family, too. Plus, Leroy Washington, Gilbert's brother, was also a good friend of my dad's, and when he and his family first

came to the U.S., they lived down the street from us. His oldest daughter, Marciana Wilkerson-Ford, became an Ob-Gyn doctor and delivered my two sons. There are all these connections. So naturally, when I went to Panama they were like family. I had this wonderful network of friends and relatives. And that was also another way to understand what was going on from a very different point of view.

Q: It's a big plus to have a completely different circle of contacts, friends, family that-

JOHNSON: Have absolutely no connection to the embassy.

Q: Exactly. But at the same time, did it ever cause you problems? Did people put pressure on you through your family? Were they after you for visas all the time?

JOHNSON: No. Oh, no, because they already had them, so they didn't have to come to me for anything.

Q: So, no problems arose from that?

JOHNSON: There was only one time when my cousin, Graciela, who was already living in the U.S., came back because she was going to get married, and I guess it was the fiancé visa that needed to be adjudicated. She had been living in the States for many, many years, and came back to help get a visa for the guy she was going to marry. So, the vice consul called me up and asked me if this was legit? I said oh, yes, my uncle couldn't stand the young man; yes, this was real. That was the only time there was ever a question that was raised about a visa matter. My uncle had no interest in traveling to the U.S. until I was leaving, and then I asked him, "Well don't you want to come at least one time to visit and see your sister and all?" My mother had traveled back there when airline fares became affordable. Both she and my father did go back to Panama. But I asked him if he wouldn't like to at least visit the U.S. once to see his sister and see where she lived. He eventually said okay. So, when I left Panama, he traveled with me. We went to Florida and visited with my parents and then all of us traveled to California where my older and younger sisters were living at the time, in the Bay Area. And he played tourist there. You must understand; my uncle drove a bus, and when he retired, he still went down to the bus depot and hung out with the bus drivers. So, he had lots of stories to tell them when he got back about his adventures in the United States.

Q: Well, that's great. But nothing that would have negatively affected you in terms of you mentioned being called the disinformer; they didn't try to put pressure on you through your family or anything like that like they might have in some countries?

JOHNSON: No. And that's what was interesting about Panama. Maybe it was because I knew so many people in so many places who were connected to the government, and because a lot of the people in the Society of the Friends of West Indian Museum—called SAMAAP for short—were supporters of the regime and we got along very well. To this day I remain friends with many of them. They understood what my role was and that I had a job to do. And they didn't take it personally and I didn't take it personally when the

regime said nasty things in the media about the U.S.; I understood why they were doing that. And when we made statements that they didn't like they understood why those statements were being made. It was an interesting place to be and there were times when it felt a little awkward, but somehow, we navigated all of that and there was never any kind of acrimonious relationship. In fact, they always used to joke with me that after all of this ends, are you going to get your Panamanian citizenship? I was told that I would be eligible for it; all I had to do was present my mother's cedula (identity card). That was interesting because, in some countries that situation could have been really difficult. They could have done all kinds of nasty things to my relatives. But that really wasn't the Panamanian way, thank God.

Q: No, that's good, that's good. It's a pretty small country; did you feel like you got around a lot?

JOHNSON: Oh, yes, I went from one end to the other, literally. And like this country, you have different zones and different cultures and different practices, but all fascinating. We went all over. I traveled all the way out to Bocas del Toro, which is up where they have more interaction with Costa Rica because that's where all the United Fruit banana plantations are located. It's on the Caribbean side and there was a lot more interaction with Costa Rica than there was with Panama City. I imagine the road networks and everything else are much more developed now, because when I was there last summer, one of the gentlemen my friends hired to drive me around told me a story about driving to Bocas. We hired a driver because I wasn't going to try to navigate that crazy traffic. He said that the best Uber job he ever had was on Christmas Eve when this guy landed at the airport outside of Panama City and said he needed to get to Bocas del Toro for Christmas, so he drove him there. I don't know how many hours—I think he said 12. However long it took, he got him there, and he said he had the record for the longest Uber drive in Panama. I believed him, because Bocas is at the tippy tippy-top of the country, way, way out there. I think they have improved the road infrastructure because when I was there you could drive to Bocas, but it was not the greatest road. If he made it in 12 hours it must have been a much better road; they must have really improved that infrastructure.

Q: Wow. Wow, 12 hours. Whoa.

JOHNSON: It's like driving from here to Indiana, to Bloomington. I've done it.

Q: Is it really that long? I mean, is Panama that big or is it just a reflection of the bad roads?

JOHNSON: It could be a reflection of the roads. If it's two lanes and you get stuck behind a truck it's going to take a while. And so, that's what I'm not sure of. I know that they widened the road between Colón and Panama City, now you can get there in half the time; before it was just two lanes and if you got behind a slow moving vehicle it was tortuous. Going west- going north, rather, it's really going north, up into Chriquí Province—the town of Boquete and the provincial capital, David, and then further up to Bocas del Toro, I don't know if all those roads have been widened. When I was there

they were two lanes; maybe by now they're four lanes and therefore it would make it a faster trip because I think it was about eight hours to David from Panama City, if I'm not mistaken, so it might take another four hours over the mountains and up into Bocas.

Q: Well, by 1989 you were reaching the end of your assignment. You said you were cut short; do you remember more specifically what the circumstances were with that?

JOHNSON: Oh, yes. So, 1989 was when they had the elections scheduled for, and-

Q: Yes, you mentioned that Jimmy Carter came-

JOHNSON: And Jimmy Carter came down. I'm trying to look at my little notes here and see if it jogs my memory. There was the usual electioneering and campaigning and demonstrations; the demonstrations there would be the pot banging and the opposition would wave white handkerchiefs; Civilistas is what they were called. And they were quite creative. Rather than standing on the balcony banging pots, they recorded the pot banging on a cassette tape and they would just put the tape into the little cassette player and just let it play at the appointed hour. I think it was usually 6:00 PM. It was hilarious. There were things like that that seemed unbelievable—I loved it! You know, such ingenuity! They wanted to have their cake and eat it too, so they wanted to bang the pots, but they didn't want to stand on the balcony banging. And I think it was also for security reasons, because they didn't want snipers shooting at them because-

Q: It was that bad? People would shoot at you if you were-?

JOHNSON: Yes, there was some fear that that could happen, because there had been some skirmishes and some violence. Like I mentioned, a bodyguard got killed at a rally that went bad. So, yes, there were some fears that these groups of thugs that supported the regime would attack people. There were concerns about that so yes, I think that might have been one of the reasons why. And the other might be people just got tired of banging pots, but they didn't want to not protest. So, there were things like that that went on. And I think it was P.J. O'Rourke who said watching what was happening in Panama was kind of like your parents going to the mall to demonstrate or something like that. He made some kind of snide remark like that because what happened was some people would protest and demonstrate Monday through Friday, and then on the weekend they'd go to their beach houses. Sometimes there were demonstrations on the weekends too, but not as much as during the week. And he noticed that and commented on it. But as we got closer and closer to the election, the tensions rose and things became increasingly unstable, more unpredictable. After the elections, when it was deemed that they were not free and fair, the situation really got tense. That's when the State Department decided to send some of us home. At that point, I had already been assigned to work in a different

region. I would be working in the USIA Office of African Affairs (AF). So, I got to have more time to prepare my transition.

Q: Oh, you'd already done your bidding and so forth?

JOHNSON: Yes, because I was originally supposed to leave in July, not May. I wasn't due to start that job until after home leave. I was already assigned to AF because I had started out in African Affairs. After Panama, I decided I needed to go someplace else; this experience in Latin America had been just too much. But plans changed because one of the things that happened when the Jimmy Carter delegation came down, was meeting the fellow who was assigned to be the press liaison for the delegation. The embassy briefers told him that since he was in charge of press he should go see the information officer or the public affairs officer, and I guess when he came over the public affairs officer wasn't there, so he came and saw me. And we coordinated their activities, because there was going to be some kind of media opportunity either later that day or the next day. He worked with our staff and then he became an extra pair of hands as we were reporting and transcribing things and doing all of the stuff one had to do, pulling all nighters there and doing the transcripts of President Carter's statement, to get it up to Washington because they were going to need it for whatever statement the United States Government was going to make. So, this nice fellow named Steve Johnson came over and worked with our office. When he left, he said, "When you come to Washington, look me up and we can have lunch." So, I did, and we did. And then we had dinner and then we just kept getting together and eventually we got married.

Q: Wow. Oh, very nice.

JOHNSON: Steve spoke fluent Spanish, so when it came time to look for onward assignments, he said, "I don't speak French. What am I going to do over there?" That's because I had wanted to go back to West Africa and I was thinking of bidding on positions in Dakar, Senegal, or something like that. Since he spoke Spanish and had lived in Honduras when he was in the Air Force, we ended up going back to Latin America and staying there for the remainder of my overseas career. He likes to joke and tell people yes, we got together because of General Noriega.

Q: So, you got married even before you left Panama?

JOHNSON: No, no.

Q: Or after you got, no, after you got-

JOHNSON: Oh, no, no. No, well after we left. But we would never have met had it not been for General Noriega's misbehavior. And we did have a representative from Panama at the wedding. Judy DeLeon, who is a dear friend and had been my right-hand person in

the embassy press section, came up to Washington, DC, for the wedding because she was there when Steve and I met and would not have missed this event for the world.

Q: That's great.

JOHNSON: Yes.

Q: So, it would have been about spring of 1989 that you moved back to-

JOHNSON: May, at the end of May.

Q: Oh, so actually you were practically at the end of your tour.

JOHNSON: Yes, exactly.

Q: So, you were a logical person to downsize when they had to do it, I suppose.

JOHNSON: Yes, I think they only wanted one American officer in USIS at that point. They got rid of lots of different people in the mission and shrank our presence because they didn't want to have to keep track of too many people, and because we weren't recognizing the regime and all of that. It was just crazy.

Q: That was still well before the invasion though, right?

JOHNSON: Yes. The invasion was December and we got married the following October, in 1990.

Q: December, okay, so not long before the invasion.

JOHNSON: I left in May, but I think everyone was anticipating a military intervention. That was probably the reason why we were drawn down. I sold my nice little Nissan

Sentra to my cousin Carlos in Colón who needed a car. Thankfully, I didn't have to worry about unloading a car on short notice, and off I went.

Q: Okay. Well, very nice. Well, maybe that's a good place to wrap it up today.

JOHNSON: Okay.

Q: You can look back over your notes and I'm sure you'll, as soon as we turn off the tape recorder think of four things you wish you had said. And we can-

JOHNSON: I'll see if I can figure out the timeline relating to some of the little things that we talked about.

Q: Okay, we can add those next time if you come up with something, and we'll take up in 1989 back in Washington for the next one.

JOHNSON: Right.

Q: Okay, we'll call that a session.

JOHNSON: Okey-doke.

Q: Today is August 15, 2018, and I'm continuing my interview with Cynthia Farrell Johnson. This is Peter Eicher.

Cynthia, I think we left off in 1989 and you had just finished up your assignment in Panama and were headed back to the States.

JOHNSON: Yes. So, I decided Latin American issues were really crazy, because between all the uproar in Central America and the uproar in Panama, I thought that maybe I should go back to Africa where I at least had had a few calm days every now and then. So, I had bid on different jobs in USIA's, Office of African Affairs, and because of my experience and background in Francophone West Africa I became the Francophone West Africa desk officer. In May—let's see; I left Panama in May and I took home leave visiting my parents in Florida with my Uncle Willie and then spending the rest of that time in the Bay Area of California with my sisters Betty and Anita. With the help of my cousin, Denise Eskew, I got settled in the D.C. area. I was very fortunate to end up living not far from her and her family, so it wasn't like I was totally isolated; that was nice. We bought townhomes on the same street in Forestville, Maryland. We had grown up on the

same street in Brooklyn, so it was just like old times. Then I started work at USIA in the Office of African Affairs.

Q: Tell me, where was the USIA Office of African Affairs at that point?

JOHNSON: It was in what is now called State Annex 44, which is on 4th Street near the Federal Center Southwest Metro stop.

Q: Just down the street.

JOHNSON: Yes, in this very neighborhood. And it was nice because Voice of America headquarters and studios were across the street and one could pop out of the office at lunchtime and go to a Smithsonian museum for lunch.

Q: Very nice.

JOHNSON: It was a nice neighborhood to be working in. The Botanical Gardens and the Library of Congress were also not far away, more great spots to visit. There were lots of good things close by.

Q: And was that the main headquarters of USIA at that time?

JOHNSON: That was the main headquarters of USIA at the time. There were, let's see; when I had first joined the agency, the offices were 1776 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW, a block away from the White House and a short walk from the State Department. But then the IMF, I think, was going to expand. A hotel and office building were torn down to build an IMF facility, so in the interim, between the time I joined and the time I came back, that building disappeared and we ended up in Southwest and it was a nice location.

Q: Okay. Sorry to interrupt but I thought that was a nice little piece of history.

JOHNSON: No, no, no, that's fine. Yes, for those who don't remember, that's where it was. And I mentioned Smithsonian because one of the things I ended up doing as desk officer for Francophone West Africa was volunteering with the Smithsonian Folklife Festival because Senegal was one of the countries that was participating. It was in 1990 that the country was featured. And as a consequence of working on that festival, I met John Franklin, who had lived in Senegal for a time. We met when he was on the staff of

the Folklife Center. He's currently working at the National Museum of African American History and Culture.

Q: Is that John Hope Franklin-

JOHNSON: John Hope Franklin's son.

Q: Oh, his son, okay.

JOHNSON: His son, John W. Franklin.

Q: Okay.

JOHNSON: I met John W. Franklin during that time, and ended up volunteering at the festival in addition to doing whatever it was we could do, which was not a whole lot. We passed messages and coordinated things. This was pre Internet, email, and text messaging. Several of us in the office ended up volunteering to work the site for some of the days, which was a lot of fun and an interesting experience. But also frustrating in that there were so many cultural activities that would have been wonderful to have been able do; to collaborate with local organizations across the board. There was an African film festival that D.C. had every year and the organizer wanted help bringing some of the African filmmakers to the U.S. Unfortunately, we didn't have a mechanism or a budget to do that kind of thing. It was an interesting job being desk officer for public diplomacy, working on all kinds of different projects, but also at times frustrating because one wanted to be supportive of private sector efforts, but there usually was not a budget to do very much. We could give moral support, we could pass messages, we could provide some kinds of facilitated assistance, but there wasn't a whole lot in terms of funding that we could provide. We could tell them, well ask so-and-so, or go to this organization, but that did not always result in a satisfactory outcome.

Q: It's not something film directors, for example, could be invited under the International Visitors Program and tie in in that way?

JOHNSON: If the overseas post had it as a priority, of course, it could be arranged. But one had to justify everything, and usually it had to be mapped out well in advance. So, even if the post wanted to be helpful, if they didn't have a visitor grant allocated for that purpose, or if they didn't have funds that they could write a grant to support a program objective, then they couldn't send a visitor either. There are all kinds of restrictions on what one can and can't do. So, unfortunately, oftentimes there wasn't a lot our office or the post could do to facilitate those kinds of exchanges, and that was too bad. I think nowadays there are a whole lot more non-governmental organizations involved in cultural exchange, so the folks involved in that kind of activity probably have more options and opportunities, but back in the day, it wasn't as easy to do. I think today, having a larger African Diaspora here in the U.S., there are community organizations that

probably get involved in doing things like that in a bigger way than, say, 30 or 40 years ago.

One of the other things that I got involved with, speaking of public-private partnerships, was Sister Cities International. I believe D.C. had a relationship with Senegal as well. I attended some of those meetings. Prince George's County also had a relationship with one of the West African countries. Or maybe I'm mixing it up and it's the other way around, but at any rate, there were Sister City relationships with francophone West African countries and I ended up going to some of those meetings and meeting some of the people running the programs. Again, we were limited to providing facilitative assistance, sharing information and letting posts know about things that were going on here that might be of interest to them over there. The job involved, besides all of the foreign policy coordination and coordinating with our colleagues over at State Department on public diplomacy programs, both preparation and creation of material and programs to offer the field that supported policy issues. Also, there was always an opportunity to connect with local organizations that were supportive of cultural, academic, and professional exchanges, and help build networks. Again, everyone was looking for funding and we were not in a position to give anybody anything, unfortunately. But we could always share information.

Q: Let's back up a minute and maybe you can describe more generally what a desk officer at USIA in that period of time did as principal day to day work.

JOHNSON: I was the principal USIA point of contact and resource person for these countries—Senegal, Guinea, Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, Benin, Togo, Côte d'Ivoire, The Gambia, Guinea-Bissau, and Cape Verde. My job was to track activities, funding, and management issues in those countries to make sure they were following the various country plans and supporting USG foreign policy goals and objectives. But, I was also their advocate in Washington, representing post interests to the various USIA program support offices. Keeping up to date on events in the countries and alerting leadership to noteworthy changes was also part of the job. And it was also important for me to keep the posts informed as things evolved in Washington. Basically it was a lot of liaison work. The goal was to understand what was going on at the posts and what their priorities were, and what they needed in terms of support from Washington.

Q: And we're talking about 20 posts or something like that?

JOHNSON: Actually, it was only 11. It was all the French-speaking posts in West Africa, so it was basically from Senegal all the way over to Benin and everything in between, but

it also included two Lusophone, or Portuguese-speaking, posts—Cape Verde and Guinea-Bissau.

Q: Cameroon even?

JOHNSON: No, Cameroon was considered Central Africa.

Q: That was Central, okay, same as State Department _____?

JOHNSON: Yes. We mirrored State Department. Having a good relationship with the posts and with the officers, understanding what their unique needs were, as well as regional and sub-regional needs, so that when we sat down with the various offices in USIA that were putting together, say, magazines' articles, looking for film and video offerings, putting together the international visitor programs, we could tell them with some authority what kinds of programs the posts wanted. We were the voice of the posts to the different offices that were creating content and doing the same kind of liaison work with Voice of America, letting the different services know what the posts were interested in, what they needed, or what policy shifts might be on the horizon that we might need to take into account. Voice of America would sometimes ask us for some substantive suggestions to take into consideration when they put together their programming and editorials and things of that nature. It was a lot of coordination. It was representing the posts to offices here, but also letting the different public affairs officers and staff members know what the priorities of some of the offices here were, what the office directors and team members were working on, and what directives they were getting from, say, State Department or other U.S. Government agencies. That was the other thing; we often would need to coordinate with other government agencies on issues that were interdisciplinary; basic interagency coordination.

Q: So, like with Treasury or Commerce or the other ones _____ foreign affairs?

JOHNSON: Right, right, exactly, yes. Or even domestic issues that would affect foreign policy, so passing information in both directions, making sure people were up to speed on a range of issues. This is pre-email and pre-internet. People were still using Wangs in their offices. It was cable traffic, it was memos, phone calls, things like that. That seems such a distant memory now. But one of the advantages of that was that we did not have instantaneous communication unless, of course, it was a phone call. The slower pace gave

everybody time to think and analyze and research, something I find lacking at times in activities nowadays.

Q: Yes. The approach, I'm sure, has changed quite a bit.

Do you remember who the director of USIA was at the time?

JOHNSON: I believe it was Charles Z. Wick.

Q: This would have been the first Bush Administration?

JOHNSON: No, Reagan.

Q: Oh, it was still Reagan in '89?

JOHNSON: Wait a minute. No, the elections were in 1988, so yes, it was the first Bush Administration, yes. So, oh no, it was not Mr. Wick; it was Bruce Gelb.

Q: And was he a political appointee, I presume?

JOHNSON: Yes, because he had been an executive at Clairol, and I think the lore had it that he had been a classmate of George H.W. Bush's.

Q: So, not necessarily a career expert in international diplomacy or public affairs?

JOHNSON: No, not that I can recall. Mr. Wick did have a background in communications and media and entertainment and that kind of thing, but Mr. Gelb's background seemed to me to be more the executive side, business side. Yes. His was an interesting tenure too, because I think he got crosswise with some people in the Cabinet or Congress and it was not always a pleasant experience for him, as I recall.

Q: Generally, how were the USIA relationships with the State Department, as you recall?

JOHNSON: As I recall they were good. Granted, my experiences at that time were at the worker bee level, just dealing with my counterparts on the Francophone West Africa desk. And I want to say that maybe, Edward Perkins was the office director. (*But, later when I checked, I found out that he had been the office director from 1983 – 1985, so we did not overlap.)*

Q: You mean for West Africa?

JOHNSON: Yes. I'm trying to remember who all was running that office over there. We'd probably have to go back and look up the staffing pattern for that time. We didn't

go to meetings at State on a regular basis, but there was definitely good communication back and forth.

Q: But USIA was really independent at the time?

JOHNSON: Yes.

Q: You weren't taking guidance from the State Department?

JOHNSON: No. Well, yes and no. We took general guidance, but we made decisions based on what made sense from the communications standpoint, and we were very steeped in Edward R. Murrow's dictum about the last three feet being the most important, that face to face interaction mattered. It was our job to discern what message would be most effective for our audiences. So, while there was a lot of activity with satellite and new technologies for that time, and radio, already there was the argument about whether radio was as important as TV. It depended on the audience. In some rural areas radio was still critical. Then there was the discussion about shortwave as opposed to digital signals. There was lots of back and forth, and like everything in life, there were constant changes. Part of what we all got caught up in was trying to figure out what made the most sense from the technology standpoint and what was the best vehicle for getting the message out. Basically, we felt that the most important thing that USIA did was having people on the ground interacting and using whatever tools made sense to project the message, but also to get the feedback, to listen, and to understand what people's priorities were, and find common ground whenever possible. Our goal was figuring out where there were win-win situations and then recognizing where we were probably going to agree to disagree. One of the areas where there was always a lot of pushback was the U.S. policy vis-à-vis South Africa and apartheid; that was always roiling, and there was always a back and forth on that issue. There were the organizations here in Washington involved on the different sides of that debate, as well.

As a desk officer, I was trying to keep my ear to the ground and understand all the different things going on, and make sure that the staff in the office providing resources, whether they were offering book translations or articles or videos or radio programs, I needed to make sure that they understood what was going to be most relevant and useful to the field. My other important task was getting as much feedback from the posts regarding the utility of those products and services.

Now, one of the other things that happened with USIA was that a public affairs officer got two evaluations. There was an evaluation from the USIA headquarters office, and an evaluation from the ambassador and the DCM in the field. One of my responsibilities as a

desk officer was to do the first draft of officer evaluations for the different public affairs officers, and then our office director and deputy director would do the final version.

Q: So, you had a lot of EERs to put together, huh?

JOHNSON: Oh, yes. That was the bane of my existence. You did what you had to do. And then, of course, we covered for each other. When the Anglophone West Africa desk officer was on leave, I would cover her countries and when I was on leave, she would cover mine. I learned a lot about the different countries in the region, not just from the helicopter view, sitting in meetings, but also working with some of them on special projects and things like that, or covering for other officers.

Q: How much of your time did you spend responding to requests from help in the field?

JOHNSON: You know, I can't really say. It's hard to tell.

Q: And was that a major component?

JOHNSON: It was a major component.

Q: Yes, okay. I mean, I wasn't looking for a percentage of-

JOHNSON: No, no. I understand. Yes, it was a major component, and I think what ended up happening as it became easier to make phone calls, I think I had weekly or monthly, I can't remember which now, but I had a schedule when I would call people just to find out how things were and if they needed anything, or if there was something that our office wanted to communicate then we'd make rounds of phone calls to the people overseas. It was about trying to keep everybody in the loop, both overseas posts as well as the various offices we worked with in USIA. Again, we needed to keep them apprised of the media activities (like VOA correspondent travel), the academic exchanges, professional exchanges, the subject-matter experts/speakers and the cultural programs that would go on tour.

Q: And you were involved in setting those up?

JOHNSON: Not necessarily setting those up because there were offices that did all that. But again, it was coordination, figuring out who needed what, letting the posts know-

Q: So, just for example, you might let the office that's setting up these programs know that a jazz combo would be well-received, or a speaker on relations with South Africa or whatever?

JOHNSON: Yes. Because each overseas post would send in all their requests to the different Washington-based offices, but we were also informed, and if we had some suggestions, so-and-so asked for a speaker and our office director knew of someone who he thought would be a good person to do that, we would always pass along the

suggestions. We also had an office in Paris—Africa Regional Services—that offered programs and speakers in French to the field. Now, all of those offices also had databases and rolodexes with names of experts in a variety of fields, so it was always a collaborative thing. A lot of times they knew experts in a number of fields, and they would offer it to the post, and then we would make sure the post actually paid attention to the messages and met the deadlines. Sometimes the offices would say we haven't heard from any of your posts on this; are they interested? And then we would ping the posts. As you know, folks get busy and things fall to the bottom of the in-box and deadlines often would pass, so it was always us trying to keep up with all that was going on and make sure the posts knew what was being offered to the field.

Q: Did that, you mean the desk officer?

JOHNSON: The desk officer job.

Q: Wouldn't it have been a normal two- or three-year assignment?

JOHNSON: Yes, two years. And then, I had another assignment in the Office of African Affairs, policy officer, which-

Q: Okay, before we get into that, could I ask you a little- a couple more questions about the desk officer job?

JOHNSON: Yes. What I'm trying to remember is I can't remember if I did the full desk officer stint or if partway through, they switched me to policy.

Q: Oh, okay.

JOHNSON: That's what I can't remember.

Q: Okay. Well, we're getting into policy; we'll probably cover a couple of my questions.

JOHNSON: Okay.

Q: But as a desk officer, did you go out and visit _____?

JOHNSON: Oh, yes, I did. Ah, good, here it is. This- I'm sorry; this is my Francophone West Africa evaluation. I did have it.

Yes, I did. I went out to visit all of my posts.

Q: Must have been quite a trip or several trips.

JOHNSON: It was quite a trip because, of course, two of them were places I had served, so it was wonderful to get back there and see friends that I hadn't seen in a while. But what made it memorable, it was October 1989, I believe, that I went out on my

orientation trip. I went around the time when they had that big earthquake in San Francisco, and both my sisters were living in the San Francisco Bay Area, and so, I was like oh, my God, are they okay? But somehow, they got word to me that they were safe, but it was unnerving.

So, I'm looking at, I just found the evaluation from that period, and as country officer for Francophone West Africa, I represent the director of African Affairs in the management and supervision of USIA operations in Senegal, Guinea, Mali, Burkina-Faso, Niger, Benin, Togo, Côte d'Ivoire, the Gambia, Guinea-Bissau and Cape Verde. I had forgotten. The Lusophone countries were also included.

Q: Gambia, that's not francophone, huh?

JOHNSON: The Gambia. Well, because it's right in there with Senegal. Exactly. And then Guinea-Bissau and Cape Verde were also in there. So, I think they just- it was more geographic, and the majority of the countries were Francophone. And so, yes, I was to monitor programs, finances and management of the posts to ensure they conform to country plan objectives. They had to be policy-focused, which is why sometimes there were interesting opportunities, but we had to be careful because we couldn't stray too far off the policy trail. We had to maintain good relations with counterparts in the Department of State and relevant officials in other United States Government offices, concerned private sector institutions and appropriate foreign embassies. Part of the job was also getting to know the foreign diplomats who represented those countries. And yes, advise the office director on what was going on that he needed to know about, and potential problems in the 11 countries that I was supposed to cover. So, yes, there was a lot to keep track of.

Q: Now, this was your first formal assignment in Washington, if I remember correctly.

JOHNSON: Yes. Yes, it was.

Q: How did you find the Washington aspect of USIA work versus the overseas?

JOHNSON: I joined the Foreign Service to work overseas, so I was not thrilled being in Washington, although I enjoyed supporting my colleagues overseas. But we all joined to be elsewhere, not to be here in Washington. It was important to be in Washington to figure out how things worked here so the next time I went overseas I would know who to call and who to bother to get what I needed done, and how to approach those people. That was the other thing; I learned the different personalities in the different offices. I learned

which person I had to cajole and who I had to tiptoe around, be very careful with when doing business. Yes—it was important to learn all the different personalities.

Q: Yes, personalities, but also, did you find the same for bureaucratic processes? Did they all seem to be very different to you when you were doing the Washington end of it?

JOHNSON: Well, when you're doing the Washington end, all of a sudden you figure out, well, that's why they kept pestering me for this, that or the other. So, yes, it provided a bigger picture of how as a little person overseas one fits into the grand scheme of things, and why people needed certain information or why there were certain practices or rules or regulations.

Q: The one other agency I was going to ask you about was Voice of America. And when you stepped up you were involved in their programs since you mentioned it a couple of times, so whether they were pretty much independent doing their own thing.

JOHNSON: They were pretty much independent doing their own thing, but we coordinated. They would ask us for input sometimes, or ask us how we thought certain things would play. Also, they had different correspondents and personalities who would sometimes tour, go out into the field to report, but also show the flag. VOA had correspondents based in different countries in West, East, and Southern Africa, as I recall. There were VOA correspondents in the field, and we always liked to meet with them and find out how things were and get their perspective on the issues of the day, and in turn they also wanted to get the Washington perspective, because they were out there; it helped them when we were able to sit down and compare notes. But yes, they were very independent and very jealous of guarding their independence. Again, we worked together as colleagues and treated them as we would treat other media that we interacted with. But obviously, the relationship was slightly different because it was a government entity.

One of the other things that we were actively involved in was trying to do whatever we could to better coordinate English teaching programming and getting the English teaching resources to the non-English speaking posts. Also, coordinating with the Africa Regional Services (ARS) office in Paris that provided a lot of programming to African posts was important. And they would-

Q: African regional services for USIA in particular?

JOHNSON: Yes, they were based in Paris. It was a wonderful job.

Q: Of course.

JOHNSON: Their job was to scour Europe for cultural program possibilities and people with expertise in policy and subject matters. ARS recruited Americans who were living in Europe or working in Europe who were experts in certain fields who could go on a

lecture circuit and speak either in Portuguese or in French along with, well, normal English-speaking audiences in the Anglophone countries. But they focused on identifying French speakers for the French-speaking posts in Africa. I wouldn't say a ton of time was spent working with that office, but there was often coordination and correspondence with the staff. And when I went on my orientation trip, obviously I had to go to Paris to coordinate-

Q: It's the only way to get to a lot of these countries.

JOHNSON: Right. To coordinate and to get to know who all the people were in the office there so that when I picked up the phone or sent a cable or corresponded in some way with them, I had a face and a name to put together, and that always makes it easier to work together. We did a lot of coordination as well with them.

As I recall, there were always challenges in funding and issues related to finance with the English teaching program. There was concern about funding. I'm looking at a note here where it talks about one of the things we did was increase the recycling of English teaching funds.

Q: Today is August 15, 2018, Peter Eicher continuing the interview with Cynthia Farrell Johnson. We were talking about her tenure as desk officer for francophone Africa between 1989 and 1991. And at some point, the device stopped recording, but we think we got most of what we talked about, and we will pick up from where we left off.

JOHNSON: Well, we were talking about the value of English language instruction and academic exchanges and doing things on the ground. Having American professors travel overseas can influence a wider swath of people than when we have a student come to the U.S. Both types of experiences are valuable because the student who comes to the U.S. gets a degree and goes back home, oftentimes ends up teaching as well. But sometimes there are challenges and the person goes back and can't reintegrate, gets frustrated and leaves the country, either returning to the U.S. or going somewhere else. I was thinking about my older sister who is a nurse midwife and public health expert, and she'd been working in that field for four decades. She sometimes gets frustrated because she says some of the same issues that were problematic 40 years ago, in some of the countries where she's worked, they still haven't really fixed things. I think that reflects what happens when young people travel, have different experiences, go back home and try to make changes and can't and then get frustrated and leave. So, maybe sometimes it's important to bring people to the country to share their expertise with folks who are there in the hopes that maybe they can do the problem solving on the ground but have some fresh ideas based on that exchange with someone from outside who might have expertise in a certain area. Actually, you see a lot of that; PBS NewsHour's Fred de Sam Lazaro always has these wonderful stories about folks in situ who have come up with solutions to local problems in collaboration with organizations that might not be from that place but have expertise and lend their expertise to people who then adapt it for their reality and solve their problems. That's part of what I enjoyed about being a desk officer in that we could facilitate some of these exchanges that could sometimes result in some meaningful,

positive results, not immediately but maybe several years down the road as a result of the contacts and the networks that were built up.

Q: And you had mentioned as well the exchange of professors, especially in terms of American professors going to the francophone countries.

JOHNSON: Yes.

Q: Were you involved in putting that kind of program together?

JOHNSON: Well, our office would facilitate in any way that we could when folks were selected for the Fulbright or any other exchange program. There was usually an orientation program of some kind that the academic exchange office would organize, and we would often be involved with that.

You had asked before about different things, and I'm just looking at this evaluation here, and I had forgotten we would also collaborate with local television stations that were doing cultural programs, programs that had some content that had to do with different places in Africa.

Q: Local American stations?

JOHNSON: Yes, like WUSA and BET did some programs. WUSA did something about capitals of the world, on Dakar, so we gave them some assistance. And BET also did something on Africa.

Then you asked about how we helped the posts, and here are a couple of examples. For black history month, one of the posts needed a musical score, and we have a library in USIA that has lots of material, but it doesn't have musical scores. I was able to track down the score at the Library of Congress, and this is back in the day, so we were able to fax it to the post. In another request, we got something for a Nigerian sculptor who needed photos of the Kennedy Center's statue of John F. Kennedy. We were able to get that for the post. A small post needed information on an African art museum exhibit that was going to be featuring work from that country, and they didn't have the information they needed to do a press kit. So we assembled the information and got it to them. Those were some of the kinds of little things that we did to help the posts.

Q: They're little things that can take a lot of time and work.

JOHNSON: Yes, but we were able to help them, get them what they needed. Those are some of the things that we did just trying to put out little fires here and there. When they said help, we need this, we would go out and get them what they needed.

That reminds me, if I were to give some advice to someone who is either in the field or here in Washington, it is to be creative and use their imagination. Little things that might seem minor can make a big difference to the folks out in the field when they're trying to

represent the U.S. and put our best food forward. Be creative in problem solving. And if all else fails, ask a librarian, because many times, even if they don't have it, they will know where you need to go to get it. That was a wonderful resource that we had and still have at State Department. As part of the merger, the USIA librarians were merged into State Department's library system. And as a former librarian, I always think: "ask the librarian" when I have a question; reference librarians are wonderful!

Q: Okay, I had one more question which occurred to me as we were talking about the international visitors' program. When visitors came from West Africa, were you as desk officer one of their standard stop off points?

JOHNSON: Well, they were one of my standard stop off points because what would happen is the program would include a stop at the State Department or the program agency would invite someone from State Department to talk to the visitors about the policy issues. Usually, when the visitor first arrives, there's a meeting with the program agency and the representatives from the international visitor office, and the desk officer would also be invited. We'd sit around a table and go over the schedule, and then, if it needed to be tweaked, it would be done at that point. So, yes, I oftentimes would attend that initial meeting when they first arrived, and then sometimes there would be a luncheon or some other kind of special event and to the extent that I could I would attend those, too.

Q: So, you met a lot of interesting people that way.

JOHNSON: Oh, yes.

Q: Important people in the countries as well.

JOHNSON: Yes. Yes, indeed. And I also ended up going to embassy events too, because invariably if they had one of their VIPs or a special person visiting or a senior government official visiting and they were going to have a reception, then as desk officer I would often go as well. Yes, I met a lot of interesting people.

Q: Okay. Now you had talked about a shift to the policy office; was this a standard transfer or was it something that they thrust upon you again?

JOHNSON: I'm trying to remember because I don't have that evaluation. The context is kind of-

Q: I was just wondering if you were bidding again or-

JOHNSON: I think it was to fill an unexpected gap, because my second assignment after I finished in the Office of African Affairs was at the Board of Examiners. I think there

was an unexpected vacancy, and they said well, why don't you just do this position, is what I'm vaguely recalling now.

Q: Well, maybe I'm getting ahead of myself. Is there anything else you wanted to talk about as desk officer before we do get into that?

JOHNSON: Honestly, I can't think of anything else. It was a fun assignment because I had served in the region. I knew a lot of the people in the region and in State Department. I didn't talk about USAID, but it seems to me that invariably there must have been some back and forth with USAID, but not that much, as I recall. It was mainly coordinating with State. It was a fun assignment because it was a part of the world that I found fascinating. It's so varied because each country is really different. The cultural life of each country is different. And of course, all of the food is wonderful. I'm a foodie, so I loved chebu jën in Senegal and foutou with sauce graine in Cote d'Ivoire and feijoada or agouti with sauce feuille in Benin and all the other places. I just enjoyed eating my way across West Africa.

Q: That's nice, of course.

So, this assignment would have ended normally in the middle of the year of 1991?

JOHNSON: I'm trying to remember because let's see; '89 to '91, I'm trying to remember. I left, when did I transfer? I'm trying to remember when I left to go overseas.

It must- when did I go to Uruguay? My next assignment after Washington was Uruguay. Let me see if I can find my other cheat sheet.

Q: Okay. Well, that's something you can put it later, but it's a good thing to put in the years regularly so that people who are trying to research this will be able to find the right timeframes.

JOHNSON: Okay. So, 1992 is when I went to Uruguay. I finished my assignment in AF in '91 because from '91 to '92 I would have been one year at the Board of Examiners.

Q: Okay. And the policy office then was much later sometime subsequent to all of this?

JOHNSON: So, the policy officer job was probably '90 to '91 or part of '90-'91 timeframe. I was in AF and the Board of Examiners from 1989 to 1992. I left Washington in June of 1992, if I'm not mistaken.

Q: Sorry if-

JOHNSON: No, no, no. So, '89 to '90 or part of '90 would have been the desk officer and policy officer. So, it must have been only a few months that I did the policy officer job.

Q: Okay. And that would have been before the Board of Examiners?

JOHNSON: Right. I went over to the Board of Examiners '91 to '92.

Q: Okay. So, let's talk a little bit about the policy office.

JOHNSON: Yes. Oh, gosh, that's such a distant memory, and it was a short stint. But I remember I had to read a lot of cable traffic and alert the director and the deputy director to anything that they needed to be aware of sooner rather than later. And it seems to me I also had to go to a lot of meetings.

Q: So, we're talking about the policy office which is setting USIA policy for the world?

JOHNSON: It was just in AF, and so it was looking at AF policy. I think that's one of those jobs that constantly morphed. It was like the number three position in the office, so if the director and the deputy director weren't there, then it was the policy officer who did whatever. That was like a promotion, and it gave me exposure to people at a different level. Maybe I had to go to more senior level meetings. I just can't remember much of

what I did, and I don't think it was very long. I will rummage around and see if I can find anything on it, but it was a short stint.

Q: And I'm wondering, you mentioned South Africa and apartheid as one of the big African issues that was going on at the time; was there anything else which springs to mind from that period that you might have been working on?

JOHNSON: Let's see. Well, let's see, let's see. There was always-

Q: And I'm sure there were coups and elections and all kinds of things like that.

JOHNSON: I was going to say, there was always some kind of political upheaval somewhere in the region that one had to keep track of. And then, of course there was a concern about what the Russians and the Cubans and other people were doing that might not be supportive of our efforts there or might be counterproductive or counter to what we were trying to achieve there as the United States Government. It was also about keeping an eye on those folks.

Q: But now, at the same time you're mentioning the Russians, this would have been just about the time that the Berlin Wall came down and so forth?

JOHNSON: Yes, yes. So, that was a time of—

Q: Do you recall changes in Africa that went along with this?

JOHNSON: I remember the changes that occurred even before the wall came down. When I was in Benin, I remember some of the people who had studied in Russia had come back disillusioned because of their treatment over there. Then I went off to Panama and spent four years there, so by the time I came back to work on African affairs it was a whole different dynamic. There was the non-aligned movement that still existed, but like everything else, it was changing. I guess those were the days when they were talking about the new international order and folks were trying to figure out okay, so what now? And there was a feeling that okay, if we've "beaten communism" everything's sweetness and light kinda-sorta. Me being a skeptical person from Brooklyn, I was like yeah, well, maybe. We'll see. There are always folks out there up to mischief, so let's see what happens. But at the time I think there was a lot of enthusiasm about how we were going to reorganize ourselves internationally, and what our role would be, and what the new priorities would be. It seemed to me that it was a time of a lot of questioning, a lot of trying to figure out what the new world order was going to be.

Q: It was also the time approximately of the Kuwait war, Desert Shield and Desert Storm; did that affect you at all?

JOHNSON: Desert Storm. You know, I can't remember, other than the usual having to make sure people knew what was going on and were getting the latest policy statements. I'm sure that there was a huge effort to get information out to posts and to do programs

and to have speakers available; you know, the whole nine yards. It was the kind of situation where so much was being communicated in real time, with satellite and satellite television, cable news and all of that.

Q: Kind of the beginnings of CNN even at that time.

JOHNSON: Yes. CNN had become a force during the Panama days to the point where the cable companies were told they could no longer carry it. What made that an interesting situation back then in Panama was that we had the U.S. Armed Forces Radio and Television Service that broadcast to the bases but was picked up by everybody in close proximity to the bases. All of Panama City could see what was on Armed Forces Radio and Television. Even though the Noriega regime tried to censor the news, people were able to get it through other means. Fast forward to covering the Kuwait conflict, there might have been people in the U.S. who weren't thrilled with the coverage, but in the age of cable television, there wasn't a whole lot anyone could do to control it or limit it. Even if the signals were jammed or whatever, word always seemed to get out.

Q: Okay. Well then, with the Board of Examiners, was that something you asked to do, something you wanted to do?

JOHNSON: Yes, because one of the things that I felt was important was to reach out to communities that normally didn't think about international affairs as a career. When I was a kid growing up, I never met anybody who had done anything in international affairs as a career. I grew up in a community with lots of immigrants, so I had a sense of other countries and other cultures, but I never really thought about what kind of career I could have that would take me overseas until I was in college and did the German summer abroad and said "Oh, this could be really an interesting way to live." I wanted to reach out to young people before they even got to college and talk to them when they were in elementary, middle or even high school, to say that there are lots of different careers out there. One of them involves learning languages and traveling overseas, learning about other cultures and sharing information about the United States with other people, and having really meaningful exchanges. Sharing their unique American experiences is an important part of the Foreign Service career. I felt like the only way to really do that with any certainty and credibility or authority, would be to do a stint in Board of Examiner—that would allow me to really understand the process for selecting candidates. Understanding the process would help me be more effective when I would tell people "these are the kinds of things you need to focus on or study or that you should be aware of if you are considering an international affairs career." At times, I had been asked to speak to groups about the career, but back then, there really wasn't a guidebook saying when you go out to speak about international affairs careers, this is what you should emphasize, or these are the resources that people can draw on. I'm thrilled that

nowadays State Department has resources that actually prepare employees to go out and do effective recruitment talks.

Q: Interesting. Okay.

JOHNSON: So, that was my motivation. I figured if I'm going to continue to go out and talk to young people about foreign affairs careers I should at least be able to talk about the here and now, because I had come in with the orals and testing and much of that had changed. Like everything else, it constantly changes. I wanted to have at least some up-to-date, relatively useful information to pass on to young people, or even adults who were thinking of making a career change. So, I served at the Board of Examiners for a year.

The other thing that struck me, when selecting people who you might end up working with, your attitude is going to be different from selecting people you'll never work with because you're getting ready to retire. I felt like having all the examiners be people who were getting ready to retire was not necessarily the best formula because you have a whole different perspective on everything. Actually, I thought it would be better to have a mix of people, but the problem is that serving at the Board of Examiners isn't considered career enhancing. I took issue with that because this is one of the most important things you're doing for your institution; you are selecting people who will be, if you're lucky, good officers for 20, 30, 40 years maybe. So, why wouldn't you want to encourage some of your talented people to spend a year doing that?

Serving on the Board is also a good way to learn about personnel issues and how to manage uncomfortable personnel situations. At the time, the way we were doing it, and I suspect it is still done this way, there are some people at the end of the exam who would not be moving on to the next level, candidates that didn't quite make it through the process. We examiners had to figure out a way to deliver the bad news in a way that would not be devastating to the person receiving it. Well, that was good practice because during my next assignment I had to fire people because we had a reduction in force and it was a very unpleasant thing to have to do, but because of my experience in Board of Examiners I figured out a way to do it in a way that was not going to be crass like the way in which some of my colleagues in other parts of the embassy delivered the news when they had to do their reduction of force. In some instances it felt like the person was simply told to get out! I mean, not that blunt, but almost. We've got to leave people with some kind of dignity. You can't just kick people to the curb after they've been working for the United States Government for X number of years.

Anyway, I learned some interesting things doing the Board of Examiners job that helped me manage human resource issues later on in my career. It was a valuable experience. And I still think that it should be a mixed group, not just people who are getting ready to leave the service, but also some who are going to continue on because I think you learn so much in that process. And you meet some of the most interesting characters. At the Board, we also had to respond to correspondence, and every so often we'd get letters from people who were incarcerated who for some reason wanted to take the exam. We

got all kinds of inquiries. We also had to evaluate folders for suitability after security investigators had done their background checks.

Q: Well, maybe you could just walk us through the process of-

JOHNSON: Yes, there were a lot of different things we did that I didn't realize was part of the process, but after I got there, I found it fascinating.

Q: Yes. So, tell me about it. What was the process and your role in the process?

JOHNSON: Well, we organized the oral exams. We decided which examiner would do what, who would play what role and how each of us would be assigned throughout the week with the different candidates who were coming in. But that was just a part of it. Some of it was sitting there and either asking the questions during the interviews or observing the group exercise. Then there was also a time of year when we would develop new questions and develop new case studies and new scenarios. There was answering correspondence. It would often entail doing research--sometimes it was easy, like finding out what was the status of someone's candidacy. Or it could be giving advice to someone who hadn't been successful but wanted to try again. If they just barely missed the cut off, we would always encourage them to do the process again if they were really interested, telling them that there was one gentleman who had been an ambassador and he took the orals five times before he finally got it. When he got in, he did well and ended up as an ambassador. So it's not necessarily that there is anything wrong with you, it's just that there are a limited number of slots and we can't accommodate everyone and have to figure out how to cut it off at some point. For those who were really close we always tried to encourage them to try again. Then there were others like a woman who was clearly troubled, who didn't have money to get a cab back to the airport to go back home, so our director gave her the cab fare. We had all kinds of unusual individuals come

through there. I think we came to find out that she had spent some time in a facility for mental illness. It was a sad situation. I mean—

Q: Now, these people, by the time they got to you they would have passed the oral exam?

JOHNSON: No, they would have passed the written exam.

Q: I'm sorry the written exam.

JOHNSON: Yes. And so, that made them-

Q: And had their medical or their security check at least?

JOHNSON: No, no. It was they passed—

Q: It was the other way around. Okay.

JOHNSON: They passed the written test so then they come for the oral. If they passed the oral, then the medical and the security check would be scheduled.

One of the other tasks we had was after the medical and the security checks were done, we had to go through the whole folder, as it were, to look at the whole candidacy and make a decision. There were some people who, when State did the background check, it became very clear that perhaps this was a contentious personality because none of the co-workers had anything good to say about them; that would be a "no" because we don't need this. Then there were other cases where the person clearly had a history of drug abuse and it wasn't just experimental one time and never again, but it was chronic. Oh, there were all kinds of things that would come out in the background check, so then it would be an issue of not being suitable for the service for one reason or another.

Those were some of the things that we had to do; development of new material was important because you couldn't have the same thing over and over again. One of the other things that happened was that all of these young people who went to Johns Hopkins University's SAIS or Georgetown University or Fletcher School of Law & Diplomacy, they would be debriefed after their oral so that they could list all the questions that were being asked and the professors could prep the next group. But that didn't always work because even if it was clear that they were prepped, it didn't always help some of them. While they had a competitive advantage, it didn't always result in them being successful when they took the orals. I think one of the things that sometimes folks didn't understand was the purpose of the group exercise. I think some of them thought that they were

supposed to show what a tough negotiator they were and by hook or by crook they were going to have their way. That approach didn't always make them look good.

It was an interesting exercise in—

Q: And this was an exam specifically for USIA?

JOHNSON: No, this was the Board of Examiners for State because State, Commerce and USIA, I believe, used it, or at least State and USIA used the Board of Examiners for the Foreign Service officers as well as for specialists. We also did oral exams for specialists, which was a slightly different process. These were for positions as a secretary or support staff or—I'm trying to remember if we did security, diplomatic security or some of the IT specialists. I can't remember all the different subspecialties, but we did some of the oral exams for specialists as well. That was very eye opening. The human condition is quite amazing sometimes.

Q: Yes, I suppose. And did you find it to be a satisfying experience?

JOHNSON: Yes. I'm glad I did it because as I mentioned, it helped me later on in different aspects of my career when I had to deal with all kinds of different personnel issues. I also learned a lot about the rules and the regulations and what's admissible and what's not and that kind of thing. I thought it a useful experience, and it did not hurt my career to spend a year there. Probably a mid-level officer wouldn't want to do more than a year in Board of Examiners, but I think it would be a good thing for State to encourage more mid-level officers to participate in that process because I think everybody benefits from something like that.

Q: And you weren't feeling like oh my goodness, I've got to get back to my USIA policy work again?

JOHNSON: No, no. Actually, I was in the process of bidding on my overseas assignment and at one point I was going to go to Haiti, but then I got pregnant and had my first son, and it was an unaccompanied post, and so I was like, this is not going to work. I had even started my Creole class but the only thing I remember is, "*bam nouvel ou?*" which is sort of like "what's happening?" Partway through my time at the Board, when people were evacuated and it became an unaccompanied post, I had to restart the bidding process. USIA was much more flexible in that regard than State in making changes and

adjustments when situations like that arose. That's how I ended up being assigned to Montevideo, Uruguay, as a public affairs officer because that was a family friendly post.

Q: Okay, so this would have been summer of 1991 that you were headed?

JOHNSON: No, no, '92. Remember, '91 to '92 was when I was at the Board of Examiners.

Q: So, when did you have your baby?

JOHNSON: He was born in December 1991. Part of my time at the Board of Examiners I was on maternity leave.

Q: And that was your first child. How was being a working mother, how did that work out?

JOHNSON: The biggest trauma was trying to figure day care. What was I going to do? Where was he going to go?

Q: Did Diplotots exist yet?

JOHNSON: No, that was not an option. I scoured ads, I visited places and it was just so horrible. But eventually I found a lovely lady named Mrs. Anna Howard not far from my house who ran an in-home daycare center that was spotless, and she was a delight. That worked out for a few months before we went overseas. It was nice being overseas because then we could actually find affordable household help. After a while our son could go to the bilingual nursery school and all of that. But yes, that was also an interesting adventure; looking for daycare in Washington that's affordable and that's good.

Q: Yes, I can imagine that would have been awfully hard. It's still awfully hard, I hear from everybody.

JOHNSON: It's a nightmare. And the frustrating thing is that we in the United States don't do a good job of setting up systems to care for the most vulnerable in our society, the very young and the aged. The people who care for our children and the people who care for our seniors are paid horribly and the work is very difficult sometimes. That's been one of my frustrations, that's one of the things that has saddened me the most, that in our country we haven't quite figured out how to take care of each other when we're in those fragile stages of life.

Q: Well, maybe this is a good place to ask you as well just more generally about being a parent and a woman in particular in the Foreign Service. Did you feel like you got the

kind of support you needed, the kind of recognition that you needed to have a life outside the office as well as inside the office?

JOHNSON: Well, let's see. That gets kind of complicated because not only was there the issue of gender, but there was the issue of race. Because one of the reasons why I wanted to go to Board of Examiners was because I felt that a lot of minority students didn't really understand or know what options were open to them, so I wanted to figure out ways to inspire or encourage African American and Latino students to consider those careers. But once you get in there's also the retention issue because sometimes folks would come in and feel isolated, alienated, and then not stay very long. I was very fortunate at USIA. What happened occurred organically. When I came into the Foreign Service in 1980 there were two other African American women in my group, and in the following class there were another couple of African American women. The more senior and experienced African American women in USIA took us under their wings and gave us advice on how to navigate the system. For the times that we overlapped, because many of them were just coming in and rotating out, and just in Washington briefly. So they weren't around a long time, but we set up a little network and support system. As the years passed, as more African American women came in, we all got to know each other.

Harriet Elam-Thomas was one of the leaders. She eventually became counselor of USIA before the merger. Harriet was one of the first persons that I met, along with Rosemary Crockett, and Marilyn Hulbert. They were more experienced and they took us under their wings and gave us a lot of good advice on how to balance work-life and personal-life. They also discussed what kinds of jobs to bid on, which kinds of jobs would be career enhancing. Eventually, both State Department and USIA developed formal mentoring programs, but in the early '80s those kinds of programs didn't exist. They weren't in vogue in the business world at that time either. This was a little ad hoc group, and we eventually gave ourselves the name The Gathering, and we would get together for lunch. We also went to some of the activities of the Thursday Luncheon Group (TLG) that, again, would have speakers and more experienced people at those lunches, and the speakers would give us advice on assignments and work/life balance and that kind of thing. (Note: I remain a member of TLG and surviving members of The Gathering, although retired, still meet periodically.)

So, I was very fortunate. I met a lot of people who took an interest in helping me understand how to navigate the bureaucracy. It's like everything in life. If you're open to taking advice and sharing information then things kind of work out. There were instances where I had to deal with some knuckleheaded people, but I never took it personally, and I always tried to take the high road and be professional and do my job to the best of my ability. I tried to make my bosses look good because when you make your boss look good they're happy and all is right in the universe. But I think one always has to be vigilant and try to do what one could to balance things, because the job demands what it demands, and it doesn't really care about your personal life. If you don't figure out a modus vivendi and set parameters and figure out how to balance things, it will just chew you up and spit you out. It does that to men and women. But because women invariably seemed to have

more going on in their personal lives than men, it could be challenging at times. It's just the way, I think, our society has evolved; nothing is ever simple.

Q: Yes. Well, this is interesting, though. So, this Gathering, as you called it, and the Thursday Lunch Group was specifically for minority women?

JOHNSON: The Gathering was for minority women. The Thursday Luncheon Group is an affinity group for African Americans in international affairs, and started out with several African American State Department officers and then it expanded to include USAID, USIA and other African American professionals in international affairs. It was a networking opportunity and it still exists. Thursday Luncheon Group (TLG) has continued to grow and thrive. Nowadays TLG has partnered with AFSA (American Foreign Service Association) to sponsor interns and offer opportunities to African American students who are interested in international affairs, and they've had some wonderful young people come through that I've met. TLG is just one of many affinity groups at State Department—there's an affinity group for the Latinx officers, Asian American officers, and LGBTQ officers. There are all kinds of different groups within—subgroups I would say, people who have something in common and feel that by coming together they can help each other advance through the ranks. Then, of course, there are the overall mentoring programs that go across the board that are open to everybody. So, I believe over time the United States Government has understood that it's a good thing to nurture employees and set them up for success as opposed to fostering kissing up and kicking down, which is still practiced in certain quarters. My philosophy always was I don't have to make someone look bad to make myself look good. And in fact, if we help each other out it's a more productive use of everyone's time. There are still people out there who don't necessarily believe that, so it makes it hard sometimes. But I've been very fortunate in my career that I was able to avoid working with people who were going

to make me crazy—mainly because of the good advice and counsel I got from my mentors.

Q: Well, if you avoided that you did better than most of us, I guess.

JOHNSON: There were some situations that gave me headaches; it's the nature of life. But the good thing about the Foreign Service is either that person will rotate out or you will rotate out. You just have to get through the difficult time and avoid the shoals.

Q: Exactly.

Okay, well perhaps that's a good place for us to stop this time. And the next time we'll take up from Uruguay.

JOHNSON: Yes, yes. And I'll try and make some notes here about what I was doing in the different places.

Q: Okay, thank you.

Today is October 10, 2018, and this is Peter Eicher continuing the oral history of Cynthia Farrell Johnson.

Cynthia, when we left off last time you had finished up what I think was a Washington assignment-

JOHNSON: Board of Examiners.

Q: -and were about to go to Uruguay. And maybe I can start by asking you either to review or to tell me how you ended up with an assignment to Uruguay, and whether it was something you were wanting to do.

JOHNSON: Well, yes, but it came after my having been assigned to go to Haiti. But at the time, with a six-month-old and a lot of political turmoil in Haiti before I even got there, they had decided that dependents should not go to post. That was a non-starter for me. So we went back to the drawing board to look at options and vacancies and possibilities. It was too bad because I had already started taking some Creole classes, and I had been fascinated with Haiti because of the connection to Benin, which was one of my earlier assignments. There had been Haitians who had traveled back and forth between Benin and Haiti because of the Voodoo religion connection and other historical and cultural connections. I was interested and curious about the culture and the history and all of that, but it was not meant to be. We eventually got reassigned to Uruguay, and that actually worked out even better for my husband, who was not a French speaker, and would have probably had to take some French classes and figure out what to do in Haiti since he wasn't bilingual in French—but he was bilingual in Spanish. Uruguay seemed like it would be a good fit for a number of reasons. For one, I was told it was a very

family friendly post. For some single people I knew, they felt it was boring. I wanted family friendly, so that worked for me.

And it was a place with a complicated past. Well, let me describe a little bit of the history. There had been that period when Uruguay and Argentina had military dictatorships and there had been human rights abuses; there was this history of unpleasantness and violence.

Q: Could I stop you there, and I should have asked at the beginning, what year are we talking about?

JOHNSON: Oh, yes, that's very important. Let's see; this must have been 19—I was there four years—so it would have been 1992. We were there from '92 to '96.

Q: Okay. So, the summer of '92. I'm sorry; I should have gotten that at the beginning.

JOHNSON: Yes, the summer of '92. Yes, because my son was born in '91, so yes, he wasn't even a year old when we went down there.

Q: And you were initially assigned for a two-year assignment?

JOHNSON: No. In USIA that was a four-year assignment. It was a non-hardship post, so it was a four-year assignment. For me it was, of course, a hardship because they have winter and I don't like winter. But it was the strangest kind of thing from the standpoint of climate because they had palm trees, and the first house we lived in had an avocado tree in the backyard and yes, they did have winter, but they didn't have snow and freezes like we have. Someone compared it to the Pacific Northwest that gets lots of rain and gets chilly and cold, but no snow, normally. When we got down there, we found out that despite the seemingly almost tropical season, the winters were pretty bleak and pretty harsh at times. We experienced bone-chilling cold because of the humidity. There's nothing stopping that cold air coming up from Antarctica. Periodically penguins would wash up on the shore at the fish market. They had a small group of baby penguins at the fish market that were quite the attraction. It was an interesting place from that standpoint.

We arrived in June. That was the year that the entire year was winter because when we arrived in the Southern Hemisphere, winter was setting in. In the Northern Hemisphere, at least in the Washington area, it had been a cold, clammy spring. It was misery! A whole year of winter! The upside was, of course, when we left, we got a whole year of summer. Uruguay is a small country of about three million people and it's not densely populated. I think half of the population lives in the capital city, Montevideo, and the other half is scattered throughout the rest of the country. Uruguayans have this love-hate relationship with their larger neighbor, Argentina. As I recall, they seemed to like the Brazilians better than the Argentines. I think their quibble with the Argentines was that they came over en masse in the summertime and seemed to take over Punta del Este and some of the other beach communities. There was this love-hate relationship where it's basically good for the economy to have folks come and spend their money and their

vacation and all of that, but then sometimes it seemed that it got a bit overwhelming. So, there was that.

Uruguay had all kinds of interesting cultural traditions and they had the Mercado del Puerto where you could go down there for a great meal. They're very much into barbecue, asador and every middle-class home that we ever visited had a backyard barbecue pit built above ground out of brick. That was one of the ways people got together and socialized, and it was a good way to meet people and get to know who was who in the country.

The country also had a small Afro-Uruguayan community as well. There were actually a lot of different cultural enclaves. First, as I recall being told, the English put in their utilities, so there was an Anglican church that on Remembrance Day had a service with a bagpiper named Jimmy Stewart who spoke not a word of English. He was descended from one of the British families that had come over to install the utilities. But there were also quite a few bilingual descendants from those British immigrants there, and the church we attended was a bilingual non-denominational Protestant church. Many of the members were these bilingual English descendants. Then there was a town called Colonia de Sacramento not far from Montevideo, with people whose ancestors came from Germany and Switzerland. They made cheeses. I'm not sure, but I believe some of them probably arrived after the various European wars. Then, there were a lot of Basques because of sheep farming. There were also lots and lots of descendants of Italians and Spaniards. Many Uruguayans had dual Italian and Uruguayan citizenship, or Spanish and Uruguayan citizenship. Another important group there were the Armenians. As I recall, some of them owned a popular radio station.

It was a very Eurocentric country. They looked to Europe and there were lots of close ties to Europe. There was also a very active Jewish community in Montevideo; in the whole country, but concentrated in Montevideo. This community had close ties with the Jewish community in Argentina. And the Afro-Uruguayan and the Jewish communities worked together much like how the Jewish community and the African American community work together on civil rights issues here in the U.S. So, that was interesting.

There are so many things about the society down there, though, that reminded me of the situation regarding civil rights and race relations in the U.S. during the 1950s and '60s. It mainly had to do with some of the attitudes. But it was so much more complicated than just race. You could not always say that people were discriminated against because they were black because there were also issues related to what group you were in. For example, if you went to the British School and rose through that system, you were more likely to be able to become a resident at the British Hospital, which was like the premiere hospital. Whereas, if you didn't go to the British School you were in a different category, and you went to the public university, but you would probably never get attending privileges at the British hospital. Even though universities were free, you had to be able to afford to go to university, which means you had to be able to have a place to live and feed yourself and all of that. If you were in a wealthy or an upper middle-class or even a middle-class family, it means that you lived at home and you could go to the university.

But if you were in a working-class or poor family, you might have to get out there and work, and it would be very difficult for you to find the time to go get a university degree. It didn't matter what color you were; if you didn't have the means, it was more difficult.

So, there are all these different categories and layers. Figuring out and understanding all these dynamics and some of the complaints and comments that people would make, it was fascinating to observe. There were also some of these really archaic ideas about race, like blood from a black person is different than a white person, which has been debunked ages ago, but there were still people who thought that that was true. And I remember, my husband and I, he's not African American, he's from the great state of Wyoming and so, we are a mixed marriage. He's Republican, I'm a Democrat. He's white, I'm black. We're mixed on many levels.

Since there was a Partners of the Americas relationship between Minnesota and Uruguay, we had all kinds of professors from different universities coming and going back and forth, and we did programs with colleges and universities in Minnesota and local Uruguayan universities. One program involved connecting the public university in Uruguay with administrators because at that time the rector was trying to figure out efficiencies and resolve their administrative problems. We were helping them with that through various exchange programs. But then, there were private schools, like the University of St. Thomas, that had an international business MBA program, and some of the courses were in Uruguay and some were up in the U.S. St. Thomas had a relationship with the Jesuit school, the Catholic University of Uruguay. One of the professors, I think it was a Professor Giordano from St. Thomas, if I remember correctly, he came to Montevideo and wanted to do some classes on international and intercultural relations. He invited me to come and participate in one of the classes, and he also invited my husband to come on a different day. And just to give you an idea, these were bright, middle-class students, but at one point Professor Giordano mentioned that one of the students said to him, "I don't understand why this fellow married the maid." The student said that because he could not envision a black person in any other role than one of service. And in part it was because there were such limited options for Afro-Uruguayans to advance through society or access higher education. Before I left, I had a farewell luncheon and I could fit all the college-educated, Afro-Uruguayan women in Montevideo around my dining table.

Q: Oh, my.

JOHNSON: I think that's changed in the decades since, I'm sure it's changed, but at that time, yes, it was, in the '90s it was still difficult for people of color to be upwardly mobile. That's why I say it reminded me in so many ways of our country but way back when, before there was a push to facilitate progress and enable people who traditionally had not had access to higher education to actually have access. (Note: We still have a long way to go in terms of true equality.) That was an interesting experience. After, let's see, the two assignments in Africa and then one in Panama, I had always been in places where it was majority people of color. In Africa, obviously, it was majority black, and then in Panama it's very mixed because you've got folks from all over the globe. Panama

had this very large, vibrant community of people who had descended either from blacks who came with the Spaniards, or blacks from the Caribbean who came to build the canal. Uruguay was the first time I was in a place where there was a different dynamic. There were groups of Afro-Uruguayans who were civil rights activists, trying to push for more accessibility and more of a voice and more opportunities. During the time I was there it was the UN year against racism and xenophobia, so there were all kinds of activities related to those issues.

Soon after my arrival, of course, there were photos in the newspaper about the new public affairs officer at the U.S. embassy. When the reporters found out that I was also an artist, there was discussion of that in the article as well. Then I got some phone calls or rather the secretary, Eloisa Herran, started getting phone calls from some of the Afro-Uruguayan leaders who wanted to meet with me. That started this relationship where I got to know some of the activists in the Afro-Uruguayan community, as well as folks who were active in the cultural community. There were a lot of different cultural groups. I should note that the Africans who were enslaved in Uruguay were mainly urban. It wasn't like the U.S. plantation system. These enslaved people were house servants, which contributed to the thinking of that student who viewed every black woman as a maid. Their roles were maid, seamstress, child-care provider, stuff like that. So, there were white Uruguayans who couldn't see women of African descent in roles other than that of servant. There was a woman who was working at one of the UN agencies, she was Guyanese, a black Guyanese, and she said she couldn't tell me how many times when she would be driving around when people would just whip their heads around; they couldn't believe that there was a black woman driving a car, because you didn't see that. It was an unusual kind of a thing to observe and realize that there's this dynamic going on.

Q: Well, let me ask you, how did that affect you, if at all, professionally if, okay, you had the Afro-Uruguayans community looking you up, but how about the ordinary Uruguayans? Were you accepted? Could you do your job?

JOHNSON: Oh, yes, yes.

Q: Did you feel discriminated against?

JOHNSON: Sure. I could do my job because of my title, because they knew I was an American, they had the usual events where you meet the post's contacts and you meet the folks that the office has been working with traditionally and all of that. But I had to be careful when I answered my door for events for people who didn't know me because they would just walk right in and want to know where the host is, and I'd say I'm the public affairs officer. It was awkward, but you don't take it personally because it's a new thing for them. That's why I say it was an interesting experience. There were odd little things that would happen, and I was like oh, wow, this is another world and a totally different mindset. For the most part, folks were very gracious and warm and welcoming. However, there were times when I'd go into a store and sometimes staff would follow me around, thinking maybe I was up to no good. I had a cousin who came to visit—may she rest in peace—she came and stayed with me for a few months. One afternoon, she went to a

store in a mall close to our home and the security guard started following her around. She got so exasperated she whipped out her Mastercard and said in Spanish, "Look, I can buy this whole store so please, stop following me, I'm not going to steal anything." She did not suffer fools gladly. But yes, it was one of those things where every now and then some odd little thing would happen, and you knew it was because they just weren't used to dealing with people of color and engaging with them at a certain level. I haven't been back there in ages, and I'd love to go back and see how things have changed, because I'm sure they have, but I'm wondering how much. Because like I said, it's not always cut and dried that it's about race. Sometimes it's about economic class. It's never simple; it's always complicated.

Q: So, you were the public affairs officer, and what was the USIA staff at the time?

JOHNSON: Well, when I got there, we had an information officer, a cultural affairs officer, an assistant cultural affairs officer who was in charge of binational center programs; so four people. But this was the '90s, so there were all kinds of budget cuts taking place, and all kinds of funding decisions being made. Some of them I thought were shortsighted. My thing is that if you really want to understand a place, you have to engage people and build relationships. If you cut yourself off and only limit who you're engaging to a very narrow group of people, you're not going to reach everyone you need to reach, and you also have a skewed view of the country. The saving grace was that the Foreign Service National staff was outstanding. When headquarters decided that we weren't going to support binational centers in the way that we had in the past, they cut the American binational center director position. Actually, I believe that happened before I got there; management of that relationship already had been altered. The U. S. Information Service (USIS) library was still in the binational center, which was across town from the embassy where the Public Affairs Office was located. It wasn't that far. It was closer to the downtown business district, and the embassy was in a more residential area, on the edge of the business district.

Q: Co-located with the embassy?

JOHNSON: Yes. USIS offices, as they were called then, were co-located inside the embassy and the embassy was located on the edge of the business district. The binational center and our library were right in the downtown business district. In addition to the library, the binational center had a very robust theatrical program. It also offered English classes and housed a bilingual nursery school, which my young son went to when he was of age. It was a vibrant and active place—there was always lots going on. During that period, USIS libraries were like public libraries where basically anyone could go in and use the facilities, read the magazines and peruse the bookshelves—it was open access. Over the four years that I was there all of that changed.

As I had said, headquarters had eliminated the position for the assistant cultural affairs officer, who had served as the binational center director. Then leadership looked at how we were configured and decided that maybe we didn't need a press officer—an information officer (IO) position. At that same time, it seemed, they had assigned a

tandem couple; one was going to be the cultural affairs officer (CAO) and the other was going to be the IO. When I got wind that they were thinking of eliminating the information officer position, I thought it made no sense to assign a tandem couple if you were going to cut one of the jobs. So, we had some back and forth, and that assignment was broken. When the person who was serving as the IO left, she was not replaced because they had already decided they were going to cut that position.

Q: And you as PAO inherited that portfolio in addition to your management role?

JOHNSON: Right. And since I had been information officer in Panama before, I had experienced doing that. We had, like I said, a fabulous locally employed staff of Uruguayans who had the whole place wired. They knew everybody everywhere, not just in Montevideo but they had a great network around the country. Rubek Orlando was the lead press person; he knew everyone everywhere, and was great at organizing not just my travel to meet our contacts in different parts of the country, but he was usually also heavily involved in working on ambassadorial trips to make sure that the ambassador met all the right people when he went into the interior of the country, as well as in Montevideo. Rubek was first-rate. All of the staff members were great. But because there was no American running the press section it fell to him, basically, and Rubek Orlando was very good at what he did.

Q: Well, it reinforces again how important our locally employed staff is.

JOHNSON: Absolutely, absolutely. If I could give one bit of advice to new officers going overseas, it would be to make sure the locally employed staff becomes your best friends because they will save your bacon any number of times, and in any number of ways. They know the country inside out, and when you have good ones it's very good. If you have weak ones, it's very bad.

Q: Do you recall what the reason was for all of the cuts? This must have been right about the beginning of the Clinton Administration, I guess, '92?

JOHNSON: Well, it was Congress and the powers-that-be who had decided that since the Cold War was over, we didn't really need to have so many people on the ground.

Q: Oh, that's right, we won, so we didn't need to

JOHNSON: Yes, the rationale was we didn't really need to win friends and influence people because we were the only remaining superpower. It seemed that the decision makers did not see why we needed to do all of this programming. The world likes us and will do whatever we ask. To be honest, I don't know what the rationale was; it made no sense to me. My thinking was, you buy insurance in case you need it, and you might never need it, but if you need it you have it. Having a good network of relationships in a country is like insurance. If you understand what's going on, you won't get blindsided by a decision that you were not counting on. If you have the right connections and relationships you won't get surprised and you won't be blindsided. In so many countries,

someone may have a title but that doesn't necessarily mean that they are influencing decisions. It's the informal as well as the formal relationships within societies that matter. If you're spending all your time responding to emails and cables and messages from Washington and you're chained to your desk and you can't get out and meet people where they are and understand some of these personal dynamics, then you miss a lot of stuff. In Uruguay, lots of times people didn't invite you to their homes; they got together in restaurants. But when you extended an invitation as a diplomat to have people come to your home, folks usually responded positively, and that was a good way of building relationships.

One of the first programs I worked on when we got there involved the Thunderbirds. The U.S. Air Force Thunderbirds were coming to town. So, we went over and met with the public affairs staff for the Uruguayan Air Force and worked out all the things that needed to be done and had a good program. Everybody was nice, and everything worked out well. As a thank you I invited the Uruguayan officers, along with the USIS press section staff, to the house for lunch. Also present was my husband, Stephen C. Johnson, who at the time was a major and a reservist in the U.S. Air Force, connected to Southern Command's public affairs division. (Because of his innovations and hard work, by the time we left Uruguay, he was promoted to Lt. Col.) When the Uruguayan Air Force staff came over to lunch, they got to talking, then one of the officers, it wasn't the colonel, it was one of the lieutenant colonels, said you know, we don't have a career track for public affairs in the Uruguayan military; we're just thrown into this job and we have to figure out how to do it along the way. It would be great if we could have some kind of training. Colonel Bernabe Gadea, who was a very outgoing, hail-fellow-well-met kind of guy who had also served in Antarctica, seized on the idea. He said to my husband, "Ah, you're public affairs. Maybe you can help us put together a training course for our guys. I have an empty desk out at the air force base, why don't you come out there and help us?" Now, in the meantime my husband had also gotten a part-time job with the Office of Defense Cooperation, so they discussed it and his boss, Colonel Curt Morris, agreed that it was a good idea. It turns out the U.S. military had been investing lots of money training Latin American military officers, but they had never done any type of public affairs training. Nothing existed in Spanish for training public affairs military officers and staff. So, Steve got hold of the army's public affairs manual, and I think they contracted with someone to translate it and he did some tweaks and added additional material from commercial public relations textbooks to it. He put together a cookbook and reached out to Rubek Orlando, who gave him advice on Uruguayan public relations experts. Steve

and Rubek formed a group with the Uruguayan Air Force officers, and they designed a course and cookbook, a manual.

Q: No, a cookbook. You don't mean a kitchen cookbook.

JOHNSON: A how-to.

Q: How-to book, yes.

JOHNSON: A how-to manual for public affairs in Spanish, everything in Spanish, and they sent it up to Southern Command for their blessing. South Com recommended some changes and Steve made all the changes. Then, because at that time we still had a little printing operation in the U.S. Information Service, we collaborated with the Office of Defense Cooperation and USIS produced the books for the inaugural, pilot course. They did a pilot training course in Uruguay and got the bugs out. When they got it where they felt it was in good shape, Southern Command started offering this course to other militaries in the region. So, my husband would go off periodically to different countries, with support from the local public affairs staff, because they were the ones who knew the PR folks in their countries, and they would put together the teams that would work with him. The training ended up working out very well. I think they're still doing it; but I don't know who does it now. I think that it became part of what Southern Command and the U.S. military does in the region. And it all started around our dining table in Montevideo.

Q: What a great story and what a good example of interagency cooperation even among the Americans, which you don't always see.

JOHNSON: Yes, exactly. To me that was important. Understanding what other people in our mission were doing and how the U.S. Information Service could add value and enhance, support, and project the message in an appropriate way and be helpful to our colleagues mattered, because we all had the same goal, after all. The same thing with the Uruguayan military; they realized that they needed a better way to do what they were doing, and when they found out that we might be able to help them, then that worked really well. The focus was not just on the military talking to the public; it was also about internal communication, how do you as an organization communicate with the people within the military and make sure that everyone's on the same page in terms of the values and the message that you want to project? How do you ensure that your institutions are supporting the democratic process? There were lots of different things that were a part of that program and a number of goals that this particular initiative was addressing.

So, yes, collaboration within the mission as well as with our local interlocutors was critical to achieving goals. We had the same goals, basically, to ensure that there was

good communication and respect for the public, respect for the civilian leadership; all those kinds of things.

Q: Now, Uruguay must have been a democracy at the time, I hope, if we were giving military cooperation?

JOHNSON: It was an interesting time because, yes, it was a very robust democracy. Many of the people who had been guerrillas during the period when there was a dictatorship were in the different political parties and had leadership positions. By the time we left, the mayor of Montevideo was from the leftist party, the Frente Amplio (Broad Front). That party was made up of people who had been part of the resistance to the military dictatorship. So, yes, the political scene had people from right to left and everything in between; those who had been fighting each other had evolved. But there were still residual resentments. There were people who were staunchly anti-military because they might have lost friends or relatives during the Dirty War. And it is totally understandable why they might have been skeptical or not totally trusting of the military. But all of the Uruguayans seemed to work hard at reconciliation and were trying to move forward, making the reforms and doing the necessary things for greater transparency and accountability. That was a big part of some of the activities and programs that we supported. By the time I got there, the Uruguayans were well on their way. It had been quite some time already since the end of the bad times, as it were. One U.S. diplomat had gotten kidnapped and murdered by the Tupamaros, a leftist guerrilla group that was active in the 1960s and 70s. His name was Dan Mitrione. It was a well-known and sad story. So, yes, there were all kinds of things that had occurred and there was a lot of history, but Uruguay was in a very different place and a better place in trying to make sure whatever problems they had had in the past were not repeated. They didn't want to relive that history.

Q: Well, you mentioned the Thunderbirds; were there other important exchanges or well-known people going back and forth?

JOHNSON: Oh, goodness. We had all kinds of folks who would come through. I'm thinking of some of the jazz musicians who came through. Folks down there loved jazz and loved the blues; they loved American music. I think it was maybe toward the end of my assignment there Terence Blanchard, who had created the musical score for a number of Spike Lee films, came down with his group to perform.

Q: Was that a USIA program?

JOHNSON: Yes. USIA sent him on a tour of the region. This was before he got so famous that we wouldn't have been able to afford to bring him down. He was already well known and had made a name for himself in the jazz world, so we felt really fortunate that he had agreed to do a public diplomacy tour through Latin America.

I'm trying to think who else came down. There was another jazz great. I'll have to thumb through my notes. (Subsequent research revealed that shortly before his death from

lymphoma in 1995, the embassy also hosted Don Pullen, who was sent out on tour by the U.S. Information Agency. Although his performances in June 1994 went well, at the farewell reception we hosted, he was clearly not feeling well and spent most of the time sitting on the couch enveloped in my down coat. In an old calendar, I noted that the performances were well received, the piano held tune, and there were two curtain calls at his second performance on June 26, 1994.)

Q: If nothing springs to mind you can add them in later.

JOHNSON: Yes, yes.

Q: You must have had congressional visits-

JOHNSON: Oh, yes. One of the more fun ones was when our ambassador was Thomas Dodd. Our first ambassador was the late Ambassador Brown. I think his first name was Richard.

Q: Well, one more you can add as we go through. Don't disrupt your train of thought on it.

JOHNSON: Ambassador Richard C. Brown had been a political officer in Uruguay earlier in his career. It was really exciting for him to return as ambassador. He was the ambassador there when I arrived. And one of my first tasks was to coordinate and organize the activities surrounding the fiftieth anniversary of the ambassadorial residence being opened in Montevideo. He wanted to have an art exhibition and several other activities, which we were able to pull off. We even did a little brochure that gave the history of the building, and I believe there had been a legation first and then we had established full relations. It's a beautiful residence, and so it was a fun project, but it certainly took a lot of time and energy. It was a nice goodwill thing, but it was sort of like goodness gracious, is this really a priority? But that's what you do when the ambassador insists.

Q: Yes, indeed.

JOHNSON: Ambassador Brown was there for, I guess, about a year and change, and I came back to the States on maternity leave and when I returned we had a new ambassador, Thomas Dodd, a Georgetown University professor of Latin American studies. His brother was then-Senator Christopher Dodd. Of course, Senator Dodd came to visit his brother and had all kinds of meetings with Uruguayan officials and private sector movers and shakers. At one point we had a reception at my house because his visit coincided with the Terrence Blanchard visit. Chris Dodd came to the house with Ambassador Dodd because the ambassador came for all these types of events. Ambassador Dodd loved coming to all of our cultural programs, and he wasn't going to miss the event we were having with Terence Blanchard. And Chris Dodd came, too. We all had a great time—it was a highlight. It was nice to have that relaxed a gathering because usually when you get a CODEL or a senatorial delegation in town, everything is

at the ambassador's residence and it's very formal and very stiff. But this was a little more relaxed because it was his brother coming to visit and spend some time; it was a bit different.

Q: Yes, that's fun.

JOHNSON: It was a lot of fun.

Other highlights. Oh.

Q: Well, I expect you must have had naval visits as well, huh?

JOHNSON: You know…there's nothing that stands out. I'll have to go back and look through. I'm sure we did. (The embassy hosted annual naval visits during my time in Uruguay, but they were all positive and well received, as I learned when I subsequently went through old calendars.)

Q: Really? Okay. It seemed like the kind of place _____.

JOHNSON: Yes, yes, I'm sure we did, but nothing jumps out right now.

Q: Okay. You did mention very briefly earlier on that you traveled around the country.

JOHNSON: Yes.

Q: Maybe you could talk a little bit about that.

JOHNSON: Okay. We visited other parts of the country on a regular basis. There were two things that we were usually supporting when we did that. The Voice of America was just beginning to deliver programming via satellite and other means, but as I recall, they were still also sending programs in other formats. Consequently, we would visit radio stations that were using Voice of American programming to get feedback and find out how we might be more effective in providing programming that would be popular with their audiences. I'm pretty sure the radio stations must have had satellite dishes and other means of obtaining content, because this was just when the internet was beginning to take hold, and the telephone company in Uruguay, I believe, was the initial internet service provider in the country. The phone company was trying to figure out how this new technology was going to work—they did not want it to cut into their revenue as a communication company. That's a whole other discussion. Anyway, we would go around and visit the radio stations, find out how they were using our programs, what was working for them, what they wanted more of or what they wanted that we were not providing. Sometimes the Latin America director for the Voice of America, Richard Araujo, would come down and he would travel around the country with us as well.

The other thing that we would do when we went into the interior of the country was to make sure we visited the local binational centers where they were teaching English. I was

always amazed when we traveled to these places and met with the teachers and some of the students because so many of them sounded like they had grown up in the U.S.! Sometimes the centers would have special activities and I could chat with the teachers. Some of them had never left Uruguay, but their English was excellent. These binational center affiliates had really good English language programs. They took advantage of the different resources that we had to offer, but I'm pretty sure that they had other ways of getting material that they needed. I think that was also the time when cable television was taking off, so they could get English language programming without going through the embassy. The world was shrinking.

Q: Yes. CNN was taking off about that time and so forth.

JOHNSON: CNN had already taken off because it was-

Q: The Gulf War, yes.

JOHNSON: And one of the CNN international network's Spanish-language anchors, Jorge Gestoso, was a Uruguayan, so of course that channel was very popular. People used both the English and the Spanish language broadcasts.

Going to the interior of the country was always interesting because I got a sense of what was going on, what people's priorities were, what they were concerned about, and how they were using our material. Sometimes we took books and magazines and other kinds of USIS publications as gifts, sometimes in Spanish, sometimes in English depending on the recipient and the activities we were supporting. At the time, there was a program that the United States Government had to translate certain books, and they were printed as paperbacks in the regional service center in Manila. We could order these books at a very minimal cost and distribute them to our contacts, depending on their areas of interest. When we went to the interior we would always go with books, magazines and other things to support the programs of the binational centers as well as for the journalists and the cultural mavens with whom we were meeting.

Now, in certain places they had museums, and as we made the rounds. One of the things that came up in a number of places was the need for better museum administration or management. The staff often said that they really wished that there was a way to train people in arts administration because so many of the municipalities had cultural programs and they were struggling, trying to figure out how to get the most out of it and how to manage limited resources in the most efficient way. That was when arts administration here in the U.S. was really becoming a thing, and there were actually training programs in universities. I also think some of our Fulbrighters started inquiring about that type of training. The long-time head of the Fulbright Commission, Renee Abaracón, retired and a new one came onboard, Mercedes Jiménez de Aréchaga. Mercedes was a lawyer but also a Fulbright program alumnae, who had lots of ideas about partnerships. With all the budget cuts for our programs across the board in USIA, we said well, we're going to have to work on getting some partnerships. When I started talking to her about some of the folks in the interior of the country who were interested in arts administration, she said

well maybe we could get some of the business community to support a scholarship for arts administration. As I recall, we had conversations with some of the Fulbright alumni. One of them was with the Bank of Boston Foundation, and we were eventually able to work something out where the Bank of Boston provided some funding for an arts administration Fulbright.

Now, this was all new because up until then, the Fulbright program in Uruguay was 100 percent United States Government funded. In many other countries the host country usually provided funding for the Fulbright program. But, that had never been the case in Uruguay. So, we began exploring ways to get additional funding for a couple of expanded programs, like the teacher exchange program. We were finally able to succeed, after discussions with the Ministry of Education and Culture. The ministry agreed to provide $25,000, which was major. It was the first time the Uruguayan government had ever funded any kind of Fulbright exchange, and I believe it went to the teacher exchange program because they were also looking at their education system and trying to figure out how to make some meaningful changes. I think they were looking at how to create a more robust vocational program and other kinds of fixes to what they saw with the ever-changing world. They felt that they needed to change some of the ways they educated their young people. We had programs working with the university, but also working with the Ministry of Education and Culture on public education and that kind of thing.

I'm going to have to go back and look through my notes to help refresh my memory, but I do remember that they gave funding for this teacher exchange, and the first one was not what I would call a rip-roaring success because the exchange was with a teacher in a school in Richmond, California. At the time, Richmond, California, was having a lot of problems. It was not exactly the safest community, so there were some issues that arose. I would have to go back and look to check to see if I even have anything that indicates what went on with that, but I remember that it was a challenging and disappointing exchange.

Q: And the exchange was actually when a Uruguayan teacher went there and a teacher from Richmond came to Montevideo?

JOHNSON: Exactly. Because it was a Fulbright teacher exchange.

But the traditional Fulbright program where they go off for academic degree and the Hubert Humphrey Fellowship and all the other different kinds of fellowships, those were all managed through the Fulbright Commission, and we had great alumni who were very supportive of some of what we were trying to do, and also good contacts with the embassy who helped us understand all kinds of things that occurred throughout the society. To show our gratitude, I started a tradition of doing a Thanksgiving dinner because the Fulbright alumni said of all the holidays in the U.S. they always found Thanksgiving to be one they really liked because of the family orientation of that holiday. They remembered with fondness the warmth that was exuded in the households that they

went to when they were in the U.S. So, we started doing Thanksgiving dinners for the Fulbright alum and those were fun.

Q: You could find turkeys?

JOHNSON: Yes, we could, as a matter of fact. There was a modest commissary setup at the embassy that would order and have things flown in that we couldn't get on the local market. We got the cranberry sauce and the turkey and other odds and ends that we couldn't find locally, and then we'd also have local fare that fit right in and it went pretty well. Those were really good events because it cemented relationships. It was an opportunity for others in the mission get to know the alumni—because we didn't have it on Thanksgiving Day. We usually had it on a different day around the Thanksgiving period, and then sometimes other folks from the embassy would come and meet Uruguayans that normally they might not have had an opportunity to meet. It was a nice way to get people together.

Q: You talked about being surprised how good some of the teachers' English was.

JOHNSON: Yes.

Q: Now, your Spanish must have been fluent by that point.

JOHNSON: Yes, yes.

Q: So, you didn't have any trouble in that regard?

JOHNSON: I think when I left Panama I tested out at 4/4 Spanish so it was good. And I did radio and TV interviews and interviews with print media. I also gave lectures at the—well, not lectures but talks at the university. I remember we had one professor who asked me to come and talk about the U.S. diplomatic system; how the Foreign Service career worked in the U.S. as opposed to in Uruguay. I think Uruguayans go through a certain course of study that is like the pipeline into the diplomatic service, whereas ours in the U.S. is competitive, with any and everybody applying. Since I'd worked at the Board of

Examiners that made it even easier to talk about how people are selected and what the U.S. Government looks for when recruiting people.

Q: Did you find time to continue with your art?

JOHNSON: Oh, yes. Oh, yes, I still had a little room off to the side where I had my paints and I would disappear in there from time to time. Even with my two children under the age of three, I still found time to paint, and I even did an exhibition before I left.

Q: So, did you have a child in Uruguay?

JOHNSON: Well, I had him here in the U.S. I came here-

Q: You came home _____.

JOHNSON: -for maternity leave because—to have the baby here in the U.S. because my parents and in-laws were not going to be flying down to Uruguay for the christening. I figured there's a better chance of them coming to see us and meeting the baby if we were in Washington than if we were in Montevideo. Yes, we came back home when my second son was born and went back down to Uruguay when he was six weeks old.

And I guess when he was 18 months, I can't remember what the age was, I think 18 months or something like that that was when children could enroll at the Alianza nursery school. So he eventually attended the binational center's bilingual nursery school with his older brother. That was a wonderful program. The school had a child psychologist who came in and evaluated all the children. She was a Fulbright program alum, so she was completely bilingual. Ironically, she was the one who said there's something going on with your older son that is not just a problem caused by being in a bilingual environment. Usually kids who are in a bilingual environment are late talkers because they're trying to process all of this confusing language switching, but she said there's something else going on there beyond the normal delay in speech. We even noticed it because at a certain point our younger son was talking circles around his older brother, who was mainly silent. She suggested we take him for an evaluation. This was around the time when we were preparing to rotate out of Uruguay. That was a wonderful gift, because if you nip things like that in the bud, if you catch it early, the interventions can have an important effect in ameliorating or in figuring out what interventions would be needed to draw him out. I had the utmost respect for that program. The staff really did a good job of evaluating the kids' strengths and weaknesses, and we had periodic sit-downs with the teachers about the children's progress and whether they were on track. If there was something that wasn't quite right, we learned what we could do to keep them on track. That was a great nursery school!

At one point, let's see, I can't remember whether it was halfway through or three-quarters of the way through that more draconian cuts were made by Washington. We were told in no uncertain terms we had to close the library in the binational center, move it into the embassy, and we would only be servicing our contacts. We were no longer going to be

servicing the general public in our libraries which I thought was shortsighted, and I told them so. But leadership didn't agree and the deputy director of the Latin America office in USIA, John Dwyer, even made a trip down to Uruguay to make sure I understood that I was going to close it and move it in no uncertain terms. I told him I felt that I was obliged to say why I thought it was a bad idea to do that, that what we wanted to do was maintain a presence and be able to engage people at different levels, and that putting it behind a hard line inside an embassy would also make it harder for our traditional contacts to access because they were not going to necessarily want to go through all the hassles of security screening.

Q: Yes, a little intimidating as well as a hassle to get into an embassy these days or even back then.

JOHNSON: Yes. My sense was that they just wanted us to serve as a reference service where people could call in or email or whatever, and we would not necessarily have walk-ins. I believe, then again, memory's murky, but I believe that the general library collection remained in the binational center, but the librarians and the reference services and materials that they would have used moved to the embassy. Ironically, years later, I can't remember exactly when, one of my Uruguayan contacts said that they thought it was a shame that the library had closed. But you know, water under the bridge.

Q: Yes. As a librarian yourself it hurts even more.

JOHNSON: Yes, of course, because the whole purpose of having these facilities is to engage the public. I will always remember the story that I heard when I was working in the Office of African Affairs. Desmond Tutu had said that the thing that gave him hope during the most difficult days of apartheid was going into the USIS library and reading "Ebony" magazine and seeing that there was a way forward if they could just hold on. We don't know whose lives we're touching when we have these facilities that are open to all. It's a self-selecting audience. But why would you want to narrow it to the point where you eliminate the opportunity to inspire someone who might be favorably disposed to the U.S.? Why would we not want to expose young people to our values and the information that we have to offer? What sense does it make to cut off their access to it? Anyway, budget cuts.

Q: So, this was your first tour as a- well, maybe it wasn't. I was going to say as a PAO because you had done that earlier in Africa, yes, it was a one-person-

JOHNSON: Well, I had done that in Benin, but it was a single-officer post where I was supervising host-country nationals. This was my first tour supervising other American officers. With the elimination of the assistant CAO slot, the cultural affairs officer took over maintaining and overseeing our relationship with the binational center (BNC). The Montevideo binational center had all of these other binational centers or satellites around the country. And eventually they opened up another BNC in the suburban neighborhood of Carrasco near Montevideo. One of the things the BNCs in Montevideo also did was to start offering classes in computer literacy, teaching youngsters how to use computers.

Even the children in the nursery school took these classes. Local entrepreneurs got a franchise from the U.S.-based company Futurekids to run this program. The BNC did all kinds of innovative things. It was a great program.

One of the other highlights was the theater. As part of our cultural exchange program we brought down a director and acting teacher named David Hammond. He directed a Neil Simon play about a young boy, "Lost in Yonkers" in Spanish, which received rave reviews and the Florencio Award—the Uruguayan equivalent of a Tony Award. It was really exciting for us, and for him. He came down again-

Q: As a USIS program?

JOHNSON: Yes.

Q: Very nice.

JOHNSON: They had a wonderful theater community down there, and the Alianza Theater in the Montevideo BNC was an important part of that community. Cultural life in Montevideo was just fabulous. Some time later, David Hammond returned and directed "Sheer Madness." I can't remember what they called it in Spanish, but it was not as successful as the first play. But, "Sheer Madness" was entertaining. The reviews for the Neil Simon play were just off the charts—for the second play not so much. Our experience with David Hammond was another highlight of our four years down there. Working with him and doing those plays and really getting to know folks in the theater world was priceless. The thing that made the rupture with the BNC so difficult was the fact that we had done so many good things together. We still continued to work with them, but the budget reduction affected how much we could fund.

Q: But it sounds like you had a good life; you had good housing too, I trust?

JOHNSON: Yes. The first house we were in was in the suburbs, in Carrasco. It had a swimming pool and I was just terrified that my child would drown one day. So, I asked that we be allowed to move. Plus, I wanted to be in town so it wouldn't be such a long commute. And if my child was going to be attending the BNC nursery school, which was in town, I didn't want to be so far away. So, there were a number of reasons for moving. We looked around and after a year in that house, we moved into a place that was a block from the Montevideo golf course and a short bus ride or walk from the embassy. It was a long walk but a short bus ride. That was the other thing; the city had good bus transportation so I could take buses to many places. I didn't have to drive everywhere because as it turned out we got a car but it was a stick shift and I don't drive a stick shift, so it was my husband driving and I would take the bus. You know, I'm a New Yorker so I like taking mass transit.

There was an interesting thing about the golf course. It was a private golf course, but the owners had an agreement with the city that, every Monday people could play for free, and on Sundays it was open for anyone who wanted to go in and wander through the

course and just enjoy it as if it were a public park. They had that kind of an arrangement with the municipality in exchange for having the golf course located on prime real estate. It was a beautiful golf course, designed by Alister MacKenzie who designed famous golf courses in the UK as well as Augusta National Golf Course in the U.S. I was told Mr. MacKenzie also did some work on the famous St. Andrews Golf Course in Scotland.

Which brings us to the municipality and the mayor who had been elected during our time there. He was a professor of architecture. Mayor Mariano Arana was a member of the Frente Amplio (Broad Front) Party. Even though he was in the leftist camp, he had a good relationship with the embassy because every year our office provided facilitative assistance for the public university-sponsored program where architectural students went up to the States to study U.S. architectural design. When he became the mayor, he wanted to shift the focus to preservation. We had a good working relationship with him. I remember that the American Chamber of Commerce—the Uruguayan-American Chamber of Commerce—invited him to speak at one of their luncheons. Several of us from the embassy attended and he opened up his talk with a quote from Benjamin Franklin and some other notable Americans. He was a very savvy politician. But his primary concern was what he could do to make life better for the residents of his city. He was willing to engage with anyone to make that happen. We did a lot. We had a lot of programs with the university. Actually with both the public university as well as the Catholic University. We had a good relationship with both institutions. We also worked well with the national library. Like all libraries, the director struggled to get funding and support. We did some programs with him as well, bringing in library experts to give the staff advice and to learn more about their system. We had a Library of Congress conservationist come down through the Fulbright program. We had interesting exchanges and strengthened our relationships with a wide variety of institutions in the country.

Q: So, by the end of four years you must have been very well connected in a reasonably small society.

JOHNSON: Yes. We got to know lots and lots of people. In our relationship with the Afro-Uruguayan groups, we ended up sending one of their members, Beatriz Ramírez, on an international visitor leadership program. She was interested in meeting women entrepreneurs, and she was also interested in governance and government. Her favorite stop was in Oklahoma. On International Women's Day, she had a memorable luncheon with a group of African-American, women entrepreneurs. Ms. Ramírez said that the warmth of the people everywhere she went was tangible—she had not expected that. I can't remember all the different parts of her program, but I vividly remember that when she came back, she said there were some things that she thought were interesting and useful. But there were other things she thought that the Uruguayans did better, which is normal. When I went back to Montevideo years later, when I was working as a deputy director for public diplomacy and public affairs in Bureau of Western Hemisphere Affairs (WHA), Ms. Ramírez and I reconnected. By then the U.S. Information Agency had merged with the State Department resulting in the creation of that office within WHA. In my capacity as deputy director, I went back to Montevideo as part of a swing through countries in the region. By then, Ms. Ramírez was a member of the Montevideo City

Council. I was so excited to see that this woman who had gone on an international visitor leadership program from the Mundo Afro Organization had risen to that position. I felt like yes, we were good at picking people with potential!

Q: Very nice, very nice.

JOHNSON: That was great.

Q: So, before the end of four years you must have had your eye on what comes next.

JOHNSON: Yes. Since I had these two young children, I didn't want to go into a position that was going to make me crazy by keeping me in the office from sunup to sundown. So, I decided to do a lateral assignment and bid on posts that were equivalent in the region. I ended up bidding on and getting assigned to El Salvador. This was interesting because the country had ended the civil war by then. This is 1996, yes, 1996, '95-'96 timeframe. The warring factions in the country had reconciled and were in the process of trying to put together all the different structures that would rebuild civil society. The police force was being totally reformed. The military, there was, of course, reforming, too. So, it was like the reinvention of everything, but not imposed from the outside, it was from within. The leaders and citizens were working through all of this and committed to true reconciliation. And I highlight that because it seemed to me that there were Americans who couldn't get over some of the things that had happened in Central America, and they harbored more animosity toward the human rights abusers than the Salvadorans who had truly suffered and were trying to figure out how to put things back together. It was interesting to see how the Salvadorans were really working hard on trying to make it work, and then you had outside American groups that were trying to figure out who should be punished for past misdeeds. I'm not really sure, but I think they were supporters of the Maryknoll nuns who had been murdered. Their murderers, I believe, were in prison in El Salvador, but there was still some controversy. I don't know if it had to do with the military that were alleged to have been involved but who were not tried or imprisoned. I remember some of the Salvadorans saying that they were trying to reconcile and work things out and that they did not understand why these activists were stirring things up. They felt that they had suffered more than Americans so why couldn't they just leave the Salvadorans alone to sort it out on their own. It was interesting to see that whole dynamic play out down there during that time.

(Note*:* The amnesty law of the 1990s was declared unconstitutional in 2016. Subsequently, charges were filed against individuals alleged to have planned and carried out the 1981 El Mozote massacre. In the spring of 2020, the issue had yet to be resolved

as the Salvadoran authorities were still gathering evidence, attempting to obtain documents from the U.S. Government.)

We got there-

Q: 1996 you said.

JOHNSON: Yes, ’96. The period just before our arrival there had been rashes of car-jackings and robberies, a serious crime wave. So, we were told to be very careful. The Regional Security Officer gave the standard lecture with all the dos and the don’ts. But looking back now, we were there during a really good time. From ’96 to ’98, the crime rate actually went down, things were a lot safer. I remember the family that was our sponsor saying that at night they didn’t stop at red lights because sometimes you could be assaulted, so people drove until they got to their destination without stopping at night. People didn’t go out a lot at night unless they absolutely had to attend an official event. By the time we got there in 1996, things had lightened up and improved to the point where there was a pretty vibrant nightlife and people were going out and about. So, it, yes, it-

Q: Well, there must have been a pretty sizable U.S. establishment in El Salvador at the time.

JOHNSON: Oh, yes. But then-

Q: Larger than in Uruguay?

JOHNSON: Oh, yes. Yes, yes, yes. Because there was also a regional U. S. Agency for International Development (USAID) facility there, headed up by Carl Leonard, and then Ken Ellis. I remember Greg Sprow, our political counselor, joking that the compound where the embassy, ambassador’s residence, and USAID building were located, challenged him—he said he couldn't decide whether it felt more like a junior college campus or a minimum-security prison. Mainly because everything was fenced, it was gated, with a lot of security.

Q: Well, I suppose after the civil war, as well, there would have been extra security precautions taken as well.

JOHNSON: Yes, exactly, exactly. It was a beautiful campus, but there was controversy because there were some Salvadorans who said it was constructed on an ancient indigenous peoples’ burial ground. There were all kinds of walhalla over its location. There were some folks who felt the compound was cursed. There were a number of

accidental or untimely deaths in the first year or two that we were there; one child died when fireworks exploded and a colleague died of a heart attack.

Q: These are Americans?

JOHNSON: Yes, Americans. And there was also a toddler who drowned in a backyard pool. There were tragic and horrible things that happened. One person said yes, that's because you all built that embassy on that burial ground; it's the revenge of the spirits. The compound was on the outskirts of San Salvador, and in addition to the embassy, the residence, and the USAID building, there was a little community center with a swimming pool and other facilities. It was a sizable compound, and it had a nice recreational facility that was frequently used by the embassy community.

Q: The residences were there on the compound as well?

JOHNSON: The ambassador's residence was the only living quarters out there.

Q: And your residence?

JOHNSON: No. We lived in town. We lived in Colonia Maquilishuat, near the American School. The Deputy Chief of Mission, John Dawson, had a lovely residence in town. I'm trying to visualize the layout of the compound and the ambassador's place. The ambassador's residence was down a ways from where the pool and the recreation center were located. There was also a garage for the official vehicles on the compound. There was a lot on that compound, and a little path that went around the outer perimeter, so folks would jog or go out on walks for exercise. They could do that safely on the compound.

Q: Was USIS there in the main embassy _____, or-

JOHNSON: Co-located, yes.

Q: -was it a separate building on the compound?

JOHNSON: We were co-located in the chancery building. There was a binational center in town that offered English classes and had a variety of activities as well.

Q: Now, you must have been PAO again.

JOHNSON: Yes, I was PAO again. We had an information officer and a cultural affairs officer. And there was lots of collaboration that went on with other offices in the mission. When I was PAO in Montevideo one of things I did was go around to all the different sections and have a one-on-one with the head of each section just to get a sense of what their priorities were and figure out how some of our programs might be helpful to them. I did the same thing in El Salvador, and there it was much bigger. I ended up being a regular attendee at USAID's weekly meetings as well because there was so much going

on both in El Salvador and in the region. It was a good way to keep abreast of what was happening or being planned and, again, I was able to see how our team could be helpful to their programs. As I said, collaboration was a really important piece of the puzzle. For example, USAID funded the police-training program, so there was this Department of Justice unit called ICITAP, the International Criminal Investigative Training Assistance Program. It was basically one of these international law-enforcement training programs that the Department of Justice had in multiple countries, funded by the Department of State but managed by USAID.

Similar to what had happened in Montevideo, one day I was watching the local news, and saw this horrific scrum. I mean, a person had been arrested and it was just chaos with the journalists trying to get statements and the police trying to take the person into the precinct. I went to the head of ICITAP, to my police training colleagues, and I said you guys are spending millions of dollars trying to train the police; are you doing anything to train them how to work with the media? I said maybe USIS could do a program to train police how to deal with media, but also educate the media about how to work with the police. Show the journalists why they should not cross the police lines and get the police to understand that the journalists have deadlines and that's why they can be pushy sometimes. In the process, maybe we could also get the journalists to understand the importance of protecting evidence and a perimeter and so on and so forth.

We did a couple of things. The first time I had a meeting with him and I talked about the value of having police understand media issues, we worked something out. There were some trainers or staff from the police academy going up to the U.S. for meetings. I suggested they have meetings with some media types up there. They were going to Dallas or somewhere in Texas. We facilitated or suggested it and they did that. Apparently, they found those meetings useful, but then months later when I saw this chaotic scene on TV and talked to the ICITAP director again, we approached USAID about funding a program in-country, because USIS did not have the money to bring down any more experts. Our budget was maxed out—everything was already spoken for. But if USAID could fund it, we could put together and run the program. So, we ended up making a request to our headquarters to identify three bilingual journalists who could come to El Salvador to run seminars on working with police and media. We wanted to do workshops for police and workshops for the media separately, and then have the two groups come together for the final portion of the program. We also wanted to do some workshops for public affairs staff in the various ministries. So, we put together this program and they did come down, one journalist from Telemundo in Los Angeles, two from different Chicago TV stations. One person worked one-on-one with the chief of police and senior staffers in the government's public information offices as well as the police academy. Then as for the other two, one worked with a group of journalists and the other one worked with police officers in separate workshops. They did a joint program with the police and the media at

the end of the week. I guess it must have lasted a week and change; but you could tell the difference after it was over.

Q: That quickly?

JOHNSON: You could tell the difference. The ambassador, Anne Patterson, attended the closing event and was impressed with the feedback she received. I remember, at the end of the program—it was like a graduation type of closing ceremony—one of the police officers said that he really appreciated all that he had learned because it gave him a better understanding of the needs of the journalists, and the journalists basically said the same things, that it gave them an appreciation and a better understanding of some of the reasons why certain police procedures existed. That's not to say that they were going to be the best of friends, but each had a better understanding and appreciation of the needs of the other. Also, the folks who were in the public information offices of the ministries who had participated, also appreciated the advice the journalist had given them on better structures and internal and external communication strategies. It was a really successful program all around. You could see the difference in some of the television coverage. Because of the nature of the training, some of the police chiefs from the interior who had participated felt more comfortable speaking to the press because, again, they had a better sense of what the journalists needed. They also established a good working relationship with the press that had participated in the training; they had built trust because they knew each other better. Again, they weren't the best of friends, but they understood each other a little better so they had a more positive working relationship.

Q: Was that a one-time deal or were you able to replicate it in subsequent years or-

JOHNSON: I was only in El Salvador for two years, so. I don't know if they did anything subsequent to that. I had also recommended that they have courses at the police academy that addressed this issue, but I left and don't know if that actually took place. It was one of those activities where at the end you could actually see the difference it had made and feel like you had made a good investment of time and energy, and it was a good collaboration between USAID and USIS with the Department of Justice.

Q: That's great.

And you said you were only there for two years; was that because it was still a danger post or a hardship post?

JOHNSON: No, my original assignment was for three years, but remember, I had mentioned that the child psychologist in Montevideo suggested we have our son evaluated because she thought there were some speech and language challenges that needed to be addressed. When we left Montevideo, we went on home leave and then we went to post. When we got to El Salvador, I sat down with the nurse practitioner at post, Charlene Burns, and said I need to figure out how to get an evaluation done at Miami's Children Hospital. As part of the medical services that State Department offers, my husband and my son went to Miami for this evaluation. It wasn't exactly a medical

evacuation, but it was official government travel for medical purposes. Our son got evaluated and came back with the results. The prescription basically was for him to work with a speech therapist but also to work with a child psychologist because he wasn't very good at reading people and their facial expressions or body language. They couldn't figure out if he had something on the autism spectrum or if his ears were not hearing in sync. It appeared that what he was hearing was jumbled that it took him longer to process what he was hearing. He had a couple of evaluations and I remember the second neurologist who saw him said we should just imagine his hearing is I-95. Your son is taking a detour. He's getting back to I-95, but it's taking him longer, so when you ask him a question you have to wait and let him process it. If he gets the right intervention with speech therapy and such, the detour will get shorter and shorter until by the time he's in middle school he should be indistinguishable from his peers. This was the second neurologist, and I remember because it was a South African named Trevor Resnick who spoke with that typical South African accent. This was during a second trip where I was present for that appointment. I was not present for the first evaluation, and my husband said that the first neurologist he went to had said that our son had Asperger's, and that he would never be good at sports, he would never appreciate music, he should go to a special school and he should be on Ritalin. At the time he was four years old. I was like really? I don't think so. By the time we went for the follow-up evaluation, our son had started speech therapy. We had found an American speech pathologist living in San Salvador, Beth De Noma, and she started working with him. We also found a child psychologist who was Salvadoran, Dr. Carlos Villeda Rivera, he was bilingual because he had been a Fulbright scholar. We were able to get him the interventions he needed in El Salvador and he started making progress. The second evaluation was when we were leaving post, because midway through our second year the speech pathologist told us that her husband was being transferred to Nicaragua. We couldn't find another American speech pathologist willing to work with him. There was another one, but she didn't want to take on any new clients. So, we had to curtail and come back to the States.

Q: Wow, the issues of trying to raise a family overseas.

JOHNSON: Yes, yes. Also, when the State Department medical doctor had come through on a routine visit, he said for your next assignment, you should go to an English-speaking country just so your son can sort things out because being in a Spanish-speaking environment was a challenge for him. Our son was managing because while in El Salvador both children attended a bilingual school, Colegio Maya. Our son had his little friends who spoke mostly in Spanish and he got on just fine in both languages. Both sons got along just fine with their friends in Spanish, but I could see how it could be a chore for him to process two different languages and have all of these issues going on in his little brain. So, it was on our way home that we had the second evaluation at Miami Children's Hospital, and that's when I was there for the meetings with the different evaluators and the neurologist. It was then that the doctor indicated that with the right interventions he thought our son would be just fine and he didn't think he needed to be on any kind of drug. By the way, our son became a gifted musician, and was named MVP for his little league baseball team, going to the local play offs when he was in middle

school. What's more, he was a straight-A student from middle school through college and graduate school. So much for that first doctor's predictions!

Q: Well, that's always reassuring isn't it, yes.

JOHNSON: Yes. But we did a lot of interesting things in those two years in El Salvador. One of the other interesting experiences involved the Catholic University where staff members had been murdered by the military. The U.S. had supported the military against the guerrillas in the civil war and members of the Salvadoran military had killed six priests, the housekeeper and her teenage daughter at the Jesuit university (Jose Simeon Canas Central American University) in 1989. The relationship with the embassy and that Catholic University were not the greatest. One of my goals when I got there was to see if there was a way to bridge that divide. Since everyone else was reconciling and working toward reconciliation in the country, we needed to figure out a way to reconcile with that university. It turned out that the woman who was the librarian at the university was an American who had lived there for many years. So I made a courtesy call on her and got to know her. I made a courtesy call on the vice rector of the university as well, got to know him, and started having conversations about ways in which our cultural and educational programs could support their efforts. It was important to just create and establish some kind of a relationship with the university.

Now, when I got there, there was a chargé; the ambassador had not yet arrived. Anne Patterson had been named but she had not yet arrived, so when Anne Patterson arrived I had been there for a while already. She also felt it was important to mend fences, as it were, and find points of common interests with the Catholic University and really move that relationship forward. While the rector and the senior staff weren't inclined to come to events with lots of people, they weren't opposed to a luncheon with the ambassador. So, we arranged one. I think we had a couple. When I first got there, we had a luncheon at my residence as a get acquainted gathering. Come to think of it, we had a luncheon to get together, talk about the ambassador's arrival and what they would feel comfortable doing— to find out if they would they feel comfortable coming to the ambassador's residence for a luncheon and getting to know the ambassador. They said yes, as long as it was just the ambassador, embassy staff and the university guests; they weren't into large public meetings with casts of thousands. We arranged that and had good conversations, and we developed some activities and programs with the university, as I recall. I don't remember the details now of what they were, but with the library I'm certain that we provided books and materials and things of that nature. Every year there was also a commemoration honoring the murdered staff and this was a huge event.

Q: The embassy staff?

JOHNSON: No, the staff of the Catholic University who had been murdered by the military. I went to two of these memorial services, one each year that I was there. And I remember the second year sitting there and listening to speeches about social justice and about doing the right thing for the poor in the country. At one point, there was a comment that the amount of electricity used for some social or entertainment activity could

electrify an entire village. Sitting there, I looked around at the PA system, all the chairs and everything that was put together for this huge commemoration, and wondered at what point, instead of having this huge event to commemorate a horrible injustice, at what point would the resources used to put on this event be instead channeled to help the very same people for whom they were advocating. It just seemed ironic that there were significant resources invested in this event, and I wondered, if they are concerned about those in need, why not have a service in the cathedral, rather than setting up all these chairs and having this PA system and all of the things that go with it that costs so much money. Why not use those resources to give more scholarships to young people in need or something like that?

Q: But that didn't happen?

JOHNSON: Those were just my musings as I sat and looked around and thought the irony of what they were saying and the criticism that they were leveling at the government and private sector. Basically, I was wondering, yes we must fight for greater justice, but you're also expending a lot of resources, and who is this helping? Life is like that sometimes—there are no simple or easy answers.

We took the relationship to a better place, and the proof of that was interesting. There was a congressional delegation that visited led by Representatives Joe Mockley and Jim McGovern from Massachusetts. During the height of the Salvadoran civil war, I think Congressman McGovern had been a congressional staffer who had always been an advocate for the Catholic University and those who were fighting against the dictatorship and human rights abuses. He was a champion for those who were fighting against human rights abuses and such. He and the delegation came down and of course, one of the first things they wanted to do was go to the Catholic University to meet with folks there to find out what their take was on the current state of the bilateral relationship. They did that and the university leaders had nothing but praise for Ambassador Patterson and her staff for the work that had been done to repair the relationship.

Q: So, you made some nice progress then?

JOHNSON: So, we made good progress, and it was a good thing, not just for our bilateral relationship, but it was also a good thing for our relationship with our own Congress because they were very seized with how the U.S. was viewed. There were a couple of people who were long-time supporters of the leftists in this struggle and felt that the United States Government had been on the wrong side of history in that whole thing because of the support given to the military. They were concerned about how we were reconciling and engaging the broad spectrum of people at the university and in other segments of El Salvador's society. But after they went over to the Catholic University and had their meetings and then came back to brief Ambassador Patterson, they said that

the folks there were pleased with the outreach and the engagement that had occurred, and that the relationship was moving in a very positive direction. So, it was like, yeah!

Q: I imagine you must have had a lot of congressional interest and visitors and assistant secretaries and one thing and another.

JOHNSON: Oh, yes.

Q: That was still a country that was very much in the news.

JOHNSON: Yes, yes. We did.

Q: Did you find it to be more of a frenetic pace than you had had in maybe Montevideo?

JOHNSON: It was a different pace because Montevideo was far away, and it was stable, and it was relatively successful in doing what it was doing. There wasn't that same history. There's a lot of history in El Salvador, so there were lots of different groups in the U.S. very concerned about what was happening, what had happened in the past, and what would be happening going forward. At the same time that I was there, the U.S. Government was also working on reconciliation and trying to get a peace process jumpstarted in Colombia. We actually had colleagues from the embassy in Colombia come to El Salvador to meet with the people who had been very actively involved in the peace process in El Salvador. So, yes, we got lots of different visitors from all walks of life and different parts of the region as well.

We also had some interesting experiences with the business community. Again, this is one of my other pieces of advice for young officers coming into the service. Relationships are so important, and I just can't emphasize enough the importance of being open to meeting new people and at least understanding different points of view. But officers must also be creative in how they engage their colleagues in the embassy.

Okay. For example, for some reason I got invited to a meeting with representatives from Delta Airlines who were going to begin service to El Salvador. One of the people in the meeting was going to be in touch with the public relations firm based in Costa Rica that would be in charge of their media program rollout in El Salvador. At the meeting, I said our staff works closely with the media here so why don't you have that person contact us and we can set up a meeting with our press section staffers to give an overview of the media scene in country? He said he would pass that along, and he did. The person came over from Costa Rica and the lead local employee in our press section, Pedro Sánchez, and his assistant Daysi Carolina Amaya, the three of us, sat down with the person and gave him chapter and verse: which media were reliable, which media were a little bit out there, and who were good people to meet if he wanted to really understand certain things about the idiosyncrasies of the media in El Salvador. We shared the names of some of our contacts that we thought could help him and his company launch Delta properly. He was very appreciative. To me, that's an example of the importance of having a good relationship with our economic and commercial colleagues. If the public affairs staff is

well connected within the mission, he or she can support American businesses by sharing with them the benefits of the office's experiences doing business in that marketplace. Obviously their needs and concerns will be different from that of an embassy, but basically, they need to know which people they can trust, who's reliable, and who might be helpful to them as an American business trying to get started in a new market.

Q: Well, I've heard you use that phrase several times, I even wrote it down, how we could be helpful to them. You used it in the context of your initial meetings with the other section chiefs when you went to an embassy and you're using it again now. And I think this kind of service oriented approach that you're talking about is really something that is a learning point for new people coming in and also a learning point for a lot of people who have been in for a long time but haven't quite grasped it yet.

JOHNSON: I guess so, yes.

Q: I find it very impressive to see you repeating that again and again in different contexts.

JOHNSON: Yes, because it goes back to the whole thing about what is a relationship. A relationship is give and take; you get something out of it and the person, hopefully, that you're engaging gets something out of it as well. It's mutually beneficial. And to me, that's the essence of diplomacy. It's a mutually beneficial relationship between countries. But it starts with the people.

Q: Yes, yes. And that also, another point also just resonated with me because it reminds me of what I used to tell my staff, that you're only as good as your contacts.

JOHNSON: Yes.

Q: Don't sit there at your desk; get out and meet people, do something.

JOHNSON: Yes. And I think that the thing that has most adversely affected that process is email and social media, because people make the mistake of thinking interaction via a tool can replace interaction face-to-face. No. It can facilitate, it can support, it can help, but it cannot replace face-to-face interactions. People want to be heard. If you go out of your way to go to someone's office to have a conversation, it registers with the person that you are serious about establishing some kind of relationship. If all your interactions with people are tweets, emails, Facebook posts and all of this social media stuff, to me it's not real.

Q: Well, I'm pleased to hear you say that, but I guess diplomacy in the 21st century might be taking a different track.

JOHNSON: Unfortunately, yes. And it's sad because I think the most important thing we do is show up. I think that closing down offices and cutting services that eliminate the opportunity for personal engagement adversely affects our ability to really get a bead on

what's going on in a place. You really have to, as you say, get out of the office and see what's going on. I find it heartbreaking that there are so many places where we now have so much violence and disruption that it's really hard, if not impossible, to get out and about safely. That means our whole view and sense of place is very different. It's just so much harder to connect when that's the environment in a place.

Q: Now, you were a full member of the country team presumably in El Salvador?

JOHNSON: Yes.

Q: That functioned well?

JOHNSON: Yes.

Q: Yes?

JOHNSON: Oh, yes.

Q: And a very professional ambassador with Anne Patterson.

JOHNSON: Oh, yes, absolutely, yes.

Q: I can't remember whether that was her first ambassadorship or one of- it was one of many, in any case.

JOHNSON: I'm trying to remember. I think it might have been her first, but honestly, I can't remember.

There was something else. One of the major issues that greeted her when she arrived was this whole issue of the deportation of people who had served their sentences in U.S. jails and were being deported back to El Salvador. That was 1996-97 when that started, as I recall. It started with plane loads of people being brought back to El Salvador by U.S. marshals, sometime before her arrival. This had become an irritant because folks were sent back unannounced and there was no coordination with the Salvadoran government. For obvious reasons, this had caused some heartburn on the part of the Salvadorans because these folks are coming back and the Salvadorans had to figure out how to keep track of them and how to help them integrate into the society. These were young men, for the most part, who had migrated to the U.S. when they were children during the civil war and they were tatted up because they had been in gangs in Los Angeles. They stood out. Maybe their Spanish wasn't the greatest, either. It was not clear that they still had relatives in El Salvador, or would have known where to find them! There needed to be a mechanism to receive them, to help them integrate, to keep track of them and to help them find meaningful employment or stay out of trouble if nothing else. But in the U.S. Government's infinite wisdom, and again, because there were multiple government agencies involved and no coordination, it took a while to get all of these returns

coordinated so that the embassy could actually alert the Salvadorans when these people were going to be sent back to the country.

Q: So, there was progress?

JOHNSON: So, there was progress, but I think too little, too late, maybe. I look at what's going on today in 2018. When we left El Salvador in 1998, there was beginning to be an uptick in kidnappings and violent crimes involving former gang members. I remember at our church some of these fellows started attending the non-denominational, English-speaking Protestant services. They had formed a group called Homies Unidos that was trying to help returnees adapt. The ICITAP police advisors at the embassy were also trying to work with them to figure out a way to help them be a positive force. Again, we left, and I don't know what became of some of the efforts there, but I remember feeling like there was so much that should have been done beforehand. At the time, it wasn't clear to me how all of it was going to get fixed. Given what has happened since then, it's clear that nothing got fixed, and it's not the fault of the Salvadorans. They did not have the infrastructure and the wherewithal and perhaps didn't have the necessary expertise to deal with so many people in need of special services. I mean, we here in the U.S. can't even figure out how to deal with our recidivism problems, and we have so many resources. So, imagine a country with even more limited resources trying to balance all of these competing demands on resources and also address a growing crime problem caused by some of these young people who were deported, many of who end up coming back into the United States clandestinely. It's just a crazy cycle. That was a major challenge and sadly, I feel like we were not able to do a whole lot to address it in a meaningful way. It wasn't because people didn't care. There just weren't the resources to really get a handle on it and figure out what all could be done. It really pains me to see all the violence and the suffering that has occurred since then and that continues to this day because of a failure to plan and coordinate. This all goes back to a civil war that created all this upheaval; the ripple effects of it are still being felt to this day.

Q: Yes. The legacy of the civil war must have complicated your job to a fairly significant extent. You've mentioned the Catholic University as something you had to kind of break into, but I can't imagine there weren't other instances of the same kind of thing.

JOHNSON: Well, we also had to deal with the onslaught of journalists coming down when the American activists were in town. I think it was because three of the four murderers of the Maryknoll nuns were being released on good behavior; after serving parts of the sentence they were paroled. There was some controversy, and so there was a lot of media attention. Of course, a lot of folks flew in to cover the controversy. We had a great information officer, Christopher Midura, who did a lot of the heavy lifting on dealing with all of that. But, everybody got involved.

Q: Of course.

JOHNSON: There was always something going on! Despite all of that, we continued to have our Thanksgiving dinners with the Fulbrighters. And because we had school-age

kids, there were always other types of interesting gatherings. You know, going to school events and meeting other parents and meeting the parents of children that our boys had befriended. That was a whole other experience. It opened up a whole different view of the society and gave us an alternate sense of place. So, yes, we had lots of really positive experiences.

One of our contacts at the post, that sadly has since passed away, was a delightful gentleman. His name was Antonio or Tony Perdomo. Tony was a dentist, but he was also an actor. He did commercials and plays and things like that. But he was also our cultural guide. On several occasions, he took us to the central market in El Salvador, which was a fascinating experience. Now, Tony had a bodyguard because of the crime problems at the time. So he took my husband and me to the central market, with him and his bodyguard guiding us around all the stalls. What was so funny was, as we went through this market, he took us to a section where they sold all kinds of things for potions and to bring good luck. There was a little stall that had these soaps that were wrapped in red and white paper called "ven dinero" (come money). And the vendor also had an aerosol spray for that, as well as another one, "fall down at my feet" to make someone fall in love with a person, also available in a soap and spray. It was just amazing! I mentioned the red and white wrapper for the "ven dinero" (come money) soap because in the Yoruba tradition red is the color that you use if you want to attract money. Several months after our interesting visit to that section of the market—actually, we went all over the market, but that section with the soap was the highlight because it was just so unusual, and it reminded me of African markets.

Anyway, as I started to say, several months after that visit, there was a panel discussion on the public television station in El Salvador featuring a number of history buffs. Now, there's no history department, or at that time there was no history department at the public university, which I found interesting. But, there was a history association and one of our other post contacts was the president of that organization. He had written a monograph or a booklet on the African influence in El Salvador's culture, and one of the examples he gave was the central market. Later on, I remember one of the guys from the public TV station telling me that they had gotten more call-ins for that program than for any other program that they had done up until that point. It was just an interesting and lively discussion because people were flabbergasted. The historian made his case and gave the examples and there was a distinctly African influence in the market and in some other traditions that I now can no longer remember. I got several copies of the brochure and even sent one to the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture in New York (part of the New York Public Library system). I sent it there because when people think of El Salvador, because it's on the Pacific side, they don't think that there's any kind of connection to Africa; why would there be? Many of the black people in Central America are usually on the Caribbean side, on the Atlantic Coast, because they came over from the Caribbean islands. So we don't think of El Salvador as a place with a sizable black community. But it's right next to Honduras and of course people move; there are migrations. Why wouldn't there be some vestige or influence from Africa there as well? And don't forget, some of the black people in this hemisphere came over with the early

Spanish explorers and stayed behind. That program caused quite a stir at the time. It was one of those things that popped up unexpectedly. It was idiosyncratic but fascinating.

El Salvador had people there who had invested much time and effort in restoring some of the indigenous peoples' monuments. There was apparently a huge indigo production site outside of the capital city called San Andres that the Salvadoran government had converted into a park with an amphitheater, the ruins of a pyramid that was in pretty good shape, a museum and other amenities. We had brought down museum experts and other folks as part of the USIS program to help with that project and the development of the National Museum of Anthropology. The anthropology museum was also considered a reconciliation tool because it brought together history and information on the indigenous peoples and the whole history of the country to try to unify the country, giving it one identity. We were involved in those efforts. We even brought down a specialist in museum security to work with them as they were devising the plans for their anthropological museum's building. My predecessors had been actively supporting some of the other cultural institutions that were involved with the restoration of the ancient sites. Again, this was part of the plan for reconciliation and coming together. We even had some of our cultural events out at that amphitheater. One was a duo from Takoma Park, Maryland, Flutar, featuring a flute and guitar. We did all kinds of programs. It was only two years, but it seemed like we did a whole lot in those two years.

Q: And life was pretty good?

JOHNSON: Life was pretty good.

Q: And life outside of the professional, life was pretty good?

JOHNSON: Yes. We had a lemon tree in our backyard, and my husband, who's into gardening, said the best collard green crop he was ever able to cultivate was in our yard in El Salvador.

Q: That's nice. Did you put on any art shows?

JOHNSON: Yes. Yes, we did something. But, it was after I left because I had started working on it before, and then when we had to curtail, I kept working on it when I returned to the U.S. So yes, I did have an art exhibition. I must have gone back for something related to that. It's all a blur now. But one of the staff made a t-shirt for me from a photo of me sitting in front of one of the paintings in the show, which was sweet. Yes, I did an art exhibition in all my posts and even places where I wasn't assigned. While I was in Montevideo I did a joint art exhibition at the Paraguay-U.S. binational center with an American woman on the embassy staff up there. I remember I had to sign

all kinds of papers agreeing that I wasn't going to sell anything or use my position as public affairs officer to gain advantage. You know, all this ethics stuff.

Q: I guess so, yes. It hadn't even occurred to me, but of course, you know.

JOHNSON: Yes. I paid my own way to go to Paraguay to be a part of the exhibition, which was a lot of fun. It was interesting to visit Paraguay. I'd never been to Asuncion and it was quite different from Montevideo.

Q: Okay. So, if you curtailed then, how did the assignment process work for the next assignment with a curtailment?

JOHNSON: Well, that was an interesting thing, too. I had to look on the bid list to see what was available. At that time USIA was different from State in that we had rolling assignments. You could bid any time of the year because our assignments started with the language start date. Basically, we had to be at post a date certain, and then personnel counted back how many months of language training the officer would need, and that's actually when the assignment started. Because you had to have language fluency of some kind to do the job, personnel counted the language training as part of the assignment. And so, that's why USIA had a rolling system as opposed to State, where everyone is in this meat market at the same time and nothing gets done because everybody is trying to get an assignment, which always struck me as kind of crazy, and not the best use of our time. Each institution has its own way of doing things, and I thought USIA's was a best practice because it ensured that staff got the language training needed to be effective in the jobs. If you can't talk to people and you get a language waiver, what's the point? I mean you're very limited in what you can do if you don't have the language of the country. And I can understand why in certain jobs, some might think fluency is non-essential, but to me, whether you're a GSO or a PAO, you need to be able to communicate in the language of the country to be effective. That's just my bias.

Anyway, it was a rolling assignment process. I started looking to see what was going to be open. By the nature of things, most jobs come open in the summertime when people are rotating because of school schedules and things like that. There was an opening in the Office of Strategic Communication, which was a unit attached to the director of USIA's office. In this office the staff was divided by theme, and each person also focused on a geographic region. There was an opening for a justice and law enforcement specialist that also had WHA experience. So, I bid on that and other positions; that was the assignment I got. My good fortune was that the person who was the desk officer for El Salvador in USIA/Washington, Marjorie Coffin, was a single woman who said oh, if you're coming

out then I'm going to bid on the job. She could move on short notice without having to worry about pulling kids out of school or a husband with a dream job.

Q: So, she knew the country and-

JOHNSON: Because she was our desk officer.

Q: -programs and so forth, which is a huge plus, yes.

JOHNSON: Yes. Everything fell into place and worked out well. I was really sorry to have to leave because we had a beautiful home that had an atrium with lush plants. If I could design a house for myself in the future that would be the floor plan, because the public area was on one side of the atrium and the private area for the family, the bedrooms and family room, were on the other side. That area also included the guest room. There were four bedrooms and each bedroom had its own bathroom, so when I had visitors it was great!

Q: If you have a couple million you can do that right in D.C., hell. Well, a couple might not be enough.

JOHNSON: No, I don't think so. I'd need at least five or six. Anyway, it was a beautiful home and it was in an interesting neighborhood. It was walking distance from the American school, but our kids went to a different school that wasn't that far away either. Our next-door neighbors turned out to be an American family, the Browns; the husband had a company that was in the aluminum business and they had a plant in El Salvador. They still have the plant in El Salvador. The Browns had two children not that far off in age from ours. I think the son was younger than our boys and the daughter was a little older than our eldest son. We got to know them fairly well; they were a nice couple. The neighbors on the other side of us were also nice. They were Salvadoran and for a little while, they had a rooster that was noisy. They also happened to be former Fulbrighters. The Uruguayan ambassador and his wife also lived on our block and we would get together with them from time to time. It was a nice neighborhood. The Browns eventually moved back to the States because at a certain point I think they wanted their children to go to school in the U.S. Also, when the crime problem started getting really bad I think they decided it would probably be better to return to their home in the States. Every summer, when we go out to visit relatives in Cheyenne, Wyoming, which is about an hour-and-a-half drive from where they live, we get together with them.

Q: That's great.

JOHNSON: The daughter became a teacher and the son is in the family business. He and his father travel back to El Salvador regularly, and they have business interests in other parts of the world. It is an interesting family and another way we can keep tabs on what's

going on in El Salvador. Thanks to email, we are able to keep up with many of our friends overseas as well.

Q: Well, okay. Maybe next time we can start with Washington.

JOHNSON: Yes. And I'll go through my notes and try and figure out what I did in Washington.

Q: Okay.

JOHNSON: The one highlight was working on Vice President Gore's first annual anti-corruption conference.

Q: Okay, good. So, we'll leave it there.

JOHNSON: O.K. And I'll write that we're going to start with Washington.

Q: Today is October 26, 2018, and this is Peter Eicher beginning a new interview session with Cynthia Farrell Johnson.

Cynthia, when we left off last time you had just completed your tour in El Salvador and were heading for Washington. And this was the summer of 1998.

JOHNSON: Correct. Yes. And I went to work in the U.S. Information Agency (USIA) Office of Strategic Communication and the symbol was D/C. It was connected to the agency director's office, so I worked with the director of USIA. By then, Director Joe Duffey had departed so Penn Kemble was the acting director. Penn Kemble was very seized with CIVITAS, which at that time (I don't know if it still exists) was a non-governmental entity he promoted that was working on civic education. CIVITAS worked with teachers and educators here in the U.S. and around the world trying to do what it could to encourage good governance. One of the big efforts was supporting educational programs to combat corruption and encourage greater citizen participation in all aspects of civic life. So, we in USIA had been involved with all kinds of activities connected to CIVITAS and supporting civic education. It had become a really big part of many of our public diplomacy programs in the field. We were involved with these types of programs in El Salvador.
(Note: CIVITAS International Programs are listed as a component of the Center for Civic Education, located in Calabasas, California.)

One of the first things that I had to do—well, there were several things I had to do when I started in that office. The major task was to familiarize myself with all the non-government organizations and the players involved in civic education activities. But even before that I had to read a voluminous document—200 or 300—pages that was like a presidential directive. It was one of those reports that they put together in the NSC or the White House. It focused on international crime and law enforcement. I can't remember the exact title of it, but basically it was the document that formed the foundation for how

the United States Government would combat international crime and corruption. Around that time, we learned that there was going to be the vice president's first annual anti-corruption conference in Washington, D.C., and of course, there was not going to be a huge pot of money made available to run the event. All the government agencies were supposed to fund it using their own budgets. So, I had to read that big book to get a sense of what the priorities were that our organization should be involved with supporting, and learn who all the players were that would be a part of the undertaking.

Q: And this would be both governments and civil society organizations?

JOHNSON: Correct. Because it was the Global Forum on Fighting Corruption, Vice President Gore's Global Forum on Fighting Corruption. Much of what we were going to do with that was informed by the administration's International Crime Control Strategy: the U.S. National Security Strategy of May 1997. I was told it was basically our bible; understand what's in there and make note of the priorities.

The first thing I had to do after absorbing all of that was figure out who all the players were. There were meetings that would be called eventually, but I quickly found out that the INL bureau, the International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Bureau in the State Department was going to be very important in that undertaking. I think in the first few days I was told who I needed to reach out to so I could start getting invited to their weekly meetings and get a sense of what the plans were and who the different people were in that bureau who were going to be honchoing this conference. Rand Beers was the Assistant Secretary at the time, but the people I worked most closely with were James Puleo, a program officer, and the deputy assistant secretary, Jonathan Winer.

Q: Was State the lead agency or the White House or do you even remember?

JOHNSON: Because it was a global forum I believe it was State that was the lead agency, although there were regular meetings at the NSC that I had to attend. Of course, the Department of Justice was heavily involved, and there were all these other agencies present at those meetings. But yes, State had the lead and it was going to be held in the main building, the Harry S Truman Building's Loy Henderson Auditorium. The Loy Henderson facility is the one that has the tables with microphones and translation booths; it is a large conference hall.

This was an interesting time to be dealing with international crime issues because there was a professor who at the time was at American University (AU), Louise Shelley, who was actively researching these matters. It was Professor Shelley who was considered an authority on transnational crime, and so one of the things I did was go meet her over at AU and get to know what she was working on. Professor Shelley introduced me to some of her colleagues there. So, one of the things that ended up happening is I began building my little rolodex of who's doing what where, and they would always refer me to others. A common refrain was, oh, you should also talk to so-and-so. At the time there was a transnational crime center as a part of the American University, and then there was Transparency International, also very actively involved in confronting these issues. The

young man who was working with the head of the U.S. Transnational International entity, who was also my go to person there, ended up going to work for State Department years later. His name was Robert Leventhal and he had all this knowledge in his head, so that was a good thing. He was very helpful!

Anti-corruption activity was a sensitive issue. At the time, people were beginning to make the connection between corruption and adverse economic effects on development and that kind of thing. The World Bank was also beginning to deal with that issue and actually local governments around the world were also beginning to embrace combating corruption as a way of dealing with some of the problems in their own bureaucracies. They were recognizing it and saying, "We've got to do something about this because it's sapping our strength. We just can't continue to look the other way." It was a moment when all the stars seemed to be aligning and people were ready to talk publicly about it and say, "We need to do something about this." That was the anti-corruption portfolio.

It was also the time when human trafficking became an issue. It was mentioned in the policy priority book as a problem that needed to be addressed, and as I was having conversations with my colleagues in the INL bureau, it became very clear that there were no laws on the books here in the U.S. to protect people who had been trafficked. At the time trafficking victims could be rounded up and charged as criminals for engaging in prostitution or whatever they were forced to do, and the people who had trafficked them, if the victims testified against them, the victims were vulnerable. If you deport the victims back to wherever they came from after they have cooperated with U.S. law enforcement, and these networks of traffickers are still active, the trafficked persons would probably be killed when they got back to their home countries. There was a movement bubbling up looking for ways to protect people so that they would be willing to testify and could be protected; hopefully, they wouldn't be sent back to places where they might be killed because they had testified against and exposed the trafficking networks. This was a totally new subject for me and for so many other people within the government. We knew that there were bad folks out there exploiting people and doing all kinds of nasty stuff. This was one of the issues that the professor at American University, Louise Shelley, was working on; researching and exposing all of that.

I'm not sure of the sequence because it's been a while, but there was an office, a new office in the State Department that addressed women's issues. I'm trying to remember the name of it. That's another thing I'll have to look for. I guess I should start making my list of things that should not be missed. There was this women's forum where the organizers were having meetings all over the world to address women's issues. I think then-First Lady Hillary Clinton was actively involved in this enterprise, this movement.

Q: I remember it, yes. I think there was at first a special coordinator for women's issues in the State Department.

JOHNSON: Yes. That's it! Theresa Loar was the Senior Coordinator for International Women's Issues, appointed to that position by President Clinton in July 1996. She also served as the Director of the President's Interagency Council on Women. Hilary Rodham

Clinton was the Honorary Chair of the Council and Secretary of State Albright was the actual Chair.

Q: Yes, I worked with her and it transitioned into a more permanent office, if I recall.

JOHNSON: Right, correct. Anita Botti was on the staff and she was the person I worked with the most on the trafficking issues. That office was trying to pull together all the information on these networks and convince Congress that there needed to be laws passed to protect the victims of trafficking so that law enforcement could get the evidence and testimony they needed to prosecute the traffickers. Those criminals needed to be prosecuted and the trafficking victims needed to be protected. That was a big process of educating all the relevant parties on the Hill about the big mess going on out there, and educating all the different offices within our agency and all the different program organizations.

For example, in the Bureau of Education and Cultural Affairs, if we were going to do an international visitor grant that focused on combating human trafficking, who were the experts that we would have people come and visit? How would we frame this discussion and put together this program? And then, there was the Office of Information Programs that did satellite dialogues and that wrote articles for placement in local magazines and newspaper. It also looked for speakers to go out and talk to their counterparts about the issue and what was being done here in the U.S. as well as learn about what was going on overseas. All of these different groups that worked on these issues needed to be educated as to the complexity of it and where there were resources, to learn more about it so that we could support efforts by law enforcement and the International Law Enforcement and Narcotics Bureau (INL). Overseas, INL officers were trying to let their law enforcement counterparts and their civil society counterparts know about the programs that might be available to educate their publics as well. We needed to educate our public here in the U.S., but USIA's role wasn't to do that, necessarily; we educate foreign publics. The law enforcement agencies here in the U.S. were undertaking campaigns to educate localities to the dangers of human trafficking and how to recognize trafficking victims and things like that. The goal was to educate the general public so that if a person saw something going on that they were concerned about, the person would know some of the warning signs and let local law enforcement know. We were in the process of educating the American public, we meaning the United States Government writ large, and we in the U.S. Information Agency were trying to educate ourselves so that we could then share this information with our colleagues overseas and they in turn could begin the dialogue with their local counterparts, people involved in civil society and law enforcement and that kind of thing.

Q: No, but that's interesting, starting out with an entirely new issue that USIA hadn't really dealt with before must have been quite a challenge.

JOHNSON: Oh, yes, because of course, there were skeptics who were oh, what are you talking about? So, yes, it was an interesting time. It was an exciting time, but it was also challenging because there was so much going on and people were seized with so many

different issues. Trying to make space for yet another thing to think about and figure out how to create programs for this was a challenge, it was a major challenge.

Q: Well, was the issue that was taking most of your time in the new position?

JOHNSON: I'm looking at my evaluation to try to remember what all the other things were, because it seems to me that there were many others. That one was a big one because it was new, and-

Q: And how did the conference go? Were you actually an attendee at the vice president's conference?

JOHNSON: Well, I haven't even started to talk about the conference. Let's see. Yes-

Q: Because this was initially building up to the conference, right?

JOHNSON: Well, the conference was on corruption, so I'm just trying to lay out all the different things that I was charged with coordinating. It seems to me there was also an issue of child labor, and I had to coordinate with the Department of Labor at some point. Someone called me up and I had a series of meetings and conversations with that person. Because at that point something had come up, some issue had come up, and I can't remember whether that was the time where they were trying to convince countries that were using children to make rugs and things like that was not appropriate. I remember there was a period where there was outrage about children working in factories and all kinds of things. The Voice of America, for example, did editorials and I remember one time we were coordinating with the Department of Labor, trying to get the right people to pass certain information that would be helpful as Voice of America put together its editorial. Not that we dictated how Voice of America could editorialize, but it seemed to me that there was a conversation with some folks about what were the priorities, what were the main points, and that's just useful information for anybody within our realm who was either working on an international visitor program focusing on the issue of child labor, or other products that we put together for specialists going out in the field to talk about the issue, or writing articles about why doing certain things was not necessarily helpful to developing an economy or however it was characterized and put out there.

So, there were those kinds of things that would come up. It helped to have a sense of who the people were, who had the expertise that one might need. I learned about all kinds of events. The Department of Justice has a unit that does these forums where they bring speakers in and who have expertise in certain issues, and they hold forth and then there are questions from the audience. One that sticks in my mind was Professor Sissela Bok, a philosopher and ethicist who wrote about how violence in TV, movies, and electronic games adversely affected young people and made them inured to violence. The lecture was shortly before the Columbine shooting of April 1999. (Note: The book she wrote

about the subject is Mayhem: Violence as Public Entertainment and it was published in 1998.)

The lecture was before the Columbine shooting because when it happened, I remembered some of the things she had said at that event. Going to those kinds of discussions were also interesting because then I met people with expertise there and I'd get their cards and then pass them to my colleagues, saying if you want someone who's an expert on this subject, you might want to look up this person.

There was another interesting speaker who focused on the issue of corruption. His was a challenging one because he said we should look back at the laws; there are certain practices in our political life that were considered normal 25, 30, maybe even 50 years ago, but we have since decided those are corrupt. The U.S. has criminalized certain behaviors, and so the question is does that make our governments more transparent and work better? One of the things he argued—this was a professor from John Jay College in New York City—so a lot of his examples were from New York and its storied mayors and politicians because his presentation focused on city government basically. One of the things he talked about that really made me think—and probably everyone else in the audience—was the dearly held concept of having people bid on projects then awarding the project to the lowest bidder. But look at what happens; invariably somebody comes in with the low bid, they may not be the best person or the most qualified person, but theirs is the lowest bid so the government takes it. Then, they have all these cost overruns and delays and in the end we taxpayers may not get the quality product that we wanted and we ended up having to pay more whereas maybe someone else gave a higher bid, but they had expertise in this area, knowledge in this area, and theirs was probably the more realistic bid in terms of what it was going to cost to do this project properly. But they didn't win it because it wasn't the lowest bid. He asked, what are you doing to yourself? He answered by giving an example of a school that New York City had put out to bid and it ended up taking many more years and many more millions of dollars than the original bid. So, he said in a way that's also corrupting because you're not really getting quality for what you're paying. And the people who are low bidding aren't being honest. Of course, that generated a very lively discussion, and I must say that I agreed with him because being a New Yorker and having observed some of the craziness that has gone on, I've always wondered about that process. He also had these really damning statistics about a series of experiments, I guess you'd call them, that they had done with sending out messages to government officials that were clearly inviting some kind of shady activity and of all the hundreds of messages they sent out only one person really pushed back and said no, meaning this person was honest. The others bit. He said with all these types of things going on, it makes one wonder if our anti-corruption laws are effective. Are all our efforts to combat corruption really effective? Those were the kinds of events that I often would go to not just to build a network of people with expertise, but also to hear different points on view on the issues. His certainly wasn't the most popular one, and he got a lot of pushback, but I thought it was good because he asked probing questions and made us think—what is your goal, what are you trying to do? Are you trying to get the best possible product—value for money? Is taking the lowest bidder really giving you what you want? More often than not, the answer is no. Just ask anyone

involved with the Silver Spring Transit Center project where so many things have had to be redone. It was just a mess. And I'm pretty sure it was awarded to the lowest bidder.

Q: I remember John Glenn used to worry that he was sitting on top of a spaceship built by the lowest bidder, too.

JOHNSON: Yes.

Q: But you were in the director's office, now getting back to USIA, and that ____ in the director's office was focused on this suggests that it had the full backing of the top levels?

JOHNSON: Oh yes. And because of Penn Kemble's involvement with civic education and all that, he was very seized with this conference and wanted to make sure that USIA did all that it could to make it a success. And oh, by the way, yes, he was going to chair a panel and I was supposed to find the panelists and organize that too.

Q: That's fun.

JOHNSON: Penn Kemble moderated the panel entitled "Strategies for Making Corruption Visible." We ended up getting the Mayor of Palermo, Leoluca Orlando (Italy), the head of the Directorate of Corruption and Economic Crime, Tymon Katlholo (Botswana) and a journalist from Paraguay's *Diario El Dia* named Jose Luis Simón. In addition, Professor Roy Godson from the National Strategy Information Center and Nancy Zucker Boswell, Managing Director of Transparency International-USA served as discussants.

As I recall, there were three star anti-corruption fighters that we wanted on the panel. One was a woman from Hong Kong who was in charge of the anti-corruption entity over there. Hong Kong had instituted some very effective anti-corruption practices so it was held up as a best practice. I cannot recall why, but she did not end up on the panel. Botswana had copied the Hong Kong model and adapted it for their country, so that person ended up as a panelist. The big star was the mayor of Palermo, Sicily. Mayor Leoluca Orlando was a legendary anti-mafia figure. It seems to me he was suggested by Penn Kemble. His presence in the U.S. coincided with him having been invited to the States on an individual international visitor program.

Oh, here it is. Hong Kong's anti-corruption commission chief was Lily Yan. We were able to arrange to get her on a primetime CNN International program as part of the whole activity.

Q: And this was part of the vice president's big anti-corruption-

JOHNSON: It was part of the Global Forum on Fighting Corruption, yes. Yes, those were the kinds of things that I was charged with doing, not just putting the panel together, but working with our colleagues in all the different parts of USIA to make sure that we publicized what was going on. And it seemed to me that I spent a lot of time also

coordinating with our World Bank colleagues who were also very actively involved in the program. Of course, there were all the different planning meetings at the NSC. There was a naval officer who was the coordinating point person on this. I ran into him about a year or so ago. He's since retired but he's still in the area. It was at an art event at the National Museum of Women in the Arts. Small world; D.C. is a small town after all.

Anyway, yes, so there were just so many different pieces to the puzzle putting this thing together and trying to get translation services. We'd get material, whenever it was available, and have it translated to support the non-English speaking posts as they were trying to also publicize this event. It seemed like there were endless little bits and pieces of things to do and to keep track of to make this work.

And then, of course, as I recall, there was the challenge of the cycle of the Congressionally mandated reports that always caused heartburn overseas because oftentimes they were critical of what was going on in a certain country. One of these was the infamous INSCSR (International Narcotics Control Strategy Report). It is the report that talks about what countries are doing to combat narcotics trafficking, financial crimes and that kind of thing.

Q: Okay. That was in your bailiwick as well?

JOHNSON: The publicity surrounding that report was an issue that we had to coordinate. This was the annual report on counter narcotics activities, and a lot of times when it was published people were blindsided at the posts, in the embassies. All of a sudden, this thing would appear, and of course, the host country, if there were negative comments about their efforts to combat the scourge of drug trafficking, would get upset. Nobody likes to be criticized. So, one of my tasks was to convince the Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement that it would be safe to send an embargoed copy of this report to the post so they could see what was being said about their country and could draft talking points and press statements before the report was released. This was especially important if the post needed to translate the information into a foreign language. We needed to give them some time to get their ducks in a row so that when it was released they'd be able to put it in context and say this is why we're doing it, this is Congressionally mandated. We needed to say that the U.S. was trying to combat this problem that has created misery all over God's creation and put things in context. We needed to explain why it is being done; your country isn't being singled out, we're not trying to bash you. Actually, this is a tool that can be used to improve whatever weaknesses have been identified and so on and so forth.

Q: Were you still focusing on Latin American in this context as well?

JOHNSON: That's what made this job interesting. I was focusing globally on the narcotics and law enforcement and trafficking and corruption; all of those international crime issues. That was global. However, our office had everyone divided up by geographic bureau as well so that we would liaison with our geographic bureau on

whatever issues they wanted our office to deal with. And I got Latin America because of the narcotics trafficking issue and some of the migration issues.

Q: Well, and your background presumably as well.

JOHNSON: Yes, because of that, exactly, my experience working in the region for so long. Sometimes it felt schizophrenic, because I was focusing on global issues and working with the functional bureaus in State Department; INL was one, but I also sometimes had to engage others offices because, as I recall, we had some issues that crossed over into the environmental realm. The oceans and environment bureau.

Q: Yes, OES.

JOHNSON: OES, yes, thank you.

Q: Oceans-

JOHNSON: Oceans, Environment and Science. Yes, there were some issues that crossed over. Sometimes I would have to reach out to folks in that bureau or other bureaus.

Yet another thing that our office was involved in was the merger. This was 1998-99 when State Department was going to absorb the U.S. Information Agency, and so there was a conversation or discussion about cross-walking all these different offices and bureaus, and how would USIA fit into State Department.

Q: When did that actually happen?

JOHNSON: I believe it was Fiscal Year 1999. Or maybe October 1, 1998—it might have been the start of the new fiscal year.

Q: Okay. So, it would have been while you were in this office?

JOHNSON: The merger took place while I was in this office. When I first arrived in Washington, Carol Dorflein was the office director, and she had worked in or had some connection to the E Bureau, which was the Economic Bureau. Stu Eizenstat was the assistant secretary for that bureau, and in that bureau they had a team of people similar to our office. It was a bureau that worked with a lot of different parts of the State Department and the United States Government because economics is not a narrow issue; its tentacles are everywhere. So, there was a need to have an office with people whose sole purpose was coordination and making sure everybody who needed to be talking to each other was doing that. This was what D/C did; it tried to coordinate within USIA, but also across the U.S. Government, trying to make sure that we were talking and getting information from everyone we needed information from, but we were also reaching out and letting folks know what we could do. We explained how we could amplify a message, and tried to show the benefits of coordinating in that way. That's why it was called the Office of Strategic Communication—we were trying to take that 30,000-foot

view of messaging by asking questions like: "Who all do we need to engage on this issue?" "Who must you reach not just within the entity, but across the government?" We focused primarily on working with State because we were getting our policy direction from State, but then we also reached out to all of the other players who were stakeholders. We argued that the undersecretary for public diplomacy and public affairs needed to have a unit like this as well because you were going to atomize USIA within the State Department, so how were we going to coordinate and make sure that all the different pieces that were scattered throughout the State Department still knew what they needed to know? We were connecting everyone so the U.S. Government could have a coherent and coordinated messaging apparatus.

Well, there were people at State Department that felt we were just trying to recreate USIA in State and that we were not with the program, that sort of thing. I think that was so shortsighted. It was so shortsighted because when 9/11 occurred in 2001, that's when it became evident that there was not a good mechanism for the coordination that was needed to get messages out, nor was there a mechanism that allowed us to confer with all those entities that we needed to work with on the messaging. There were people scattered to the four winds doing different things and it was really difficult to coordinate and get that two-way conversation or multimodal conversation going to respond quickly. That was one of the things that USIA had prided itself in, that because of this coordination mechanism, when something unexpected came up we could quickly pull together everyone who needed to be pulled together because you had a unit whose purpose in life was to know who all needed to be in the conversation. But we didn't transfer that capability into the State Department for the new undersecretary. So, I was very frustrated and disappointed that it was not considered a best practice that was cross-walked over to the State Department. And to this day, I think we're still suffering the effects of that decision. There are all kinds of papers that have been written and complaints that have been made about coordination and that kind of thing. But, you know, that's life.

Q: Well, we've segued into the merger of State and USIA, which is right in this period, so maybe we can talk a little bit more about that. Were you actually involved in some of these committees that were trying to help determine how this would be done?

JOHNSON: Well, I think it was the acting USIA director and then my immediate supervisor who handled that. Carol Dorflein was only there a few months and then she retired. The new person, Peter Kovach, came in, and-

Q: That's the director of your office?

JOHNSON: D/C, Peter Kovach was the new director of D/C. And so, it was Penn Kemble and Peter Kovach, and of course, Rick Ruth, who was the most senior civil

servant in the director's office. They were all working on the merger and got input from all of us as issues came up.

Q: And was this an issue now where it was mandated from above that it's time to merge these two organizations? Or was this somehow a working level that worked its way up with recommendations to do it?

JOHNSON: The merger of USIA and State?

Q: Yes.

JOHNSON: Oh, this was then-Senator Jesse Helms, who headed the Senate Foreign Relations Committee at the time.

Q: It was Jesse Helms?

JOHNSON: He wanted-

Q: Wasn't even the administration.

JOHNSON: It was Jesse Helms, who had this plan to merge both USAID and USIA into State Department. And I guess it was Brian, was it Atwood? Brian Atwood at USAID?

Q: Atwood at AID, yes.

JOHNSON: Brian Atwood successfully fought it off giving, I think, good reasons why he thought perhaps there should be better coordination, and there were some ways that one could integrate certain activities. But he felt it was really important that USAID, to the extent possible, maintain its independence or autonomy. Whereas, I distinctly remember sitting in a meeting and Joseph Duffey, Director Duffey made some startling statements.

It seemed that he was even questioning why we had a U.S. Information Agency. So, that made all of us-

Q: Was the director of USIA questioning it?

JOHNSON: Yes, yes.

Q: Okay. Well, that could be-

JOHNSON: That was a bit disconcerting because-

Q: A bit disconcerting, although you see it happening these days again.

JOHNSON: Yes, sadly, yes.

Q: But there must have been at least a tacit agreement within the administration as well that there was some merit to doing this?

JOHNSON: Well, yes. There was agreement within the administration. There were pros and cons. The pro was you would be seated at the policy making table and could perhaps therefore have a voice and bring the perspective of those who are on the frontlines literally engaging foreign publics on policy issues. We could highlight what public reactions might be. We could say, if you take this line, this is how foreign publics are going to react. USIA even had a whole unit that did research on public opinion on a regular basis. Some of the polling was purchased from local outfits, but other times contracts were made with foreign polling organizations to ask specific questions so that we could get a sense of what people were thinking. That was another one of my tasks in this job from day one. When I interacted with other parts of the U.S. Government, I would emphasize the importance of understanding foreign publics and taking advantage of public opinion research to frame official statements. I told my contacts we needed to understand where people were, meet people where they were, and figure out what mattered to foreign publics because we were not going to get very far if we were talking about A and they were really worried about B. There had to be some kind of mutual benefit. Yes, we want to advance USG policy, but people are not going to undermine their own wellbeing just to please the U.S. We have to figure out what is needed in the environment, what people are concerned about, and what it is we're trying to do. How does what we're trying to do help them achieve their goals and objectives and how then will that coming together help us achieve our goals and objectives? Sometimes we agree to disagree and there's just not a lot of movement. But at least we understand why they have their position and they understand why we have our position, and that's an important thing to do as well.

One of the things that I always diplomatically tried to say is that we can't just go in and browbeat people. We have to really understand what the lay of the land is, what the communication environment is, and who the people are that really influence things in the society. Taking advantage of research, and asking for research if you don't know, is

really important. Before you open your mouth, you need to listen and understand. One of the things I tried to advocate was the use of public opinion and other types of audience research that was being done by USIA's research team to help staff understand any given environment. The research would reveal the pushback we were going to get if policy took a certain direction. By taking into account what people were concerned about and finding a way to present what we needed to say in a way that showed that we actually appreciated and understood what their concerns were, then we might make a little bit more progress in getting cooperation on a sticky issue.

Part of my job was also to educate other parts of the U.S. Government as to what USIA could and couldn't do. We couldn't work miracles just because an agency wanted someone to agree with the USG position. No, we had to understand where things stood in that society and how what we are advocating was going to affect that society, and if it was going to adversely affect people in that society then the chances of persuading the government or leaders to do what we wanted probably were not too great.

Q: Yes. On the merger, if I could continue with that since it's such a seminal event, from a personnel point of view how did that affect you if this happened right in the middle of your tenure. What happened?

JOHNSON: Well, we were going to end up going to a different bureau because our office would no longer exist. That was another issue; they had said, "you all are just trying to preserve your jobs." Well, I'm a government employee. I'm going to have a job no matter what. My concern was preserving a mechanism for coordination and effective communication. But unfortunately, the decision makers didn't see it that way. So, all of our team ended up going into the Office for International Information Programs—IIP. Each of us went into a different part of it. Because of the issues I was handling, I went into a team that was already working on narcotics—kind of working on narcotics. Let's see; I'm trying to remember.

Q: That would have been an office that was somehow under the undersecretary for public information? Or public affairs?

JOHNSON: Yes, it would be part of that. I was on a global issues team; it was called the Global Issues and Communication team (IIP/GIC). And yes, it was the undersecretary for public diplomacy and public affairs who would oversee the Bureau of Education and Cultural Affairs, the Office of International Information Programs, and the Public Affairs Bureau. Then there was, I guess, a dotted line to the Voice of America or rather the Broadcasting Board of Governors.

Q: And spokesman and spokesperson.

JOHNSON: Yes, the spokesperson is in the Public Affairs Bureau. If I'm remembering the organizational chart, there are three branches; the public pieces are two big units. And

there may have been more. I would have to look at an old organizational chart to figure it out.

Q: It's alright. You don't have to get every detail into your history.

JOHNSON: Basically, what had been USIA would still exist under the undersecretary for public diplomacy and public affairs.

Q: So, you went into an existing team, which obviously would-

JOHNSON: And I had been working with them beforehand-

Q: Before, you know, so obviously there's some change, but was there a radical change from your point of view? Was it a good incorporation?

JOHNSON: It was a change in that the subject matter expanded. Before my focus was mostly on transnational crime, law enforcement and all things related to those issues. When I joined IIP, in addition to that, I was going to be responsible for environmental issues because that was a global issue. I think our team mirrored what the different functional bureaus in State Department did. I'm trying to flip through here to jog my memory.

Q: So, it would have been things like refugees and human rights and so forth?

JOHNSON: Yes, yes, yes, exactly. I had to expand my little network of people that I engaged. And what also happened was that the INL bureau, the OES bureau, all these different bureaus got public diplomacy officers, so what I used to do before as the liaison with INL, now they were going to have a team or a person doing that. So, yes, I had to read in on all these new issues, some of them I was already familiar with, but things like HIV-AIDS became part of it because it was public health and science. Space was also part of OES's portfolio, so there are all these new and different things, including more on refugees and migration issues that I had to get up to speed on. I already had interactions with colleagues in the Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration (PRM) because of trafficking issues. So I was not starting from zero with that office.

Yes, there were new things and then, of course-

Q: Did you physically move to the State Department?

JOHNSON: No. I physically moved from an office on the top floor to an office on the fourth floor of the USIA building in Southwest. And those offices didn't move to a location near the State Department until much later.

I spent a lot of time getting to know the different public diplomacy and public affairs people in all these different bureaus, as well as the officers who were working specific issues, like the woman in OES who had the AIDS portfolio, Nancy Carter Foster. I got to

know her and find out what kinds of things they were doing and how we could add value and take advantage of her expertise and her network. Again, my network of contacts within the State Department and outside in the non-governmental sphere and with academics and researchers and all kinds of folks expanded.

That reminds me of something, talking about advice to folks in the service now. Some of my colleagues, when they had Washington assignments, took advantage of being in Washington and started working on master's degrees in substantive areas of interest related to their work or on subjects that they wanted to work on in the future. Going to some of the think tank presentations was also useful, because I met people with expertise and could build a network of experts. I could build what folks called purposeful relationships, good working relationships with people who could be helpful in the future even if I wasn't working on something totally related to what they were doing at that time. Things change, issues rise and fall, new issues come up, so it can't hurt to have go-to people for expertise. I would encourage officers, to the extent that they can, to keep track of what's going on in the different think tanks that deal with issues related to their portfolio. In so doing, they can learn all kinds of useful things, especially if they are in the business of trying to communicate policy. They can also shape how the policy is communicated and put it in context and put it in language that addresses the different concerns of the audiences they are trying to reach. Many times, the people who were doing research in the field and who have expertise on these issues can provide advice and counsel. None of us knows everything, so it's important to find these different go-to people with whom one can bat ideas around to come up with solutions. You can decide, "okay, so I need to couch it in these terms if it's going to really resonate with the listeners," that kind of a thing.

Q: So many resources of that nature in Washington that yes, of course people should be taking advantage of them, but they don't always.

JOHNSON: And they can't always because, unfortunately, not every supervisor values those kinds of interactions.

Q: That too.

JOHNSON: An officer could get dinged for taking an extra-long lunch hour because he or she went over to Brookings or Heritage to hear something, and wasn't glued to their desk answering emails and doing memos for whomever. It's tough, because officers have to be responsive to others, their supervisors and the higher ups, but sometimes I think

there's not an appreciation for what goes on outside the building that can really pump up or enhance or fine tune a message with additional knowledge and nuance.

Q: Yes, yes. That's good advice, good advice.

Now, what did the changeover do in terms of looking for a next assignment? Did everything change?

JOHNSON: Yes, the assignment system in USIA was not adopted as a best practice. We just had to adapt to State's practice. The way USIA did it an assignment started the first day of language training because that was the most important thing in doing the job. It had to adjust to the October cycle after all of the summer deliberations on promotions have been completed. In State, you can't bid on something if it's two grades above your personal grade, or something like that. You know, they have all these rules. You had to wait, basically, until you know whether or not you've been promoted before you can start bidding. Later on, I worked in HR in career development. I remember learning all of the different rules about when one could bid and what one could bid on. Oh, mercy!

Q: They've changed regularly as well, so-

JOHNSON: Exactly. So, back in the day, as I recall vaguely, it was a totally different landscape, so we had to learn that new system. I guess the biggest shock in that period happened just before I left the D/C office to move into the IIP on the global issues team. I got this phone call from Susan Clyde in personnel telling me I had been promoted from FS-1 to OC, which was the Senior Foreign Service. I was totally flabbergasted! It was the last thing I expected, because we were getting ready to merge with State Department. It just never occurred to me that I might get promoted, because I remember when I first came back in '98, there was a promotion list that had quite a few people promoted into the Senior Foreign Service, and the folks at State Department were a bit twitterpated because they said USIA was trying to stack the Senior Foreign Service ranks with all their people before they merged with State Department. I just assumed that was the end of any promotions for anyone because it was frowned on by the powers that be over at the State Department.

So, I get this phone call, and I think it was a Friday evening. I was packing up, getting ready to leave, and I get this call that I've been promoted to the Senior Foreign Service. You could have knocked me over with a feather. That was nice, but then that meant I had an opportunity to look at different types of jobs that maybe I hadn't considered before.

Q: So, in USIA you were still being notified by phone call rather than a list suddenly appearing and surprising everybody on a Saturday morning or something?

JOHNSON: Oh, everything was very personal, yes. They called people overseas when they were promoted. Your career counselor would call. They always tried to do that. USIA was a small agency, so they could. Actually, that particular list was tiny. I think

there were only a half dozen or maybe eight people who were promoted to Senior Foreign Service that year. I guess it was the last gasp. But yes, I got a call.

Q: Well, congratulations. You were suddenly Senior Service, and so, what did that let you look ahead to under the new system?

JOHNSON: Well, under the new system I could look at a job like deputy director of the office of public diplomacy and public affairs in WHA. And I think that I had already had some conversations with folks about that, but it really didn't become intense until after the promotion, then I think it was more of a viable option. Oh, and then the other thing that was going on during this same 1998-1999 period was looking at all the positions in USIA; State started talking about how these positions were over-graded and that they needed to be downgraded. That began a long process and lots of conversations as well. Yes. There were so many things going on that were demoralizing for those of us who were in public diplomacy because we felt that State didn't really value our workforce. One of my other concerns was because people didn't appreciate and understand what our charge was. I felt there needed to be an education process; the same way we tried to educate foreign publics, we needed to educate our State Department colleagues about the value that we could add to the foreign policy-making process. I don't think we did a very good job or were able to do a very good job of it because there was so much going on and there were so many different things that had to be done to make this merger work. I feel there was a missed opportunity to really focus on this as a way of explaining why these jobs were graded the way they were. They are that way because this is what the expectations are of the person. In the end, it became subjective. Basically, the powers that be didn't think some of these things were as important as we thought they were. They didn't think that the grade should be as high. That began a multi-year process of re-evaluation and realignment. Those changes also came with budget cuts and positions were eliminated. There was a lot of carnage.

Q: So, you had not been in Washington very long at this point, and did you still want to stay there longer, and you were looking for another job in Washington after this?

JOHNSON: Yes. And by then I had already decided, before I got promoted, that I was not going to be going back overseas because I was going to retire.

Q: Retire? Oh, my.

JOHNSON: Because, as you know, it's an up and out system and the clock was ticking. So, I had already started thinking about what I would do after I ticked out. Plus I had school-age children and one of them had a learning/developmental issue that required speech therapy and other kinds of therapies and the regional doctor-

Q: Right, the thing that had brought you back to Washington in the first place.

JOHNSON: Right. The regional doctor had said that if we did go overseas again it should be an English-speaking country just to keep him on the right track. But my husband and I

decided we probably wanted to just stay here and focus on getting him the support he needed and not have to worry about trying to figure out what country had what school and speech therapists and all of this carrying on. I had already figured I would just try to get good assignments to do good work and then go off into the sunset. When I got promoted that meant that I had a little extra time.

Q: Right, right. Well, at least seven years?

JOHNSON: I believe so, yes.

Q: Something like that, yes.

JOHNSON: Seven, six; I can't remember now.

Q: Okay.

JOHNSON: So there was additional time on the clock, but by then my husband had found a job he liked and there were all of these factors that made going back overseas unattractive. The challenge was to find meaningful work here in Washington, and I knew that I would never be promoted beyond OC because what I needed to do maybe after one more Washington tour would be go back overseas to a bigger post with more complex

issues, and I just wasn't going to do that. I knew how many years I had left on the clock to make a difference at least here while I was in the service.

Q: So, you moved onto- you had mentioned the deputy director of public affairs for WHA; was that something you actually bid on and were assigned to?

JOHNSON: Yes. So, that was my-

Q: And that would have been 2000?

JOHNSON: That would have been 2000.

Q: 2000, okay.

JOHNSON: And this is where my documents end.

Q: But it's so recent you can remember it.

JOHNSON: I still have those other documents, those other evaluations, but I need to find them, and it's been a challenge trying to find them. Maybe we could stop at this point. What do you think?

Q Okay. We could call it a short day if you want to. And pick it up in 2000 with your next Washington assignment when we start again.

JOHNSON: Yes. Because I'm even trying to remember how long I was in IIP. I can't recall when exactly I changed from IIP, because there were some interesting things that went on in that IIP assignment. I'd like to go through them a little more carefully and figure out if there are any other useful words of wisdom associated with that before I move to the next one.

Q: Okay, certainly.

JOHNSON: Maybe we could start with if there were any lessons learned that might be helpful from the IIP adventure and then segue into the WHA, which was also an interesting process because again, it was educating ourselves to the ways of the State Department, and also trying to educate our counterparts, our colleagues, as to what we could and couldn't do. There were big questions at that point as to whether these public diplomacy units should be units in and of themselves, or whether public diplomacy officers should be sent to sit in the different offices within the bureau. For example, should we have the unit that was walked over remain as they were at USIA, or should the desk officer for Andean countries go sit in the Office of Andean Affairs? There were conversations about what's the best configuration, and some geographic bureaus kept

their public diplomacy teams together intact, and others put the public diplomacy officers in the subunits, the different offices, sub-geographic unit offices.

Q: Interesting; there was no consistency.

JOHNSON: No consistency—there was a DAS whose portfolio included public diplomacy, but that person wasn't always a public diplomacy officer. It was a period of experimentation, so that's why I'd like to try to see if I can find some of the evaluations and other documents from that period because there was just so much churn. "Churn" is a good word; people were trying to figure out the best way to make this merger work. The undersecretary for public diplomacy and public affairs had limited power over how things functioned because all of a sudden, these offices were part of geographic bureaus as opposed to being part of the undersecretary's domain. There was a lot of questioning and confusion and frustration too. All we wanted to do was a good job, and it was frustrating because we were trying to figure out the best way to do this work in this new configuration.

Q: Okay. So, we'll take up there next time.

JOHNSON: Okay.

Q: Good morning. Today is January 25, 2019, and I'm beginning a new interview session with Cynthia Johnson.

Cynthia, last time we spoke to each other we had talked about the integration of USIA into State and your experiences with that. And I believed we ended the interview about the time you were moving from what had been IIP into a new job in- integrated into State in Western Hemisphere Affairs, public diplomacy and public affairs office. So, why don't we start there and maybe you want to recall anything we didn't say or any wrap-up words you want to say about the last session and take it onwards from there.

JOHNSON: Okay. When I was assigned to IIP, the managers decided to send all of us on our team to work with the different parts of IIP that focused on the subjects that we had been working on in D/C. So, I went to a team that was already working on counter-narcotics, environment, HIV-AIDS, a little bit of refugee migration issues having to do with human trafficking, anti-corruption issues and that kind of thing. The value that I hoped that I was able to bring to that team was many of the relationships that I had established with not just different offices in the State Department, but with outside entities as well. I had already been going to weekly meetings in INL, which is the International Law Enforcement and Narcotics bureau that dealt with a lot of the counter-narcotics activities. I had also been working on messaging related to trafficking and anti-trafficking issues, so, I knew some of the players there. After the change, I picked up the portfolio of environment, and was responsible for going to the weekly meetings in the OES bureau to bring back first-hand information as to what its priorities were, and what things might be changing. We set up strategic partnerships and looked at different entities that might help inform what we were doing. I remember that as a period when I

continued going to some of the National Institutes of Justice lectures because one of the tasks that the IIP team I was on had was identifying experts in the field of law enforcement and related issues, and certainly many of the folks who lectured on panels and were in programs at the National Institutes of Justice were great candidates for our speakers program and other activities.

In D/C, I had also been a liaison with WHA, working on some of their issues. Plan Colombia was one of the big policy programs being designed and developed during that period, as I recall. I did go to weekly meetings in WHA anyway, so it was a fairly easy transition going from the IIP team onto the WHA team. During that time I also became aware of some initiatives that the World Bank had in terms of collecting information related to poverty, because at the time the church I attended, had a series of speakers and one of the issues of focus was poverty. The World Bank had done studies on it and published a series of books called "Voices of the Poor." One of the things I remember to this day after reading those books was a statement by one of the people interviewed. He said that for poor people, probably the most important thing that anyone could do to help was to provide healthcare, because if you're sick and you can't work, you're basically dead. Healthcare and having access to clean water and a clean environment are critical for survival of the poor, and I thought that was ironic because over the years, time and time again, in our country even, we have had these debates about healthcare and who should have it and how should we provide it and this kind of thing. The fact of the matter is, when you look at productivity, if you have a population that's ailing, you're not going to have growth and prosperity. In my experience living in Africa and Latin America, especially in Africa where you have malaria and other diseases that would decimate the population—and we had periods when I was serving in Africa when some of our staff would be hit with bouts of malaria—it was just awful. These are our colleagues who are pretty well paid, but it was hard to avoid infections when they lived in an environment where there were pesky little bugs going around biting people, no matter how much one tried to protect one's self.

All of these dots actually connected because when I went to work in WHA, of course, poverty continued to be an issue that drove a lot of the policy decisions and was a hot topic of debate.

Sorry, you were going to ask?

Q: I was just going to ask you, since you were putting so much emphasis on health and whether the department was also considering that a priority or not.

JOHNSON: Yes, exactly. I'm just looking at some of the notes of things that were identified as problems that resisted conventional responses, and that's a direct quote that I recall from a meeting. We had five things that were listed as problems that defy any kind of conventional response, and number one was poverty. Number two was the narco-organized crime; those were the top two. Migrant smuggling or human trafficking was

number three. Corruption and environment; those were the top five. And those were the issues that I had been dealing with in my IIP position.

Q: Which _____ neatly into your portfolio with kind of the functional issues there.

JOHNSON: Yes.

Q: Okay. Now, maybe I can ask you as well before we get too far into this, that you transitioned from USIA to WHA in the State Department; this was just something which was done administratively rather than a particular position you bid on through the normal transfer cycle, or was it?

JOHNSON: Well, the positions were advertised, like all normal positions, and what the Western Hemisphere Affairs bureau decided to do was cross walk the USIA public diplomacy office, physically, into the building in Foggy Bottom as part of the bureau, as a separate entity within the bureau. WHA leadership folded its public affairs operations into our office. So there was still a public affairs office in a different location in the building, but organizationally we were one unit, and we weren't that far apart. I think they were around the corner from our office. The public affairs office still continued with its work in the new Bureau of Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs, but now it was part of the WHA public diplomacy team. There was still that line of demarcation because the Smith-Mundt Act didn't let us use public diplomacy funds to address the domestic audience. We still had to keep the two pots of money separate so that we wouldn't run into trouble with the Congress.

Q: Okay, that's interesting. And maybe you could tell me how large an office this was, and how it fit into the bureau management.

JOHNSON: Oh, goodness. How many people?

Q: Well, yes, approximately. I don't need a-

JOHNSON: Oh, probably everybody together, maybe it was a couple dozen, because I'm thinking we had the desk officers who covered multiple countries, we had the support staff, and then I think there were five people on the public affairs team. We also had interns rotating in and out and work-study students, one of whom eventually became an FSO, which was exciting and wonderful. The positions that changed were related to the budget. In USIA we had someone who managed our budget, and because we were now part of WHA, the EX (administrative services) office would handle our budget. I'm trying to remember, we still had the expertise of that person, but he became part of the

EX office instead of being part of our team. He was still responsible for managing and making sure all of our money got spent properly and things didn't get screwy.

Q: So, you had a pretty big operation, which was presumably under an office director.

JOHNSON: Yes.

Q: And did you have your own DAS as well?

JOHNSON: Yes. We had a DAS. The DAS covered, I can't remember what other region, but it seems to me that the DAS covered another geographic region plus public diplomacy. Yes, there were a whole lot of us, and I was the deputy director of that office. My main job was to find the right candidates for the jobs overseas and in the office. And also, understand this new universe and new culture of State Department, which valued different things from what USIA had valued and that operated differently. The whole assignment cycle was different. USIA had a rolling, year-round assignment cycle because people's assignments started on their first day of language training. Having good foreign-language skills was a critical part of our job. Everyone had to have either 3/3 or 2/2, depending on if it was a hard language or an easier one. The merger called for all kinds of readjusting, because previously, we didn't wait for the promotion lists to come out to make assignments. There was a whole lot more flexibility because the most important thing for USIA was to make sure people were language qualified and able to communicate when they went overseas. If you waited until after the lists came out, because so many people were rotating in the summer due to families with children in school and all of that, sometimes it got too late and then language training got short shrift and that didn't serve us well. That's not to say anything about all the other training, because we didn't just do the language training, there was all the other training depending on what you were going to do in the job. If you're going out as a spokesperson to do press work, there are all kinds of things that you needed to learn. And if you were going to do academic exchanges, same thing—cultural programs, managing grants and things like that had to be mastered. Since we did a lot of things that State officers didn't do, training was important. As a first or second tour officer I was responsible for a budget and managing exchanges and doing all kinds of things that some of my State counterparts who were political or economic officers wouldn't ever do until maybe they were a DCM or in a type of position that handed out grant money, like the narcotics coordinator or something like that.

Q: Or maybe never.

JOHNSON: Yes, yes. So, there were things that we had to learn with respect to grants so that we didn't do something inappropriate and end up breaking the law. We were similar to consular officers who have to take specialized training to make sure they get it all

right. There were so many different pieces that had to be recalibrated and adjusted because it was a totally different assignment system.

Q: Was State sensitive to that?

JOHNSON: Let's just say that we in USIA viewed it as a hostile takeover and State was not interested in any of our best practices. Because we did so many grants and dealt with so many kinds of financial arrangements, there were some of our best practices that we thought should be adopted and they wanted no parts of that. State could have cared less! I wasn't too involved in that universe, but I had friends who worked in offices that handled grants and things like that, and there were many eye-rolls, exasperation, and frustration trying to explain why certain practices had been developed at USIA. These were not activities that State had traditionally done, so their mechanisms were not as flexible. Plus, the whole purpose of a communication organization is to be able to respond quickly to changing events, and that was a concept that seemed hard for some in State to grasp. If you have to get a half-a-dozen, no, if you have to get two-dozen clearances just to say yes or no in a quickly changing situation, it makes it a lot more difficult to turn on a dime. Now, granted, we were still getting clearances to do policy statements. When we were USIA there was coordination because that was our purpose—communicating policy. But our internal clearances took into account State's, and so, there were ways to try to get things done as quickly as possible.

I remember when I was in Panama during the crazy times with General Noriega and all kinds of fast-changing events. Our public affairs officer was often on the phone with the public affairs office in Washington saying look, I need somebody to give me some guidance yesterday because this is what's going on now. And that worked when it was necessary to get quick approval. Sometimes, when the PAO couldn't get a response, he would just say something and say okay, if you don't like it, fine, but we've got to say something and this is in line with our policy. More often than not it was okay, but there was that flexibility because it was a different agency and our mission was to explain U.S. policy. We weren't creating it, but sometimes you had to remind people, this is what the policy says, so based on what the policy says this is what we need to do. If you want to change the policy because of the changed circumstances then you need to let me know what to say yesterday! Sometimes they were able to walk the hallways and get people to respond quickly. But then, when we were all absorbed into this behemoth organization, then there were many new processes. Of course there were the staff assistants, and they were like the gatekeepers for lots of things. All of a sudden, we had to filter everything through all these different staff assistants in all the different bureaus. There was so much that we had to learn about the inner workings of State because many times we had just worked desk officer to desk officer or office director to office director. As an independent agency we had more flexibility in making certain types of decisions, but as part of State Department everybody had to learn the rules of the game and the culture of the institution. That was an adventure!

I'm looking at some of my notes on some of the things we did, and of course, both the office director and I did a lot of traveling, going to the different posts to evaluate the

programs and how they were doing with the transition and what messages they wanted us to carry back to Washington and what things we needed to keep an eye on to support them if they ran into some trouble. In some places the transition was difficult. Some of the State staff members were so vindictive! There was a hostility that had always existed because we had our own representation budget. It was needed because we did receptions for visiting scholars, speakers and artists. We hosted receptions for special events and programs. We had dinners to bring together people who might not normally get together around an issue where they all had a common interest and goal. We would do this to try to move everyone along in support of a particular policy. There were so many things we did with these funds to support policy initiatives. As everybody knows, if you sit around a table eating it's hard to be really nasty, so that was an important tool in our toolkit. We had a budget to do these types of events. And we had representational dishes for the public affairs officer because the bulk of the entertaining was done in the public affairs officer's home. When an information officer or cultural affairs officer had an event and needed extras, he or she could use the public affairs officer's china. We were a team that worked together because we had this responsibility

When we cross walked into State, the representation budget stayed separate because Congress said these funds are for public diplomacy and it would still have to have a separate budget for its activities. Congress was allocating money separately for public diplomacy. In the past, we had also hosted events for other officers in the embassy in support of policies and initiatives because that was our job. There were some embassies where the administrative officer, on the first of October, 1999, went to the public affairs officer's house and picked up all the china and other representational items, taking them to the warehouse, so that if the public affairs officer wanted to do something, he or she had to put in the request and have the stuff come back to the house for an event, and then it had to be sent back. It was just unbelievable, the pettiness and the craziness that went on. Yes, those kinds of things happened. As you can imagine, morale was not the greatest in some posts, and so part of our job was also to try to be as supportive as we could and help people get through a period where some very ugly behavior surfaced.

Q: I have to say that surprises me because I had left the department by that time so I didn't witness it myself, but at posts generally the USIA operation I would have thought would have been fairly small and well-integrated and I would have hoped this kind of thing would have been totally avoided.

JOHNSON: Exactly, that's why this kind of behavior was surprising to many of them. Some of the staff in the USIA units or USIS as it was called overseas, who were responsible for the budget, were suddenly faced with questions about whether or not they stayed in the public diplomacy office location. Because of their work, they had to move to the Budget & Fiscal office. There were questions about whether or not their positions would even exist. There were all kinds of questions and things that had to be sorted out, and it was hard, it was really hard. That's why many of us viewed it as a hostile takeover because the whole world for many people was totally turned on its head. I was in Washington at that time so I was looking at things from the Washington perspective and trying to work in a positive way to make it a smooth transition on the Washington side so

that we could be as supportive as possible to the officers in the field. But it was, oh, goodness, difficult!

Q: Your job, you said, focused on personnel issues and trying to get people not only for your slots but for the embassy; now, how did that work? Did that begin to integrate more as well since everybody was now part of State ? Did more former USIA officers move into, say, political or economic jobs and more State officers moving to what had previously been USIA jobs?

JOHNSON: Well, there were so many things happening at once. First of all, State leadership said all of the positions in USIA were over-graded, so then there had to be an evaluation of the grades. And then there were questions like, "Do you really need all of these positions?" Some of the questions were valid. Should we move certain positions from Country A to Country B because there were small countries that didn't even have any public diplomacy programs and they weren't going to get any. For example, there was an officer out there doing economic work part-time and public diplomacy tasks part-time. How are we going to better support those types of officers? Or how are we going to do training? Now everybody was going to have to be a consular officer at the outset of their career, and they could also serve as a public diplomacy officer, if necessary. On the one hand, because so much public diplomacy often is addressing consular issues, there was some logic to that because the more you know about how that functions, the better you can be at explaining it to others and working with your consular section to do the necessary to make sure the public is aware of fraudsters and to the bad actors.

But the downside of that is you don't start your public diplomacy work, perhaps, until after you're tenured. I sat on the Commissioning and Tenuring Board during this assignment. We had to review and decide on all the new officers. We had to read their evaluations to decide whether they should be tenured or not. It was a head scratcher to me. What entity hires people to do Job A and has them do B, C, D and E and they never even do Job A until they get tenured? The whole purpose of entry-level training should be to prepare that person for their specialty, but because of staffing shortages, the entry-level assignment system was being used to help fill gaps where there was a shortage of tenured officers. Many times this was because the entity had been starved for resources and State Department, unfortunately, doesn't have a domestic constituency that thinks foreign affairs is important. Sadly, as a nation, we don't seem to believe in prevention. In my view, diplomacy is there to prevent crises, but if you're not staffed adequately, you can't really do that. You're just putting out fires and trying to catch as catch can and put band-aids on things.

It's been hard to make a case for the proper funding. Every secretary of defense during the last 15 years or so has done that, with Secretary Gates probably being the most articulate about it. He made a case for why he felt more funding should go to State rather than Defense because he felt that the resources that State could bring to issues could prevent some of the conflicts that eventually Defense was going to have to have to go in to deal with. It's still a problem today, probably worse now, unfortunately. Actually, I have always looked at it like insurance; you buy insurance for your car, you buy

insurance for your house and you may never need to use it, but you are reassured because you have it. If something bad happens, you have it. To me, intelligence and diplomacy and all of these folks who try to figure out what's going on in the world and try to engage people and find out where we can align our goals with their goals to prevent disasters, that takes time. You have to build relationships and people have to trust you, and you can't do that remotely. You have to be on the ground, talking to people and understanding what the environment is and what is generating dissatisfaction or unhappiness with U.S. policy and what might be done that would arrive at a mutually beneficial outcome. It's all about relationships and developing human relationships take time.

It was our job in WHA/PDA to build relationships within the State Department so that we understood what was going on and how we could help and how we could support policy. But we also needed to know who could help us and support us as we tried to explain why what we did mattered. There were people who didn't think what we did mattered, and didn't understand—they seemed to be always asking, "What are you guys here for?" Unfortunately, we were not able to conduct a public diplomacy education campaign within State Department before the transition, so when we got over there, we had to try to do what we could and work with all of our counterparts throughout the building with varying degrees of success.

Another part of what we did was establishing and maintaining a good relationship with the foreign embassies in town because we had cultural programs and they had cultural programs. I remember one of our desk officers for the Andean countries, Olivia Hilton, was working with her counterpart in the Andean office to facilitate the return of some cultural patrimony, objects that had been illegally taken out of Peru and ended up in the U.S. It involved law enforcement and all kinds of coordination, but the items were going to go back to Peru. We did things like that—it was a wonderful feel-good thing where the cultural folks in conjunction with the law enforcement could make sure that the artifacts were returned to the rightful owners.

During that time, there was also the start of planning for the U.S. Diplomacy Center. That would be the first diplomacy museum of its kind. This was back in 1999-2000 when some of us in public diplomacy were invited to be part of the discussion and talk about how we could, based on our expertise in working with foreign publics, also talk about how we might work with the domestic public. That was the public affairs hat of public diplomacy and public affairs, explaining what diplomats do abroad and having programs that allow the public to come in and see diplomacy in action. It was a way to let folks know what their tax dollars were doing and why it mattered. Those were interesting meetings that I attended during that period as well.

I feel like I've spent my entire professional career justifying, or trying to figure out how best to justify the existence and the value of what I do. Before I joined the Foreign Service I worked in Brooklyn Public Library and there were always budget cuts. The librarians were always trying to explain that a public library is not just a place people come for books; these are the services we offer and so on and so forth. It's like I went

from that to going into public diplomacy and having to explain that public diplomacy isn't just press or media relations. There are a whole lot of other things we do to build relationships, not just for short-term benefit but for the long-term, because many of our exchanges don't bear fruit for a decade or more. Everybody wants a quick turnaround and immediate results. Well, human nature isn't like that! Why would you expect public diplomacy to be able to turn everything around overnight?

Q: Right. Well, how did your new office relate to those kinds of programs, say exchanges and Fulbright grants and so forth? Were those then handled out of your new office in State or was there a separate structure for it?

JOHNSON: USIA programs continued to exist, but within a State structure. IIP continued to be an entity that fielded speakers, that provided translations and texts and articles, magazines, websites, and now, of course, now it does social media and all that other stuff. ECA, Education and Cultural Affairs, remains as well. IIP, International Information Programs, remained with all kinds of activities including oversight of the overseas libraries that provided information resources, bibliographies, research and the like. A post could come in and say quick, I need information on X, Y and Z, and the resource librarians or the IIP team would get to work and provide them with what they needed, at least in English and sometimes in translation depending on where they found it and if they were able to translate it quickly. The posts would often come in with requests because there was a cycle for soliciting things from the post based on their country plans and that sort of thing, and so they would submit their priorities. Staff in IIP would figure out what kinds of products were needed in Spanish, French, Creole and Portuguese. There was all that kind of coordination and planning between WHA/PDA and IIP. We were in constant touch with the field and passing information to the officers about IIP products and services. With the academic exchanges it was the same thing with the Bureau of Education and Cultural Affairs, ECA. That bureau did the academic and professional exchange programs, the Fulbright programs, it did certain special programs like arts programs where artists and cultural specialists were sent overseas. ECA would support these workshops by sending experts overseas.

For example, the legendary Evangeline J. Montgomery—known to friends as EJ—and an artist in her own right, was also on the ECA staff for a time and did some amazing programs. One young woman that I became friends with years after I retired, a fellow artist, it turned out she benefitted from a program EJ ran. Helen Zughaib, who is of Lebanese heritage, participated in workshops with Palestinian artists in the West Bank and other parts of the Middle East. EJ ran interesting programs like that, where American artists were able to go abroad and meet some of their counterparts overseas, share their techniques and also learn new techniques and find out what was popular in arts communities over there. African American artists would go to countries where maybe the artists there had never had an interaction or engagement with an African American artist. They could talk not just about their art, but about the African American experience in the U.S., and their culture and things like that. There were all kinds of programs where diverse artists from the U.S. went to all the countries of the world, basically. And it was really exciting, both for the artists, because they learned a lot about the local culture, and

for the public diplomacy staff as well. Sometimes we worked with the Art in Embassy program and the artist who was featured in an Art and Embassies exhibition at the ambassadorial residence would go to the post to do a workshop.

Art in Embassies is not a public diplomacy program. It is a totally separate program run by the Office of Buildings Operation (OBO). In the past there was art that was loaned for three years to the ambassador when he or she was in a country. The ambassador would go through slides or images and pick art for the residence. Sometimes the art would come from a museum, sometimes from a gallery, sometimes from the artist directly. I had the good fortune of having some of my colleagues when they became ambassadors ask to have some of my artwork for their residences. That is how I got to be a part of the Art in Embassies program. And when OBO did the fortieth anniversary celebration, there was a White House reception and we all went to the White House, where the first lady gave a talk and it was so cool.

Q: Which first lady was that?

JOHNSON: It was Laura Bush. Yes, I think it was Laura Bush.

There were all kinds of arts programs. We had the Arts America, OBO did Art in Embassies, and so oftentimes we'd find ways to collaborate with that office to do interesting programs. Got sidetracked, but all that to say that there were lots of different opportunities for collaboration. Some of it had gone on before, but now it was a lot easier, and certain offices started looking more to ECA like the Art in Embassies program, wanting to do more partnership activities because it just made sense.

One of the things I also remember from that period, when Secretary Powell was the secretary of state, he tried to get people to cut down on paper and to make memos shorter. That was a time when there were format changes. I think they added a recommendation section where the person could say yes, no or have some other suggestion. I think he wanted everything on one page or two, max. That's also when Secretary Powell started going around to the bureaus before he went on a trip and wanted the actual desk officers to brief him. All those things were exciting and a morale boosters for many of the officers who were fortunate enough to be able to do that. It made them feel like what they were doing mattered. That was an interesting period because Secretary Powell really focused on the staff, asking why they were staying in their offices so late at night. He'd ask, " Don't you have families? Go home. Figure out a way to do this more efficiently so people aren't here until 7:00 and 8:00 at night." And that was tough because so many times your principles are out at a meeting and they don't come back to the building maybe until 4:00, and then they have all of this stuff they want done and the seventh floor is asking for all of this stuff, so how can you not be there until 7:00 or 8:00? But it was interesting because he really pushed people to try and figure out a way to have a life and not be always in that building. I was all for that because I kept getting into trouble with daycare and they said they were going to throw my kids out of the program because I was always late. Because of that, I had to start driving to work because Metro was always messing me up, which I hated. I did not enjoy driving and it was an extra expense but,

you know, in the end at least if I had to stay a little bit later I could usually get to the daycare center on time because driving was faster than taking Metro.

Oh, goodness. One of the things we also tried to do was focus on ways we could boost morale during that period of transition when people were feeling put upon sometimes. And so, we-

It beeped.

Q: I'm not sure whether it beeped. It might have been a beep from someplace else. So, it seems to be recording.

JOHNSON: Okay.

So, one of the things we looked at was the awards process and how we might recognize people who had really done a great job with certain things. Funding-

Q: Okay. It beeped again, so let me stop it and see what's happening.

JOHNSON: Is it batteries?

Q: Today is January 25, 2019, and this is Peter Eicher continuing the same interview session with Cynthia Johnson.

Cynthia.

JOHNSON: One of the things that we did, that I had mentioned was that we tried to identify people who had performed in an exemplary fashion and recognize them. The other thing was we organized public affairs officer conferences so that we could gather, and people could compare notes. We also tried to have, as I recall, sub-regional gatherings. We would bring together the folks who were in Central America for some kind of training. Not necessarily the American officers but the locally employed staff members who were working in the information resource centers or libraries, for example.

That was another issue. In the U.S. Information Service overseas, one of the major tools were these open-stack libraries patterned after U.S. public libraries where people could come in and read magazines and borrow books, get help finding information in reference tools, and as things became more and more digital they served as reference centers. People could call up and ask for information and have it emailed to them. Staff would email articles and find answers to things by doing online searches. Anyway, the powers that be decided that this had to change. I think it was mainly budget driven. These libraries were expensive operations and if we were closing libraries in the U.S., why were

we having libraries overseas? You should know, our esteemed members of Congress who traveled abroad and saw these facilities didn't like that one bit!

Well, libraries in the U.S. are funded locally and the libraries that are overseas are part of the U.S. diplomatic apparatus, because it's a way for people to learn about the U.S., U.S. policies, U.S. values, and way of life. I recall one of my colleagues, Ambassador Robert Gosende, saying one of his favorite statements was something that Bishop Tutu had said, that when he was a young boy or a young man, he had received a lot of inspiration from being able to go to the USIS library and read "Ebony" magazine and see that there were black people in another country who were achieving, and that inspired him and encouraged him to not give up on equality for blacks in South Africa. There were stories of people behind the Iron Curtain who had been able to access information, and folks all over the world who were inspired by things they found in these libraries. Young people who were of limited means were able to go into these facilities and learn about the U.S. and what our experience had been. Maybe there was something similar that they said along the lines of " If they could do it there, we can do it here." It was certainly an important tool when we were advocating for democracy and using many documents, historical documents, to explain how our system had come to be the way it was. It was also making a point about the free flow of information and the value of easy public access to information. The library was the embodiment of what we felt the U.S. was supposed to be advocating. But then, you had people who said no, that these facilities were just too expensive, we could no longer afford them. Their position was that we should only be speaking to or servicing the decision makers in these societies. We were trying to tell them that some of these young people who came into the library just to get out of the heat in the summertime, or in Africa who come in there because it's the coolest place and they just want some respite, ended up reading something or seeing a movie or participating in a program that 15 years later they would say, "It was when I went to the library and saw all this that I thought why not work for a more democratic society."

But of course, these are things that are very ephemeral. It's hard to quantify or come up with the statistics to support why an open access library represents the U.S. core value of the importance of access to information matters. Or how public libraries in the U.S. were seen as ways for educating the citizenry in a different way from the public school system. Oh, none of that mattered anymore! There were lots of funding decisions made due to budget limitations, and that is how the open access libraries overseas began to shut down. Many of them closed and the librarians were moved behind the hard line inside the embassy buildings, and they basically performed reference services for key movers and shakers in the society. When we were lucky, we had other institutions that could take our collection or take over the collection if it was, say, in a binational center in Latin America. We negotiated an arrangement with the binational centers and they basically inherited many of the collections. In some places, if there wasn't a binational center, then some of the books were donated to a university, or maybe there was an American studies corner or something along those lines at a college. Years later, as I recall, there was this

move to establish American corners, because someone got twitterpated that all of a sudden China had libraries all over the place.

Anyway. At that time, we were pulling back and closing the libraries and shifting service. The budget realities, unfortunately, forced a lot of those changes. No one was advocating and making a cogent case to the appropriators as to why this mattered and how this was part of our public diplomacy toolkit that provided us with an opportunity to engage the up and coming younger generation in a different way. So, that tool fell by the boards. We just tried to figure out new ways to be effective, to use some of the social media and other resources to meet people where they were, because that was the mantra, "meet people where they are." Whether it's physically going to where they are or finding out what magazines they like to read or what radio stations they listen to or the programs that became the new focus. We also looked for ways to form partnerships and provide information on issues where we had common goals with the folks in the country or with particular groups or organizations. We started doing a lot of work with non-governmental organizations that were trying to address, for instance, poverty issues in tandem with USAID, if USAID operated in a country. Or we might do that by forming partnerships with people who were trying to fight the narcotics trade and addiction problems in their own countries, or combat human trafficking problems. We often did that by identifying all the different groups working on issues where we had common goals and objectives and doing what we could to support them with the materials that we had, like films, videos, or experts. We would put together international visitor programs, again, in consultation with our offices in the Bureau of Education and Cultural Affairs—with the WHA section of ECA's International Visitor Program, which became the International Visitor Leadership Program in later years. When ECA were planning its budget and the kinds of programs it was going to offer, of course, the staff contacted the geographic bureau and at WHA staff-wide meetings we'd say our posts are telling us this, but we also wanted to hear from leadership, the office directors and others. There were a lot of conversations to make sure that the IIP programs and the exchange programs we were putting together would really address the issues that were in the bureau's top five that I mentioned earlier.

One of the things that had been a bee in my bonnet from the days of when I was in the Office of Strategic Communication was the value of the USIS public opinion polling operation. We were always going out to the posts, asking about the issues that were of most concern, and in turn we would tell our colleagues in the research office that these are the issues that are a priority. If there was polling data out there that could help us understand the communication environment in Country X, Y and Z, we needed it. Sometimes the staff had relationships with all kinds of polling organizations throughout the world, but for the WHA region they had relationships with different reputable pollsters, and oftentimes we could get questions added to polls that were already going to be taken. This was better for us because they were going to be doing it in their language; it's not like some foreigner was going in there asking sensitive questions. We would often give polling outfits questions about issues that were important to us, things that we were concerned about. We usually wanted to know how people felt about a particular issue in a particular country. Or we wanted to find out how an issue was being covered or

discussed by the media in a country or by the leaders. There would be all kinds of information that professional pollsters would gather anyway, and so, sometimes we didn't even have to suggest a question or ask about an issue because they were going to be covering it anyway. That was the beauty of the USIA polling operation. They were constantly looking at what was out there and doing analysis and issue papers and circulating them. From early on, I was always telling the different bureaus that I was interacting with at State that we couldn't really effectively communicate if we didn't know what the communication environment was like. We need polling. When we were first starting our initiatives on trafficking that was one of the key things. I said we needed data on what people actually knew or understood about human trafficking, and if they didn't understand it then part of our job was to explain that this was what's going on so that these young people would not be victimized. It was often boys and girls who were being trafficked. So we needed to have an education campaign. That was one of the early initiatives. During my time in WHA it was the same thing; what were the issues, and how could we craft a message that was going to address what people were concerned about. But we also needed to educate people about the issues when both governments were concerned that criminal organizations were undermining our countries and corrupting our officials.

I was big on working with the public opinion polling staff in getting people to use that data. And I was also big on informing people that the public opinion research unit even existed. Sometimes there were offices that weren't aware of the amount of the data that they might be able to use to get a clearer picture of what was going on.

That was a USIA resource that got folded into INR, the intelligence and research arm of the State Department. But they still focused on the public opinion aspect, which for us was critical. If I were to give any advice to an up and coming Foreign Service officer, I would say, "Find out who your region or your country's public opinion polling expert is in INR and become their new best friend, because they will provide you with invaluable information as to what the lay of the land is in your country, in your region." Besides, some of the polling data is fascinating. It helps us figure out who we need to be engaging in a society. What you want to do is go out and meet people in all the different sectors that might influence your work and assist you with your work. Take the time to get to know them, because you don't want to be calling them up for the first time in a crisis to ask for help. Those kinds of cold calls are not great. You don't want to be cold calling someone in a crisis; you want to be able to call someone and say look, I need your help with something, and have it be part of an ongoing conversation. That's why I keep going back to this thing about the importance of relationships and not hiding behind computers and iPhones.

Q: Absolutely.

JOHNSON: One of the other things we worked on was leadership training for our staff, and that was in keeping with what Secretary Powell was advocating. He was the one who actually had the Foreign Service Institute (FSI) develop the three different tracks of leadership training and really beefed up the school of leadership at FSI. That was where

State offered leadership training oriented to the newer officers, the mid-level officers, and to senior officers. Of course, there were special courses for DCMs and ambassadors. There was also leadership training for locally employed staff. A lot of emphasis was placed on that and we tried to do as much as we could to support that effort. There were so many different issues that I was constantly having to pay attention to during this time!

Then, all of a sudden, I cannot remember who, a Congresswoman, asked WHA DAS Dan Fisk what State was doing for Afro-Latinos, because apparently something had happened and there was a whole big brouhaha over it. Fortunately, our office had conducted quite a few programs focusing on the challenges that confronted Afro-Latinos. That was also part of Plan Colombia. When it was implemented, one of the things that had been identified as an issue was that Afro-Colombia majority communities were adversely affected by narco-trafficking activities. That problem was compounded by the fact that in those communities people felt ignored and left out of past assistance programs. The combination of being adversely affected by the narco-trafficking and feeling that their concerns weren't given the same serious attention as those of say, indigenous peoples or middle-class urbanites was raised. During this period in WHA, there was a lot of discussion about the rights of indigenous peoples and the concerns of Afro-Colombians. So we had been doing programs here and there all along. Again, this was based on what our posts were telling us they needed and getting them plugged into the resources that were available. We were able to do a nice write-up and say this is what we're doing, and it apparently satisfied whoever had made the request. But it was another example of how we were always trying to anticipate what's on the horizon, what's bubbling up, who are the activists out there who are raising their hand and saying "help" or coming to our offices asking for help with something. Then suddenly you realize there's this whole other community that is struggling and trying to do something positive and wants to get integrated into some of these programs that other communities and other groups have had access to all along.

That leads me to another issue, health—HIV-AIDS. There were all kinds of discussions asking, "what do we do?" I remember there was also some public opinion polling on that and on attitudes toward HIV-AIDS. VOA, Voice of America, the Latin America branch, mainly the Spanish-language unit, did programming on this issue. But they also did programs in Creole and Portuguese and other languages as well. I think they even had a Quechua (Kichwa) initiative. There were all kinds of interesting things that the Voice of America was doing, and we had a wonderful working relationship with the staff, too. We went over to meetings, they came to our meetings sometimes, and we brainstormed. For instance, we'd say this is an issue that we want to address. How do we harness all of our resources to deal with the HIV-AIDS crisis in the region—I think that it was raging in Haiti at that point. It was the focus of some of the VOA Haiti programming, but it was also a focus in some of the other countries. Once again, that was one of those things where we had to coordinate with not just the Bureau of Ocean, Environment and Science. It was the bureau that dealt with a lot of the HIV-AIDS issues. Nancy Carter Foster was the go-to person in that bureau for the longest time. She put me on to the many outside entities and non-governmental groups and private organizations working the issue. We looked for all these different resources and VOA eventually did a series on the issue.

That's another thing; in addition to radio programming, there was constant coordination with some of the producers of *telenovelas* (soap operas) in Latin America to get a variety of themes introduced into some of their storylines that would provide accurate information on an issue, whether it was health, migration issues or something else.

Q: What an interesting approach. Had this been going on before?

JOHNSON: Yes, yes. I remember from when I was in El Salvador. It was a regular thing because at the time Brazil, Venezuela, to a degree Colombia but I think mainly Venezuela and Mexico; those are the places where a lot of these very popular *telenovelas* were produced. The public affairs staff members in those countries were oftentimes having conversation with some of the producers or the creative types who were involved in these programs to see about weaving themes in storylines that would communicate accurate information helpful to the public, that also then supported a policy. It wasn't necessarily that we were pushing the hard policy issues; oftentimes it was things like humanitarian issues. We were basically saying, please don't go wandering in the desert with no water because you will die. Please don't cross illegally, because you will die in the desert. Real stories. Sometimes the real news stories aren't sufficient, so trying to integrate those pleas into a *telenovela* based on a real event might carry more weight. The same thing applied for educating people about HIV-AIDS. No, you couldn't get it from sitting on a toilet and things like that. So, you shouldn't ostracize and alienate people because they're sick. Over the years as researchers produced advances, it wasn't just the U.S. Government that was asking these creative types to figure out a way to include those themes. I think the World Health Organization and other entities got involved with trying to use every conceivable platform for communicating messages and preventing hysteria, because that was, I think, the goal at that time since there was a lot of misinformation going around.

We were busy. And I haven't even talked about 9/11.

Q: Okay. Well, before we get to 9/11, which I guess is significant enough to mention, it sounds as if, with a lot of these programs, they're very similar to what you were doing

before you were integrated but just trying to do them in a new context with all the additional difficulties that presented.

JOHNSON: Yes.

Q: Okay.

JOHNSON: With all the additional clearances you had to get and permissions that you had to get.

Q: Yes. And new systems and new relationships and new officers and one thing and another.

JOHNSON: Yes. There were new ways of doing things, and so often, we had an urgent issue that needed to be addressed quickly and we couldn't address it as quickly as we had in the past. Just trying to figure out how to get things done sometimes was exhausting. Then we had 9/11, and I think that exposed some of the challenges of the integration and how systems maybe hadn't worked as well as senior management had hoped. There was a lot of coordination that had to be done. Charlotte Beers came into the position as undersecretary for public diplomacy and public affairs from the private sector. Since she didn't have a strategic communication unit to address some of the coordination issues, that's when it really showed and her office tried to do some reorganizing, but it was like trying to build an airplane when you're flying it. It's just hard.

I was just looking back at some notes. We had to reach out to the field and try to get them information as quickly as possible because there was so much going on, and people were clamoring for information. It was intense. We tried to find out what they needed and get them whatever it was we could get to them as quickly as possible and move money around to do translations because we needed to be able to communicate to people in their language when it was an important message. There were some posts that wanted to take out thank-you ads, and normally we didn't do that, but on that occasion, we thought it was appropriate. They needed extra money because we hadn't budgeted for things like that. For example, there had not been a website in Portuguese. I mean, posts had their own foreign language website, but there was not a central website in Washington, so that had to be stood up quick, fast, and in a hurry. Then there was a sudden need for a different type of exchange program focusing on terrorism and combating terrorism and combating extremism. There were all kinds of new issues that had to be addressed. You know, out with the old, in with the new, because we had to shift gears. We had to be able to move money around and find people with expertise to address certain issues—yes, it was intense, intense, intense! I remember some of the debates about taking out ads. Some said, "We don't do ads," but there had been an outpouring of support and condolences, so it made sense to take out an ad saying thank you. What is wrong with that? But it had to be discussed and approved before it went forward.

As a consequence of the attacks, with the start to the war in Afghanistan and all of the things that occurred after that, there was Guantanamo. Guantanamo is on the island of

Cuba, but it wasn't under WHA's purview at the Department of State; it's a Department of Defense installation. So, there were many meetings about the whole issue and we had to explain it while the nation's leaders were trying to figure out what to do and how to do it. I remember sitting in many of those meetings, wondering, why am I even here? Much of the public affairs related to Guantanamo would need to coordinate with the Department of Defense public affairs staff, which is obviously what was done. It was difficult. There was lots of juggling that went on. But in the midst of all of that we still had to do all of the other things and address all the other issues that were still a priority. The same routes that narcotics and human traffickers used, terrorists could use, so that issue still needed attention. We still had to work on issues of international organized crime and poverty.

Q: Yes. They didn't go away on 9/11, did they?

JOHNSON: No, they sure didn't. And environmental issues and health issues; none of those went away, so we still had to work on those matters. In the midst of all this, suddenly people became interested in youth. Now, when we had advocated keeping libraries and certain types of sports programs that had been eliminated—these were programs that focused on youth—we had been told that youth was no longer our audience and that we had to focus our limited resources on decision makers and policymakers. Well, after 9/11 there were discussions about disaffected youth and alienated youth. So, it was suddenly okay to think about young leaders and youth leadership and young people again.

Q: So, it did translate into some programmatic changes?

JOHNSON: I don't remember anything specific, but I remember that there was that discussion, and those of us who had been arguing to keep those programs and had decried the demise of those programs just sighed and said okay, happy to see them realizing that we need to be talking intergenerationally, not just to a certain generation. But we were really crushed that it took this horrible incident to make people realize that we need to talk to a lot of people, not just a very narrow group of people. That was frustrating, but we did the necessary.

One of the things that I remember that was really wonderful was the Youth Orchestra of the Americas program. It wasn't a U.S. Government program, but the organizers contacted us and wanted some facilitative assistance. I don't even remember what we did for them, but we did something to help, I guess. I think we communicated with our posts about the program and that there were some young people who would need help—that's what it was. There were young people who were going to be applying for visas and we needed to tell the posts that this was a legitimate program. We had to let them know that they were good kids and they weren't going to do anything bad; just come to play music. Yes, I think that's what it was; these young people were going to spend three weeks at the New England Conservatory of Music and then they were going to do a short tour through the U.S. They were actually coming to the Washington, D. C. area so we got to go hear them. There were young people from Mexico, Costa Rica, Brazil, and Venezuela. I got to

see Gustavo Dudamel before he became a sensation! He conducted one piece at the end, and it was an encore and he went on and on. My two young sons were with us when we went to see them at Wolf Trap and after the second encore, they said, "Okay, can we go now?" Then he did another encore and it was, "Can we go home now?" But it was wonderful! We got to go backstage and meet the young Maestro Dudamel and meet the youth orchestra staff. When I see things like that, I say, okay, there's some hope for this world. All these beautiful young people making beautiful music; there is hope for the human race. Those kinds of things were uplifting.

During the time that I was in that office, I mentioned that I would visit different posts. One of the posts that I got to go to was Cuba, where I met a number of painters, photographers, art gallery owners, and dancers. There was a director of the U.S. interest section, who had the equivalent of an ambassadorial-level position but had a different title because it's an interest section, not an embassy. Anyway, the director, Victoria Huddleston, had an event at her residence, and I met many performing artists and we talked about cultural exchanges and things like that. Well, I'm sitting in my office one day and I get his phone call from someone saying, "I'm the secretary for President Gerald Ford, and he'd like to talk to you about a group of performers from Cuba that are having trouble with a visa." So, I speak to President Ford. The group was supposed to perform in Aspen, Colorado, and there was some problem and there were some restrictions. I said we could send word to our mission but it seemed to me that there was some kind of restriction that Congress had recently imposed, and that made everything more complicated. It would take longer to get the visas. I don't remember the details now, but I said we would contact our post and see what they could do to help, but there was not a whole lot that our office could do to influence anything because whatever they're doing has to go through the legal channels. I think they actually were able to travel, but I don't know if they made it to Aspen in time or if that performance was canceled because it took so long for them to get visas. That was the highlight; I got to talk to Gerald Ford and he was really nice and understood that there was a limit to what I could do.

Those are the kinds of things that would happen. You'd meet people or get calls from people when you least expected it for things, sometimes over which you have no control, yet they think you might have some control. I think what happened was that President Ford talked to one of the dancers that I had met, and she gave him my name at the State Department, and that's how he ended up calling me. Go figure. Just so funny!

Q: How things you don't expect suddenly move to the top of your agenda as well.

JOHNSON: Yes, yes. But unfortunately, in that particular instance there wasn't a whole lot I could do. I think I might have sent a message to the post about it, but I mean, it was basically the consular section and I think they were already trying to work out a solution. A lot of times when our elected officials make these rules up they don't really think about

the actual tangible effect on the ground. How it's going to influence or stymie a legitimate activity? It's unfortunate. It's the law of unintended consequences.

Q: Yes.

JOHNSON: We'd get a lot of that sometimes. Throughout that period it was a constant struggle to figure out how to insert our public diplomacy staff into discussions and have a meaningful role in all these policy decisions because it was a new structure. All of the desk officers with regional portfolios in the public diplomacy office would go to the staff meetings of their sub-regional counterparts. So, for example, the desk officer who covers Central America went to the WHA Central America office's weekly meeting. We were divided up that way and it seemed to work well, but there were discussions about whether these PD officers should move into the regional offices altogether.

Ah, a bad memory's a terrible thing. Now I'm trying to remember how that played out. I think there was an experiment and the problem with that is when you break up the team, when you atomize the team in that way, it's a whole different dynamic when you have to come together to work on issues that go beyond a narrow regional bureau. We needed to have everyone from all the regions in the office interacting because serendipitous things happen when you're in an office together. I tried to do a lot of my work not sitting at my computer but going to different people's offices and talking to them and then running into folks in the hallway and having a conversation and saying, "Oh, wow, why don't we do this?" Those things don't happen if you don't walk around.

Q: Sure, sure. Just your 9/11 example is a perfect one. It wasn't just WHA which was struggling with these same issues, but the same thing all over the world.

JOHNSON: Yes. That was the other thing. The deputy directors for the different geographic public diplomacy offices did have their own set of meetings where we got together and compared notes and tried to figure out how we were going to manage things going forward. Of course, we had to confer with each other because maybe someone is applying for a job in WHA who worked in the European Bureau, so I asked my counterpart about the person's strengths and weaknesses. We were always working together, talking together. Then there was a discussion of whether or not the undersecretary for public diplomacy and public affairs had any influence over the assignment process. Did that office weigh in? Did it do so in any way, shape or form? There were so many different questions and practices that were new to us. I think to this day, there's still discussion on best ways to manage and do things and concern about whether the public diplomacy cone is thriving or not in this new environment. There were so many things that were different. Take the evaluation system and process and the way it was done in USIA as opposed to the way it's done in State. I had to write all these different evaluations and then I needed to have conversations periodically with each staff member, and then give them advice and counsel on how to identify things that they wanted highlighted that would be career enhancing to them. We also had to discuss what kinds of assignments going forward would help their careers. I had to suggest what they should think about bidding on to round out their experience and make them competitive

in a new universe when we had political and econ officers who realized they could get management experience doing a PD job. All of a sudden, we had to decide not just among the PD universe, but there were other people from other cones (or specialties) who wanted to come in and I had to figure out if they would be able to do a good job.

I remember going to one country that will remain nameless where I had been assigned in the past. I had dinner with a friend who was like the Mike Wallace of that country. She looked at me and said, "When are you all going to start sending people who know what they're doing again?" She said that was because of the change in the way people were being trained and assigned. When I had been sent to that country, I'd already had several assignments as a public diplomacy officer. For the people who were going there as press officers after the merger, often it was the first time they were doing a public diplomacy job because they were fairly junior and had done rotations in everything but public diplomacy. Trying to reinvent and support and nurture and make sure that promising young officers didn't get discouraged because all of a sudden they were expected to handle situations that they had absolutely no experience with was a challenge. Sometimes, if they were arrogant and didn't take advantage of the knowledge and expertise of their locally employed staff, they had a hard way to go. So, I often told more junior officers that their biggest asset was the locally engaged staff because they have institutional memory and they have expertise. If for one reason or another they felt that they were not getting the support they needed, they should let me know. I emphasized that they need to take advantage of their resources, especially the human resources at post, the staff that had experience. It's not that everything they're going to suggest is right because they have a different optic. But they do have expertise that is invaluable to us—officers should take advantage of it and learn from them.

Q: Absolutely.

JOHNSON: That was my other sermon that I would often give because I think back on the people that I worked with and so many times I learned so much from them. I feel like I'm a better human being because of what I learned from them. And they were just salt of the earth. There were some who were knuckleheads but some of us are knuckleheads too! It's everywhere. But the ones who were good—oh, they were magnificent.

During this period I also developed Graves Disease, and I think it was not helped by all of the stress. Toward the end of my time in WHA I was really sick and at first, the doctor had a hard time diagnosing it because even though the symptoms indicated it, the blood tests weren't confirming it. The doctor was at his wit's end for quite a while until finally the blood tests started confirming what he suspected. I had hyperthyroidism, which is an overactive thyroid, resulting in this incredible weight loss, tremors and all kinds of other physical discomfort. This was happening at a time when I was juggling a lot of things. It was not just the work but also two children at home and a spouse whose job had him sometimes traveling a lot. It was a lot. And so, I think it was during that time that I decided that I was not going overseas again. I had already taken the retirement planning seminar so I was going to start working on my transition to life after the Foreign Service. You know, there's nothing like getting really sick to make you think about what's really

important in life. As much as I love my country, I was not willing to, at this point, sacrifice myself and leave my children motherless. They were still in elementary school, so that was something I thought about a lot.

Q: Oh, wow.

JOHNSON: Hence my concern about having to make mad dashes to get there to pick them up from after-care. When I came back to the States in '98 they were just entering kindergarten and first grade so they were in third and fourth grade by then. I thought, "This is not a good disease to have, and if I don't take care of it properly they would be left motherless." So, I needed to rethink some of these career decisions. This was a moment where I had to decide whether I wanted to apply for Deputy Chief of Mission (DCM) positions, because that was the logical career progression. One of my sons had a speech and language disorder; it was a developmental thing. With the right speech therapy the doctors said by the time he was in middle school he would be indistinguishable from his peers. That would only happen if he had consistent therapy.

Q: You've mentioned that once before in the context of leaving one of your posts.

JOHNSON: Right, exactly. And if we went overseas it had to be in an English-speaking country. So, I would have to find a post, an English-speaking post that also had good speech pathologists in their school or in the local market. And even if I found one, two or three posts like that, there's no guarantee that I would actually get assigned if I bid on it. So at that point I really had to make a decision about what to do in terms of my career because the longer I stayed in Washington the less likely I was going to be to make MC, the next rank above OC. I would need to go out and take a DCM job if I wanted to be on the ambassador track. By then, I had already decided I was not going to be on the ambassador track because that's not a fun job and I wouldn't get to do all the interesting cultural and academic work that I enjoyed. I had done press tasks because PD officers have to do press work, and I enjoyed working with some of the journalists because some of them are fascinating. But my heart was with the cultural and the academic side of the house. As DCM, there's a lot of HR/personnel and budget work. You do policy but it's basically the care and feeding of the junior officers, which is really important, but also the overall management of the mission. It's a big job if you want to do it well.

Q: Of course.

JOHNSON: So, I decided maybe not. And so, when it came time to bid-

Q: Which would have been what year, 2002?

JOHNSON: Yes, 2002. Let me just look on my little cheat sheet here. Yes, 2002 I would have been due to rotate out because the deputy director job was a two-year job.

Around this time, I was also working very closely with the EX office on our positions because there was this whole thing about how all the public diplomacy jobs were over-

graded. Now, I didn't think they were over-graded because not only did we manage policy issues but whether you're a CAO, an IO or a PAO, everybody had to manage a budget and everybody had to manage a staff. It seemed to me that that should count for something. But anyway, it did not so it was a difficult time.

There was also a discussion of where the positions were and should all the positions that USIA had in the field be where they were located at that time. Should some of these positions be converted to entry-level positions that are rotational? It was pointed out that there was no such thing as an assistant political officer or an assistant econ officer in the State system. You're either an econ officer for X or an econ officer for Y, you're a political officer with a narcotics portfolio or you have the labor portfolio. So, there was a conversation about that, because in the USIA world you had the cultural affairs officer and then you had an assistant cultural affairs officer at a larger post, sometimes even two assistant cultural affairs officers. And the same thing with the information officer; you had an information officer and you had an assistant information officer. Then there were all of these discussions about whether or not those assistant positions should remain, or should they be made rotational with the officers doing a year as an information officer and a year in a consular position, or a year in political and a year in cultural affairs. There was all of that negotiation that had to take place and we had to figure out how to make it work. I remember spending a lot of time working with the folks who dealt with that process. We had to justify everything and make a case for yea or nay. I guess that's how the conversation about my onward assignment of going into HR career development came up. Eventually that's what I decided to do, to throw my hat in the ring for a senior level career development officer position.

Since a lot was going on with my health, I thought that type of job might also give me the flexibility to deal with whatever treatment I was going to have to have. While I was still in WHA and dealing with all of this stuff, I started seeing all the different specialists to see how best to address the illness and I had to take some time off for the actual treatment. It was getting toward the end of my assignment in WHA anyway, and I think by then they had identified who would probably follow me and so, I was doing the job and also getting things organized for the transition to the new person because there was so much going on.

I'm looking to see if there are any other highlights from that period, but I think I've covered all of it.

Q: Well, it was certainly a busy period, a lot of different things going on in your portfolio.

JOHNSON: Yes, and as I looked through some of my old calendars, I was reminded of so much. That was one of the other things, I was just chucking, going through boxes and decided to clean out and throw away old documents. What am I saving this old calendar for? I'm not writing my memoirs, and I couldn't remember what half of the stuff referred to according to the little notations. You know how you make a note on the calendar and then you go back and ask yourself, what was that? Yesterday, my son helped me with the

shredding because it's like why do I need this? It was an intense two years in WHA. In one way it was exciting, and I met some amazing people because all of these different officers came in, bidding on jobs, and getting to know them so I could make a decision. Sometimes I was able to make them very happy because we got them assigned, and other times they ended up being very disappointed because there was another competitive candidate who ended up being a better fit. I also remember we got dinged by one ambassador—who will remain nameless—because we were too slow in filling a position. Covering jobs in Cuba was always a headache. The person who was the PAO in Cuba was supposed to rotate out, but the Cubans would not approve a replacement. They wouldn't let anybody in, so he had to stay and his onward assignment sat vacant. We didn't really want to break his onward assignment because after Cuba it would have been a really good assignment for him. He was very good when he finally got there, but the ambassador wasn't happy that there was this really long gap trying to get all of this done. We did send in other officers to provide coverage, so it was not like we were ignoring the needs of that country. We tried to do the best we could to do right by him and to also take care of the post, but the ambassador wasn't happy. That wasn't good. But we did the best we could with what we had; we were able to do some positive programs in Cuba but it was always a struggle because of the nature of the relationship. The Cubans did not like

the person who was supposed to have been assigned there because they probably figured he'd be too effective. Who knows?

Q: You talked about going into HR career development, you've also mentioned the retirement seminar, but now this career development position was not a retirement position-

JOHNSON: No.

Q: -it just was- Was it in CDA?

JOHNSON: Yes. It was HR/CDA. And from there I went to FSI and then after FSI is when I retired.

Q: Okay. So, we can take these one at a time. So, anything else you want to say about the current assignment?

JOHNSON: About WHA?

Q: Yes. I think it's a good stopping point to move on to the next one at the next-

JOHNSON: Yes, and I'm looking at the time and I didn't know if you wanted to cut here and then the next time, we'll pick up with HR.

Q: I think it's probably a good time. You know, two hours is a long time for you to keep talking and keep thoughts together as well, so I think it's better to take up with that next time.

JOHNSON: Yes. I'm just looking to see if anything was left out. Last time we talked, we talked about women's issues and the trafficking issue, and the organization or the entity that we had worked with. I was trying to remember the name. We worked with them also in WHA. It was extensive; the organization was Vital Voices. During this two-year period, we also had a lot going on with gender issues and Vital Voices, mainly focusing on trafficking but also to some degree on gender issues in general. All that to say again, going to all these different meetings, meeting all these different people, but not being tied to my desk, making sure that I always was able to go beyond the meetings, sometimes just have lunch with someone to talk about some of the issues and brainstorm in a less formal way I think was also important. We officers can develop friendships through the work we do. But we can also develop these really cordial professional relationships by getting out of our chair, walking to someone's office, picking up the phone, calling them and saying let's do lunch and talk about this and such. It all goes back, once again, to the whole issue of relationships. What we do in the Foreign Service is try to cultivate these kinds of relationships that will help us, basically, advance the interests of the United States Government but also produce some positive outcomes beyond our borders, because we're all living interconnected lives on this globe. And it's not just about us and what we want, it's also what's in their best interest, what do they want, and how we can

work together so that both of us are benefitting and serving our respective countries faithfully. I think sometimes people forget that that's what we do and it's not very glamorous and it takes time and doesn't garner a lot of headlines. But that doesn't mean that it's not important and it doesn't mean that it shouldn't be done. It's critical, and I think not enough people really appreciate that, especially those who appropriate the funds.

Q: Absolutely.

JOHNSON: And on that happy note…

Q: Okay, well good. So, we'll leave it there in the middle of 2002 and take it up there next time.

Today is March 1, 2019. This is Peter Eicher continuing with a new session of a continuing interview with Cynthia Johnson.

Cynthia, when we left off last time it was the middle of 2002 and you had just finished up your assignment in WHA/PDA, and you were about to move on to HR.

JOHNSON: Correct, correct.

Q: And I'm not sure we talked about whether you had chosen that as your next assignment or whether it was something that was kind of pushed upon you or-?

JOHNSON: Oh, no. I chose it because by that point I had decided that I would probably retire in the next few years. Actually, I was going to retire sooner than I ended up retiring because I had some health issues and so I continued working until everything got resolved. I ended up staying a little longer than I had anticipated. So, I chose HR because it seemed to make sense in winding down my career.

Q: And you'd done a little bit of HR work before as well.

JOHNSON: Yes, I had been at Board of Examiners, so it was something that interested me, the whole personnel thing.

Q: So, can you tell us what your assignment was exactly and how it fit into the HR structure?

JOHNSON: It was HR/CDA. I think, career, development and assignments. But it really should have been just called assignments because I was assigned to the office that handled senior officers, folks on the threshold at Foreign Service-1 plus OC, MC grades. I handled the OC and MC officers who weren't DCMs and ambassadors because, as I recall, the DCMs and ambassadors were assigned to the office director. Definitely the

ambassadors; I'm trying to remember now if the DCMs were also. I honestly can't remember.

Q: Was this all cones or just-

JOHNSON: This was for all cones. In addition to the Foreign Service Officers (FSOs), I also handled the assignments for Diplomatic Security (DS) officers.

Q: Wow.

JOHNSON: It was a lot of people.

Q: Yes. It was just you doing all of this?

JOHNSON: For a certain portion of the alphabet, and I can't even remember what letters I had. It was something like K through M or J through L. They divided it up.

Q: So, there were several of you-

JOHNSON: Yes, there were several of us and the alphabet was divided up. But then, also we had different specialists that each of us handled. There were maybe four or five of us, so there were a whole bunch of us working together on this process. I remember in one of the early meetings the office director, the head of that division, said that these were senior officers so they didn't need much help, and if they couldn't figure out how to advance their career by then, that was their problem. I had an issue with that because I felt like if the title was career development and assignments, we should at least be given some kind of training in coaching and being helpful to people who might have some legitimate concerns and not know which way they should go.

Anyway, we had our orientation. It was basically to familiarize us with the databases and the policies and procedures and all of that. But I still wondered if this was the best use of U.S. Government resources, because I was being paid a very handsome salary and some days I just felt like I was a glorified data entry clerk. Does this task really require an FSO with all these years of experience to do this if we're not adding some kind of value to this proposition? What I thought was a little odd about the whole operation was they told us we should give the officers advice on courses and remind them what they were required to take, like leadership training classes. If they were planning to retire, because at that point with FSO-1s, some of them were not going to make OC, so they would be planning their next move, which would be to go into the Job Search Program. We'd have to remind them of things like, "You have to sign up for certain things while you're still an active duty officer because you can't sign up for them after you've retired." So, yes, there were things we could do to give advice and counsel, and we could alert them to special courses and details or assignment opportunities outside of State Department.

They did give us a little bit of training on how to deal with disappointed or unhappy clients. And they did tell us things like if somebody comes to you with a problem which

office we could refer them to for assistance. Those kinds of things were helpful, but our role basically was to listen and to refer people and to provide some kind of support to folks who might have been unexpectedly evaluated in a problematic way. There was also, right next door to our office, the Career Continuity Office. If people had concerns about their evaluations (EERs) and needed advice, we referred them to Janice Clements or Bernadette Cole-Byrd in that office. If they were having problems at their post and felt that they were going to be adversely affected by the situation we could, again, refer them to the career continuity counselors. We got a long list of procedures and where to refer people, but we ourselves were very limited in what kinds of training we got in how to be helpful to folks as they were trying to figure out their careers.

There were all kinds of procedures we needed to learn, for instance, if someone had a death in their family in the Foreign Service. Those were the kinds of rules and regulations we needed to familiarize ourselves with at the outset. And then, of course, there were people who might run into some kind of problems and have to be yanked from the post. If there were investigations of some kind because of suspected inappropriate behavior, then that was a whole drama. It was an interesting two years there. Yes, 2002 to 2004. I met a lot of interesting and talented officers.

One of the biggest challenges was back in 2004 when State was trying to fill the posts in Iraq, Pakistan, and Afghanistan. There were some willing participants and others who were not so willing. Then, that got into the whole thing about which people could and couldn't or what they would or wouldn't do. Officers sign up for worldwide availability, but State was always reluctant to force people to go into assignments. There were all kinds of questions about fairness in terms of people who had spent a lot of time in hardship posts who wanted to go to non-hardship posts, and people who had spent a lot of time in non-hardship assignments that State felt should also do what they called their fair share of hardship assignments. There were all kinds of programs where we had to look over people's records and recommend what kinds of assignments they should actually bid on to fulfill the fair share assignment obligation. There were people who wanted to stay in hardship posts because they enjoyed the challenges there. And they were dragged kicking and screaming to non-hardship posts because those weren't assignments that necessarily interested them and vice versa. There were also people who had medical issues who couldn't go to certain types of posts.

Probably the thing that was the most challenging was finding jobs for people who, as the assignment cycle was winding down, still didn't have any assignments and needed to go somewhere. We had to try to find something that would work for them. There was a process where sometimes there was an office that needed someone with a certain kind of expertise, but they didn't have a slot. The office would create a job and it was called a Y-Tour and then the person could go into that job. It was like an over-complement position, but it was a legitimate job. Sometimes people were able to make those kinds of arrangements and get the job.

But basically, we had slots to fill and needed to put bodies in the slots. Sometimes it was really difficult matching the people and the jobs because sometimes the skill sets didn't

match. At times, there were personality issues that would come into play. The whole process of assignments in State Department was very different from what had been done in the U.S. Information Agency, where they had rolling assignments all year round and you started your assignment when you started your language training. USIA had it worked out like that because we had to have the language skills to do the job. But in the State Department the assignment season started after all the promotion lists were announced so people knew what grade jobs they could apply for. There were many times when people didn't have enough time to do the language training or any type of substantive training at the Foreign Service Institute because the post said they had to have this person immediately if not sooner. When Colin Powell was secretary of state, he really made an effort to force people to recognize the value of training and to be more flexible in allowing people to get the training they needed. One of the difficulties was these posts would say they needed the person yesterday and wouldn't let them get whatever training it was that would have helped them do a good job. So they get to post and maybe they don't perform as well as the supervisor would like, but if you didn't let the person get the training, how do you expect them to know everything that they need to know to do the job well? They're learning on the fly. Under Secretary Powell, there was an effort to address that problem, and it was addressed to an extent because he got a training float. But then came Afghanistan and Iraq and Pakistan that needed lots of people, and all of a sudden the training float all went into filling those critical-need posts.

Q: Was Colin Powell secretary during this time you were-?

JOHNSON: I want to say yes, because there was so much going on with training. I think by the time I moved on to my next assignment, Condoleezza Rice was the secretary of state. But I think part of the time that I was in HR he was still secretary of state. I guess, what, the elections were 2004? Let's see.

Q: 2004 or 2000-

JOHNSON: Yes, it was 2000 and then 2004, so he was at the tail end of his tenure there. And then, after the 2004 elections Condoleezza Rice came in.

Q: Wasn't there a substantial expansion of the Foreign Service under Colin Powell as well?

JOHNSON: Yes, but this was the training float that he wanted to bring in. And also, because of all the budget cuts in the '90s, there was a severe shortage of mid-level officers. He was trying to fill vacancies because there were jobs that were not filled since there were just not the bodies available. That was when management also made more opportunities for Civil Service employees to more easily geto Foreign Service assignments that were hard to fill. During his tenure, State did bring in more people for

this training float and to fill in these gaps. But then, again, some of those people got sent over to Iraq and Afghanistan, so it made it difficult to maintain the training float.

The good thing that happened when he was secretary of state was that they designed, organized, and implemented mandatory leadership training at each level: at the entry level, mid-level and senior level. That created an environment where there was consistent coaching or training in leadership across the service so that all the cohorts in mid-level, for example, were getting the same kinds of training and development of leadership skills. We had the precepts and the things by which one would be judged in the evaluation process, but if we did not get the kind of coaching and training and support to enable us to do those things effectively—the tricks of the trade—then we would end up not knowing the standard operating procedures of managing people and resources. If we don't have that knowledge, we would be learning on the fly and we would have uneven outcomes. So, that was one of the good things about Colin Powell's tenure; he really focused on what employees needed to be their best and to be the most effective Foreign Service officers that they could possibly become.

The biggest challenge in that office was trying to help the folks who were unassigned toward the end of any given assignment cycle. We had all kinds of things come up. People who wanted to go to certain posts and wouldn't consider anything else, but then maybe the bureau had its own person that they wanted to assign and that was, for those of us coming over from USIA, that was a bit of culture shock. In State, you had to lobby for your assignment; you had to meet with the person in charge. That included my position. Since I was in charge of assignments in WHA/PDA, there were people who had come to see me, saying that they were interested in such and such a job, and I had to balance that with the needs of the post. For instance, did this person have the background? Were they a known quantity in the bureau? If they had already been assigned in the bureau and were known, then that enhanced their chances. If they were coming from somewhere else and no one knew them, then it was not impossible but it was a little bit harder to get the assignment. Oftentimes, if it were someone that I didn't know, I'd contact a colleague in the bureau where they were assigned. If they were, say, in Europe, I'd call up my counterpart there and say so and so is applying and I'd ask, "What's their work record like?" "What was your experience working with that person?" Basically, that's what everyone had to do to try to figure out in such a large bureaucracy who was a good officer. Since USIA was much smaller and folks basically knew each other and knew each other's reputation, work ethic, or lack thereof, that kind of thing did not usually occur. That infamous corridor reputation was real! What's on paper's fine, but what was your corridor reputation? Do you have a reputation as a hard worker and someone who was effective, or were you a difficult personality? That goes on in all organizations, in organizations large and small. But for those of us coming from USIA it was a bit of a culture shock that you'd have to go around to all these different offices and talk to all these people just to be considered a serious candidate. If the deputy director of a particular office hadn't heard from you, they would assume that you'd put that

assignment on the list because you had to fill out 12 options. Oh, it was a strange new universe.

Q: It is. Not to interrupt your train of thought, but tell me, do you think the open assignment system at State as you experienced it was a good one? Did it work?

JOHNSON: It depends on where you're sitting. If you are an officer who has served in one bureau and you're trying to break into a new one, and no one knows you there, it's kind of tough. And whether it was State or USIA, it was almost the same thing. But if you were within your bureau and you have a good reputation, it was easy. When you want to move someplace new, then sometimes it could be difficult. I guess it's as good a system as we humans can devise.

Q: Well, that's a big compliment. But that also leads you into this fair share that you were talking about earlier.

JOHNSON: Right.

Q: Because if somebody has spent their assignments, career say in Africa and then they decide well, it's time that I get a European assignment, the system as you've described it would be rather unfair to them.

JOHNSON: Yes, it could be difficult. And I think that is why they instituted this fair share system, because there were a lot of complaints that officers who had served in hardship posts and decided they wanted to try for Europe had a hard time. The European office seemed very rigid in deciding which officers they would take. Some other bureaus were like that as well, but I think Europe was the notorious one, as I recall. So, State instituted this fair share program because Personnel said there were people who went to Europe and they just parked there and never left, and therefore no one else had an opportunity. It wasn't fair that they basically made it impossible for others from outside the bureau to go there. I remember our supervisor used to always say "life ain't fair." Yes, but we were supposed to implement this policy and move people around and urge people to move around.

Q: And fair share, if I remember it, was more forcing people who had not been to a hardship post to go to a hardship post rather than actually opening up more opportunities at Paris, London type posts for non-European specialists.

JOHNSON: Yes, yes. Exactly. That's what ended up happening because as I said, we had people who stayed in certain regions, whether it was in Asia or Europe or Latin America. We're supposed to be generalists, so at a minimum we should have some proficiency in two regions. So, yes, that was one of the things that we did. In looking at people's records, finding out who had spent all their time in non-hardship posts, there was an effort to force them to do at least one hardship tour. If a person hadn't done a hardship in a certain number of years then he or she had to bid on one of those posts; the objective was for the officer to be assigned to one of those countries. Sometimes it worked out and

sometimes it didn't because then again, the bureaus had something to say in the assignment process. Basically, we would have to comply if the bureau said so and so has expertise that we need in this job and we don't want them to go off to some hardship post because right now—we need this person and their expertise in our bureau. There were different factors that would come into play when deciding assignments. Of course there were all kinds of complaints about this and accusations of running an old-boy network or of racial discrimination, of pushing minorities into Latin America and Africa and that kind of thing. There were all kinds of conversations going on. Then different affinity groups got involved, like the Thursday Luncheon Group that represented African American officers, professionals and civil service employees. There were also groups representing Latinx and Asian employees. All of the different affinity groups had something to say about assignments and what was fair and what was not. They would also often hold meetings for their members to give them tips on which kinds of jobs to bid on that would be career enhancing and would help them move up through the ranks. There was also advice about what jobs would also give them exposure to different opportunities in the different regions. There was an effort made to address some of what I think management viewed as legitimate complaints about lack of opportunities for certain groups in the department.

Q: Did you feel there was any discrimination that was harmful to women by that time?

JOHNSON: Well, there had been lawsuits and lawsuits and all kinds of-

Q: There's no doubt there was a history of it early on, but this was 2002-

JOHNSON: Yes, this was well after all those lawsuits and so, there were all these remedies that had been implemented, so…

Q: So, what did you find?

JOHNSON: The same thing. It seemed like there were more and more women coming into the service and more and more moving up through the ranks. The gender balance was improving at that time. Much improved over, say, when I had entered in 1980, although I think when I came in our USIA class was 19, and I think there were 10 men and nine women or nine men and 10 women, something like that. There were a lot of women in that class.

Q: Oh, that's pretty good already.

JOHNSON: Yes. I think things had started to shift, especially with the resolution of some long, ongoing lawsuits. I remember that by the time I was in Panama in the mid '80s that there were a number of women officers who had come in because of the rulings on their candidacy by the judges in regard to one of those gender discrimination lawsuits. There were a lot more women coming through the pipeline. By the time I got assigned to CDA,

I couldn't tell you statistically how many were female and how many were male, but there were a lot of women officers rising up through the ranks.

Q: There were also a lot more tandem—

JOHNSON: Oh, yes.

Q: -people said as the years went along, and that must have been a frustration for you.

JOHNSON: Yes. That was sometimes problematic but not as horrible as I had feared, and I think because they had started giving people tips on what they needed to focus on and what they needed to do if they were a tandem couple. I think the advice was for them to look at what was on the list and figure out a viable solution. There were a couple of things they needed to figure out. By the time they were getting to the grade of FS-1, one of them might end up being DCM, and so sometimes they split up and went to different countries. Or they had some kind of work around so that the spouse wouldn't be supervising his or her spouse as DCM depending on the situation. I think in most of the examples of those I had, it was the husband who ended up being the DCM and then there was some kind of a cutout that had to be arranged for the wife who normally had come in later than the husband. That was the pattern. Other times if they had both come in at the same time, one of them might have to go to a neighboring country because in some cases the missions were so small it was hard to do a cutout. People did all kinds of things to make it work. Management also tried to do its best to be accommodating and to be fair. It's really tough because you would have someone looking at a job and then if tandems were assigned in different offices in the embassy then sometimes people would complain that it was unfair because the person only got the assignment because he or she was part of a tandem couple. Well, what are you going to do? Nobody gets everything they want all the time, so you just try to be as accommodating as you can and as fair as you can. But sometimes you do end up giving preference to the tandems simply because you've got two trained officers; why would you have one of them sitting around twiddling their thumbs on leave without pay? Sadly, that was what some officers ended up having to do if he or she couldn't get assigned to the same country with the spouse. I think the department always tried to avoid that if they could. Because if you've got someone who is capable and there is an opening there, why not have that person do the job?

Q: You had mentioned the war posts, the Afghanistan, Iraq assignments. I wonder if you could say a little bit more about that. Were people required to do one of those tours yet at that point?

JOHNSON: There was a kerfuffle in the beginning because Foreign Service officers don't' take kindly to being told they have to do something.

Q: Even though they're worldwide available.

JOHNSON: Even though they signed a paper saying they're worldwide available and they'll go wherever the government needs them to go. It's just the culture of the

organization that has always tried to be accommodating and send people where they really want to go because then they'll probably be a lot more effective in getting the job done. But in this case, it was really difficult because there were not enough bodies that wanted to go, and so then they started trying to push people to go and that caused a whole big brouhaha. I can remember, there was a town hall where things got really testy. As I recall, in the end there were quite a few, especially entry level people and more junior officers, who saw this as an opportunity to make their name, to get some good experience. When HR started guaranteeing really nice onward assignments after doing the difficult assignment, things seemed to calm down and they were able to fill the posts as needed. You're always going to have people complaining and griping, but it seemed to me that once they figured out a solution, things settled down. It took a while for management to figure out what was going to work for these assignments to be attractive. One has to give the officers the proper safety training; State had to develop courses on how to keep safe in a combat zone because we hadn't had to do that before. There were a lot of things that had to be stood up concurrently. I think some Foreign Service officers justifiably said, well, we're not soldiers, we're going into a combat zone; how are we going to stay safe? What are we supposed to do? What are the new standard operating procedures? Management did design courses and developed policies so that when people went out, they felt more confident that they knew what they needed to do to stay safe. There were people who went out and they really felt that they had done something important and valuable. I met some of them when I went on to my next assignment in the public diplomacy training division of FSI. I met some of them who were coming back from those posts and going out to other assignments. But it's one of these things where an organization when it's having to deal with a new situation, none of us can see around corners as well as we would like, so sometimes you're playing catch up, trying to figure out what it is we need to do to properly prepare people to do these jobs because this is not a normal public diplomacy or economic officer or political officer working situation.

Q: You mentioned also that you had- were the assignments officer for diplomatic security people.

JOHNSON: Yes.

Q: This must have been a totally different kind of system.

JOHNSON: Yes. That really made me feel like a data entry clerk because they had their own system and knew which person they wanted to go where. I met some very interesting Diplomatic Security (DS) officers. The DS agents would come through the office because sometimes there was some glitch that occurred in the software that we'd need to correct. And sometimes people hadn't filled in their bid lists. They did not require as much care and feeding and the numbers were fewer. Diplomatic security had its own way of doing

things. But because all of HR was centralized, there still needed to be someone tracking and making sure all the I's were dotted and the T's were crossed.

Q: It must have been an especially big group of diplomatic security officers about the time we started the wars off.

JOHNSON: Yes. But I was at the end where they were more senior, so these were more experienced people. I wasn't dealing with the entry-level diplomatic security officers. It was people who had been in a while and they were rotating, and some of them were going to some of these difficult places, but others were just either coming back for a Washington assignment or going to the UN. It was a little of this, a little of that. But nothing really stands out other than most of them were really nice. I remember I had a conversation with one fellow who had done security for Disney before he joined the State Department. I think he was a police officer somewhere and then he had worked for the Disney Company in Florida. Years later, I met him when I was invited to speak on a panel at the Job Search Program. He was retiring, and he said, "Yes, I'm going back to Florida."

Q: Oh, very nice, very nice.

JOHNSON: Yes.

Q: You talked about dealing with unhappy people and people who were 01s who were not going to make senior. Were you the one who had to give some of these people the bad news?

JOHNSON: Let's see. I'm trying to think now. Well, people tracked their records and if their name wasn't on the promotion list it was not a surprise. I got to give people the good news when they got a promotion.

Q: You would see the list before the general public and let people know?

JOHNSON: Yes. There were some folks that I would call. It varied on who called. Sometimes the geographic bureau people called and sometimes we in HR called. The folks who weren't promoted didn't get a call but it seemed to me that there was also paperwork on who had time and class. We had to inform people who were going to have to retire, forcibly retire because they had not been promoted. After a certain number of years if you're not promoted then you are given a golden handshake and are sent off to do whatever you can do in your next adventure. I recall writing letters to some of those individuals, letting them know what their options were in terms of the retirement planning seminar and things like that. They would come in. Sometimes we'd have conversations. If they didn't get promoted, sometimes they would come in to talk about what assignment they might take that might help them get promoted. And that's why I said sometimes it was a little frustrating that we didn't have more training in how to coach officers, because sometimes I just wanted to know, " What is it that I can realistically do to help this person?" I could base it on some of my experiences and what I

observed, but I felt there should be some kind of consistent body of advice that we could give. I guess we ended up getting that from the Continuity Counselors. Whenever I wasn't sure, I would go talk to them, asking, "What can I tell this person, how can I help this person?" At least we had that in our suite, and I could sometimes even send the person to them to talk about their specific situation. We tried to encourage them to take an assignment that might be career enhancing but sometimes there wasn't going to be a happy ending. The thing to do would be to suggest they take an assignment that they would find personally fulfilling. That's what sometimes made details or assignments outside of the State Department attractive. It seems to me that there was a certain timeframe if you were close to being ticked out where a detail could have been problematic. I cannot remember. I don't know if there were certain assignments like going off to do something in another federal agency that had restrictions. Folks would say that details were not career enhancing because you're going to be outside of the department so maybe you shouldn't do that kind of thing. But if that's what you want to do you should go for it. So, yes, dealing with people who had problems and couldn't find a job anywhere in part because they had a difficult personality, that probably was the hardest, and I had a few clients like that. I tried to do my best in those situations.

Q: And so, in those cases they might be put into an assignment where the bureau didn't necessarily want them or where they didn't necessarily want to go?

JOHNSON: Well, sometimes they were good at figuring out a Y-Tour, which is an over-complement assignment. Sometimes they were able to find something like that to get them through. Sometimes they retired. But if they weren't close to retirement age then they really needed to find a job.

Then there was also the issue that you could only be in the U.S. at the department for five years, and then you had to go overseas. The only exceptions were if there was a health issue of some kind or a needs-of-the-service matter. That rule was often a challenge for people who had children in high school, and they had one more year left and wanted an extension for family reasons. Again, there were always ways to try to argue in favor of the client to get them a one-year extension because of mitigating circumstances or difficulties. Usually if it was a health issue and it's documented it's a no-brainer because then State MED might not approve the assignment—the medical division could weigh in at that point. But if it was a personal reason then sometimes it was a little more difficult to argue for that extension. Sometimes they were able to extend if the bureau wanted them to stay on another year and everybody made a case for it. The same thing with overseas assignments; they didn't like people to stay in a post forever and a day, but again, if the person had a child who was in the senior year in high school, sometimes they would argue and the post would come in and support the officer, saying please, please let them stay. But there were times when families were forced to come back and the child stayed behind with friends to finish the school year. It's been known to happen on both ends; either they stay in the Washington area with friends or relatives in the Washington area and they stay to finish high school and then go off to college or the same thing

happens overseas, but that is not ideal. Sometimes it was really challenging trying to help people.

I remember one client came in and he wanted to find a boarding school for his son. I think his son was interested in the arts or something creative and I had just heard about a school in upstate New York that had a special arts program or maybe I had seen a report about it on TV. It was the Storm King School. I mentioned it to him and he ended up looking into it and he ended up sending his son there. It all worked out for them. Sometimes, I had that kind of serendipitous thing where I could help somebody out. All kinds of things would come up and I just tried to do my best to be helpful.

Q: Did you actually sit on the assignments panel?

JOHNSON: Yes. Our particular panel met on Tuesday mornings.

Q: How did that work?

JOHNSON: It was usually pretty straightforward. The only time you had to explain something was if there were a special case that they had to vote yea or nay; someone applying for leave without pay because of a difficulty in getting an assignment or because they had some personal issue that they needed to deal with. Or they were tandems and couldn't get assigned to the same place. So, you would make the case for that client's request for leave without pay. Sometimes they needed a language waiver because the post felt they had to be there yesterday and there wasn't enough time to take the full-blown language course. Maybe only courtesy-level language skills as opposed to getting all the way up to fluency, which made me cringe, but yes. We did what we had to do for the clients and for the service. When we had unusual cases, the assignments officers would make the argument for their client and the panel would say yea or nay. Most of the time it was pretty straightforward, as I recall. It seems like another life at this point.

Q: Yes. Well, it does. I wonder if you can remember any cases during your two years when you actually had to do a directed assignment where somebody was, you know, slam dunked into a position against their wishes just because of the needs of the service?

JOHNSON: You know, I honestly can't remember.

Q: You probably would because it would be kind of an unhappy anomaly, I guess.

JOHNSON: Yes. I do remember being scandalized by someone who had been in Iraq, and another officer was slated to go into a position and at the last minute the powers-that-be decided to bump that person and put the other person who had been in Iraq in that

position. That didn't sit well with anyone because it just felt grossly unfair. But that's life!

Q: Yes, for somebody who's already designated and offered the job, yes.

JOHNSON: Yes, another person had been selected for the position by the bureau and everything was set for that person to take the job. But then the powers-that-be said no, no, this other person is going to that post. That was the one that I remember as opposed to someone being forced into something they didn't want.

Q: And did that happen with frequency?

JOHNSON: No. I think that's why it stuck in my mind because it was so unusual, and it seemed so unfair.

Q: And the "powers-that-be" would mean somebody on the seventh floor, the director general or someone like that?

JOHNSON: Well, someone with a higher pay grade than even the DG, as I recall.

Q: Oh, okay.

JOHNSON: So, you know, you're not going to argue.

Q: No. You can argue but it doesn't mean-

JOHNSON: You will not prevail. But you know, stuff like that happens everywhere. There are all kinds of things that go on and we don't know the backstory, so who are we to question. But on the surface, we were all harrumphing. Oh, goodness!

When I was in that assignment, that's when I really started trying to figure out what I was going to do next in terms of retirement dates. Toward the tail end of my assignment in WHA I was diagnosed with Graves Disease and when I transferred to HR/CDA it was being treated and we thought everything was fine. But then, after I was transferred to HR, I developed thyroid eye disease. Thyroid eye disease is the uncontrollable growth of fatty tissue that starts to squeeze the optic nerve, and if it's not dealt with properly you go blind. I went to my doctor, Dr. Gilbert Hurwitz, for follow-up for the Graves Disease and said that I was having problems with my eyes and needed to see an eye specialist. I asked if he could recommend someone who specialized in that kind of disorder because the regular ophthalmologist I had gone to didn't seem to take the problem seriously; I was a bit annoyed. Dr. Hurwitz gave me the name of another doctor, I called up the office and they said well, that Dr. Goodglick didn't have any openings for another two months, you know, the usual. When I called Dr. Hurwitz and said I couldn't get in, he said oh, no, no, no, you have to go see him now! Apparently, he called and said find a time to see her and off I went. When I went, I think that it was a Thursday, and Dr. Goodglick said oh, we need to do surgery like yesterday, so he put me on an intravenous steroid drip starting on

Monday at a hospital near my home. It was real fast! And then he said we're scheduling you on Thursday—for surgery. I can't remember in how many days, but it was like I was going to have three days of this IV drip and then go into surgery. So, I needed to go see a nurse over at a different hospital where the surgery would take place for the pre-op examination. When she started asking me about the dates of when I noticed the problem and when I went to the doctor, she said she had never seen anyone develop this problem so rapidly; this was really unusual. That explained why the doctor wanted to take pictures of my eyes when I went for my first appointment; it was like wow, this is crazy! I had the surgery and was out for a while. One of the results of the surgery, and this was a crazy complicated thing, was that I ended up with double vision and had to have corrective lenses. Before everything healed, I had to go back for yet another surgery because something was not quite right, so that was the second one. After everything healed, I had to do yet another surgery to correct the double vision. It was a process and it was not fun getting poked in the eye like that! But it remedied the situation, with the steroids and all of that, but as a consequence there was this period of time when I was not in the office, and so that made me think oh, I really need to focus and figure out what I'm going to do post Foreign Service active duty because who knows? I could drop dead tomorrow and all they would say is oh, that's too bad, who's going to fill in?

At that point, I decided I wanted to really do more of my artwork, and maybe start a small art business. I had already taken one of the retirement planning courses at USIA years before, and I'm glad I did because at that point I started figuring out some things I needed to do in terms of saving and organizing life and finances. I then started thinking about all the other things and getting information to help myself as well as all my other clients who might be retiring at some point in the near future. That was when I started actively planning, during the 2003-2004 timeframe, trying to figure out what kinds of things I might want to do when I was no longer working at State. Taking into consideration that I was going to have two children going to college, I had thought about the when-actually-employed rehired annuitant kind of stint as one way to help with financing their higher education. But I was also hoping that I could do something in the creative realm that would pay because the arts don't pay but still, they are so satisfying. I was trying to figure out how I might be able to balance all of those things and do all those things, so I started doing the research.

Q: So, you went into the open assignment cycle yourself while you were supervising it. Did you sort of have a different perspective on it from within the office? People say that people go work in CDA to get their next job; is that _____ worked?

JOHNSON: Yes, because quite a few of my colleagues who were in there either bid on consul general jobs or DCM jobs, or even some ambassadorial jobs. It was interesting; the men were all applying and positioning themselves for these senior jobs and the two of us women who were there, coincidentally, we were looking to retire and go off and do something else.

So, yes, some of my colleagues worked on positioning themselves for their next job. There were some folks who said well, why don't you bid on a DCM. It had never been

my goal in life to be ambassador. I had been chargé at posts and even acting DCM and that convinced me that it was not something I really wanted to do. It was a lot of responsibility and I was more interested in the cultural and the engagement aspect of Foreign Service work; I really didn't want to deal with all of the big policy issues. I had wanted to deal with the big policy issues in a more intimate way, where we used our cultural connections or our academic connections to influence in some way, but it's not the same. I was not into browbeating and that kind of thing. Sometimes you have to employ tough pressure tactics, as ambassador, because that's part of the job and that wasn't something that I felt was in my wheelhouse. As I like to say, a woman's got to know her limitations, just like a man has to know his limitations. You just have to know what works for you and what you feel comfortable doing.

Q: Well, not even limitations, but you want to be happy as well as get ahead.

JOHNSON: Yes, exactly. And I liked the soft power approach. I found that more interesting, and in a way more challenging because you're trying to understand what's motivating people and what they value and what's important to them. And then, you're trying to figure out okay, this is what we need, this is what they want, how do we find common ground? Where is the point where we can both agree on something or are we going to have to just agree to disagree? Sometimes that means you need to listen more actively and not be always spouting off.

Q: So, as you were looking for assignments you decided that FSI was the place?

JOHNSON: Well, I had wanted to stay one more year and retire out of CDA, but a new office director was coming in and I was told that she wanted to form her own team. So I was not welcome to stay. Off I went to the Foreign Service Institute (FSI). I can't remember how that all came about. I guess looking on the list and because of my health issues I still wasn't cleared to go overseas anyway, so I guess that was one of the options. I felt if I was going to be ending my career, maybe I could do a brain dump of lessons learned and leave it there as I moved on to other things.

Q: So, the middle of 2004 was the move to FSI?

JOHNSON: August of 2004 I moved over, yes, I moved over to FSI. One of my favorite quotes from Edward R. Murrow indicates that the really crucial link in the international communication chain is the last three feet, which is a bridge, personal contact—one person talking to another. That was sort of my motto throughout my career, those last three feet. You'd be amazed what you can achieve by just sitting down sometimes and talking through something with a person. That was my mantra as I moved on to my next thing over in FSI.

Q: Well, FSI is a big place. Tell us specifically what your job was at FSI.

JOHNSON: My title was instructor on the information officer training team. The Public Diplomacy Training office had a cultural affairs training unit and an information or press

officer training unit. Then it had someone who was in charge of Foreign Service National or locally employed staff training. The director of that office oversaw those three teams. There was also an office manager and support staff. This is where contracting out support staff positions drove me crazy. Back in the day, all support staff was made up of Civil Service employees. Management or I guess Congress in its infinite wisdom didn't want State to have so many FTEs. I'm not sure what the issue was, but the decision was made to contract out support staff, which meant it was a young person who was starting out in his or her career. It was a low paying job and did not have the greatest benefits. Being smart, talented individuals, as soon as a good job with good benefits came along, they were gone. In the time that I was there, which was one year, I believe…I can't remember whether there were two or three support staff for the information officer training team—every time the person became very proficient in how we needed things to be done, they left for a better job. So then we had to train someone new. I often wondered—are we being pennywise and pound-foolish? Why not just have this as a job with several grades that as they become more proficient and skilled at it, they can get promoted and then eventually they will move someplace but at least you would have them maybe for a year or two as opposed to six months. Anyway, that was my pet peeve.

Q: Yes. Okay, Cynthia, let me stop you there for a moment because I notice my battery has gone down a bar and I want to make sure we have good reception throughout all this.

JOHNSON: Okay.

Q: Today is March 1, 2019, and this is Peter Eicher continuing with today's session with Cynthia Johnson.

Okay, Cynthia, we were just talking about your move to FSI-

JOHNSON: Foreign Service Institute, yes.

Q: -and you talked about your frustrations with contracted staff.

JOHNSON: Yes. And they were all really nice young folks, very capable, and it was just frustrating to have that revolving door. But, such is life in the modern world, and we are getting more and more of that with the gig economy, as it's called now. You don't even contract people now; you just hire all these consultants. You don't give them any benefits and they're on their own to figure out how to sustain themselves. Well, I guess we were very fortunate to have been born when we were born because it's difficult now to have any kind of security or stability.

My title was instructor. And the Public Diplomacy Training office was new because there had been a training division in USIA, but it didn't function as FSI functioned. A lot of us took courses at FSI even though we were USIA officers. It just depended on what was offered and what was needed. When State stood up this new training division, it conducted a lot of surveys, and I remember receiving the survey when I was still in WHA/PDA. It asked what our expectations were and what kinds of things we wanted

taught. So, it was interesting now to be on the other side because I was going in and they already had the curriculum and everything put together and they were teaching the courses. The courses were the product of all of the different survey results and meetings that had occurred after the merger to develop training courses that were similar to the ones in the other divisions for the other cones. Each cone or career specialty had its own set of courses.

I was assigned to the information officer team, and I was working with Stacy White, but she was rotating out. Shortly thereafter, Patricia "Kit" Norland replaced her. And this was really crazy because I was an OC, a senior officer. And looking at my evaluation here, Kit Norland, was an FS-02, and the division director for public diplomacy training, Janet Miller, was an FS-01. So, I was more senior to everyone, but it was a Y-Tour, and so that's why we had that anomaly. Normally that wouldn't have happened.

Q: No.

JOHNSON: Anyway, I went over to FSI and one of the things we had to do or one of our responsibilities was to get feedback or evaluations from the students when they took the modules and the course. Based on the evaluations, we looked at what was being done to see if we needed to tweak it. As new issues arose, sometimes we would add them into the modules. We were constantly looking at the product. But as a new instructor I had to take certain courses before I even did anything in the classroom. We had courses like how to create training materials and how to update modules; how to design graphics that would stick with people and help reinforce the message being communicated and things like that. It was interesting because in a way it reminded me of some of the things you learned along the way as a public diplomacy officer about the value of a photo, the value of an image in terms of communicating an idea.

One of the other things we had to do was identify outside speakers and expand the pool of experts that could be invited to speak to the classes.

Q: That sounds like it's right up your alley from things you've done previously.

JOHNSON: Exactly. It was along the lines of what we normally did as public diplomacy officers. Of course, it also included mentoring the newer officers because some of the officers in the class would be entry-level officers and others would be folks who were of a different cone and they were going into an information officer position, so it would be the first time they were doing that kind of work. We would mentor the officers who were going to be first-time information officers.

When I arrived, I found out that they were in the process of trying to revise the eight-week information officer course. The goal was to come up with the most effective methods for communicating U.S. national security and foreign policy objectives. That's a mouthful, you know. The thing that was interesting is when courses are designed at FSI, we have subject matter experts which would be the FSOs who have done this work over and over again in different countries, and then we have people who specialized in

designing courses and know how best to sequence the information for maximum effect in learning. It's a whole discipline, course and curriculum design. There were people like that who came in and met with us and worked with us on some of the things that we were proposing and some of the revisions we were making. We also would meet with the team that actually did graphics at FSI. We met them and got to know them to figure out how they might be able to help us with some of the visual aids and things that we needed for the course. This was also in the olden days before you had Smartboards and all of that. We still had VCRs and televisions. Although we were trying to get better Internet access, it wasn't always easy to get it so that we could have interactive sessions in the classroom. We did not have an Internet portal allowing us to do webinars. Webinars weren't even a thing back then. We had the equivalent where we had to go down to a special studio to have a conversation with someone who was in a different location. But the technology was changing and that was becoming easier to do. I remember at one point we were able to do a conversation with a professor in Iowa who had a radio program on the elections and he talked to our information officer students about some of the things that he and his team did in terms of communicating what was going on. Not just locally in Iowa but to a more global audience. Those were the kinds of conversations we had that were really fascinating. That professor's name was Steffen Schmidt. He was Colombian-born but had come to the U.S. and had done some innovative things with remote learning and with his radio programming. He was an interesting speaker.

Anyway, we worked with all the different divisions in FSI to help us make the course a better product.

I was just looking through my notes yesterday on some of the advice we gave to the students, and in a way, it would be good advice for any Foreign Service officer, not just for a press officer. Nowadays you can get everything online. You can go online and look at the local newspaper in your country of assignment. So, my assumption is that everybody's doing that—maybe, maybe not. If they're not, they should. You can see not just the print media but you can get radio, TV, podcasts, all kinds of things. I'm sure these are available online in whatever your country of assignment might be. Even if it's a country that doesn't have a large media presence, they've got something online; everybody's got something online.

The other thing that I recommended was to find out if there was any media in the U.S. for the immigrant community from that country, because sometimes those media outlets are connected to media outlets in the home country. It would be useful to see what media the immigrant community from Country A is consuming here in the U.S., what's it saying about what's going on back home, as well as what they are saying about U.S. policy here to get a different perspective. During the time that I was at FSI, I had the opportunity to go to a conference in New York City, organized by Pacifica Radio and a couple other organizations. The conference focused on ethnic media in the U.S. There was booth upon booth featuring all these different ethnic media outlets, Vietnamese, Spanish-language, French-language, Arabic and so many others. They put out a directory that had a listing of all of these outlets, whether they were print, radio, television or online. I remember getting one of the catalogs and giving it to someone I knew in State Public Affairs, saying

they might want to have a look at this; this is domestic U.S. media, but the office might want to engage some of these folks and see what's going on with their media and how we might get our message out to that media as well. I don't know if they ever did anything with it, but they can't say that I didn't pass it along. I also told the officers in the class to try and figure out if the ethnic media for their country of assignment was active in any way here in the U.S. because it would be worth having a look to see what they were doing.

During that time, we also talked about the possibility of taking advantage of some of the public affairs training that the Department of Defense offered, because they had quite a bit. I had met some of their public affairs officers in various stints, so I knew that they had a pretty robust training program. There were other officers who were also interested in trying to figure out how we might have some crosspollination, maybe some of our officers go to their courses and they come to ours. But as far as I know, nothing ever came of that proposal to work with the Department of Defense and that was too bad. At the same time, I had joined the Public Relations Society of America because they had all kinds of tools and offerings in terms of public engagement, and they were doing some interesting things with technology. I joined to see what they were doing and how some of that might be helpful to the public diplomacy function. Of course, I got a lot of pushback from some of our officers who said well, we're not public relations people and we don't need to focus on what they're doing. Anyway, I tried. For many years I kept my membership up because they did have some really useful newsletters and e-blasts, email blasts that synthesized or summarized articles on the latest in communication technology, in messaging, in marketing and all kinds of tips that I thought could be adaptable and applicable to communicating the U.S. Government's message. But I never got any traction on that either.

One of the other bits of advice that I remember giving to the officers was to make sure that they advocated for the Foreign Service National or local employed staff to get training here in the U.S. We emphasized that it shouldn't be given out as a reward; it should be used so that the employees can speak with authority about the U.S. after having been here and done a deep dive into what are these United States, how and why does the country do the things it does.

Just the fact of coming to the U.S. and realizing the vast distances, for some employees, was an eye-opener. I remember when I was overseas, some of my staff would come back from a visit and they'd say, "You know I didn't realize how big the U.S. is and how varied the different regions are!" There's no substitute for hands-on experience, for being there and seeing the country close up. I tried to convince the officers that when it makes sense and there's something offered, if they think that their locally employed staff would benefit from taking the training, that they should send them and not view it as a reward

for good work but training so that they can be even more effective when they get back from their time in the U.S.

One of the things that I found most challenging in that job was trying to look into the future and figure out how we would be working in five years and what the communication environment would be like. It's just been sort of crazed with the…

Q: Yes, it changes minute to minute, doesn't it?

JOHNSON: Yes, with the technology changing. One of the things I valued in getting the newsletters from the Public Relations Society was that it was oftentimes talking about some of the trends and some of the new technologies and how they might be used. But still, even with that, it was difficult to figure out what the State Department needed to be thinking about as it went forward in messaging, because State Department has very definite ideas about how to do everything and it's an inward communicating organization. It's not necessarily looking to be constantly pushing information outward. Due to the nature of diplomacy, you're guarded in what you say because it's often about not making anyone lose face and making changes where it's a win-win for everyone. So, of course you're going to want to be very careful in what you say and how you say it. But the fact of the matter is, with the way the world is changing we can't just speak to elites and to decision makers because with the Internet it's a free for all. Anyone can upload and blast whatever they want, whether it's true or not. The challenge of trying to figure out how to manage messages in a chaotic environment like that is mind numbing. Back then it wasn't nearly as chaotic as it is now. Back then, looking into the future we could see there would be increasingly decentralized control of messaging and that was one of the things that was hardest to try to figure out; how do we navigate this new world?

Q: Was this already pre-Facebook and Twitter and all of that?

JOHNSON: Yes, pre-Facebook, pre-Twitter.

Q: The internet was there the same way it is today.

JOHNSON: Yes, exactly. The Internet was there and we were already beginning to see the start of the loss of control. Back then it was blogs, I think. Blogs were a big thing at that time, and we were already beginning to see that there were all these people blogging and talking about different matters. There were non-governmental actors influencing as well. Diplomacy was no longer the domain of just the diplomats and government officials; everybody was chiming in. We had programs to strengthen civil society, so we were going to have more voices out there. Just figuring out how to manage our message so that it was heard, because there are so many voices now, that was one of the

challenges. Trying to figure out the future and how to effectively communicate in a noisier and noisier communication environment was the new normal.

Q: And to integrate this into the training you were providing?

JOHNSON: Right, exactly. In the midst of all of that, one of the things I did was take a course on stress management, because I figured there's got to be a piece of this course that maybe we should be integrating into our course. There's nothing more stressful than having a microphone shoved in your face and being asked a question that you're totally unprepared for it? That was an interesting course, and it was actually very good. There were some aspects of it that were useful to include in our course, but I think everybody just needed to take it because it was just a good way to remind people that there are only certain things you can control. Your reaction to things you cannot control is a key part of managing stress.

Okay, let's see. What else? Ah. Other words of advice, I remember. We had conversations with more experienced officers, and I agreed with one of them that said that if you really want to be effective, you must remember that the ambassador's secretary is the most important person in the mission. Be nice to the ambassador's Office Management Specialist (OMS) (secretary in the olden days). The second most important person is the Deputy Chief of Mission's Office Management Specialist. It's true, because I remember so many times the ambassador's OMS calling me up to ask a question or pass on a helpful heads up, and I would do the same thing. I'd say did you see this or have you heard that? A good collegial working relationship with all your colleagues is good, but especially with the ambassador's OMS. The other important person is the one who runs the motor pool. If you need to get somewhere and you're in a bind and you have a good relationship with that person, they'll figure out how to get you where you need to go. These are the practical things that you need to know to survive.

One of the other things that I always found beneficial throughout my career was getting to know all the former exchange visitors, as many of them as possible, because they have a unique perspective, having spent time in the U.S. and then being nationals of that country. They have a different lens and they can provide useful insights into their country and give you helpful feedback on how the U.S. is being perceived. So, the former exchange visitors, they're really important people to get to know.

There were always conversations about influential media outlets, and I think for a time when the world didn't have the Internet, I think sometimes we paid more attention to the media outlets that the elites and the policymakers and the decision makers pay attention to. But as civil society became more active and non-governmental players became more active in many societies, we had to focus not just on the elite media outlets but on the outlets that the masses followed. The tabloids and some of the other outlets that folks might have thought eh, well, why do we need to pay attention to them? Well, because three-quarters of the population is reading this or listening to this or watching this. Going into a country and trying to figure out who watches what, who listens to what, who pays attention to what, which ones are there because they're the favorite of some higher up and

which ones are really effective and influential. Analyzing the media landscape is always important and that's where the locally employed staff come in and can really set you on the right path in terms of who's who. Still, everything has to be carefully evaluated because these employees are nationals of that country, so they have a certain perspective. Talking to folks in the expatriate community was also enlightening; they had a different perspective. Americans who have lived there for many years and seen all kinds of changes have an institutional memory that is worth its weight in gold. Getting out and about to meet these people is important.

I can't remember who it was; one of our speakers said all news is local. There's no difference between international and domestic news anymore. Everything is local. It's true and it's funny. I would go to the most remote little village in Africa and the people there would know so much more about the U.S. than we Americans would know about their country. So, all news is local when you're out and about overseas.

Another bit of advice I remember from some of the sages who came to the class, the ambassador doesn't like surprises, and no one wants to lose face.

Q: Yes, yes.

JOHNSON: So, let that be your guide.

As we were doing the revisions, there was a focus on evaluation and how to measure success, and that has always been a challenge for public diplomacy because so much of what one might consider successful isn't immediate. It's not going to be evident in a 24/7 news cycle. It's usually months or even years. A young professional who goes on an international visitor leadership program, the payoff isn't necessarily going to be a month after they come back; it might be three or four years or even 10 years. I remember there was a young woman in Uruguay who was active in one of the Afro-Uruguayan organizations—Mundo-Afro. Her name was Beatriz Ramirez and we sent her on an international visitor leadership program. She came back with some interesting ideas and mixed feelings about what she observed in the U.S. as opposed to what was going on in Uruguay. When I went back for a visit years later, she was on the city council for Montevideo, so it was a good investment of that exchange program because she was very sharp, very smart, and had good insights. I was glad to see that she had succeeded in making her way in local politics. That's why evaluating the success of programs is so difficult. Sometimes you can get a fairly quick payoff, like the time in El Salvador when we got everybody together in a room from different political parties in the government and the banking sector to talk about money laundering and why it was important to have laws in place to deal with it. Or when we had training for the police officers and for the journalists so that each group understood the role of the other. We saw a difference within a few weeks of that training, and the legislators eventually came up with a money laundering law. But not all of the programs have that kind of month, two-month, three-month, or six-month impact; sometimes it takes a lot longer. Figuring out how to measure success in some of these programs is a challenge. In working with the press, it may be preparing the ambassador for an interview or doing the media plan for a visiting

delegation, a CODEL or a STAFFDEL or a VIP. What's the measure of success for activities like that? It's hard. I guess it's successful if there are no *faux pas*.

Q: Well, that's a minimalist-

JOHNSON: But that's the short-term.

Q: And do no harm is _____.

JOHNSON: Yes. But so much of what we do is an investment in a long-term relationship, and so that was one of the biggest challenges as we were developing courses and trying to figure out advice and counsel—What does success look like and how do we measure it? To this day I don't know if we figured that out for much of what we do because of the nature of trying to change minds and attitudes. In this country we're still having battles over how best to change attitudes and it seems like we're regressing in certain quarters so, how do we measure success?

Eventually, we came up with a four-step formula. The first one was understand, which means you research and analyze the communication environment, figuring out what would need to be addressed. Then, you provide information. So, it was understand, inform, and if you're lucky you influence; step three. Finally, understand would come in to play again—that is you evaluate to understand what occurred. Was the message heard, did it make a difference, was it helpful, or counterproductive? That was the four-step process that we posted in the room. The action that was repeated was "understand." You should be constantly in the process of trying to understand what's going on in your communication environment. If you're going to communicate, you really have to know who is listening. That's why you have to evaluate the environment on the front end and on the back end—seeking to understand is a continuous process.

One of my colleagues came and talked to the class, a fellow named John Matel. He had a line that I hadn't made a note of before. You cannot tell people more than they are willing to believe. That's part of this inform-and-influence component. You can inform but if they really aren't feeling it for whatever it is you're trying to tell them, you're not going to be able to influence them no matter how many ways you try to communicate it. That's when you get to that agree-to-disagree outcome.

We had all kinds of activities, programs, things that we shared. We encouraged the information officers when they were going out to find out who owned some of the media outlets in their countries of assignment; what were the owners' vested interests in different political positions; what were their points of view, who did they speak to, and was it mostly news or was it mostly editorial comment masquerading as news? They had to figure those kinds of things out to be effective.

Oh, and then someone made a joke of Ten Commandments of the IO, but I don't think I have 10 written down. They were things like thou shalt not surprise Washington. Thou shalt have lots of batteries, recorders, and handheld sets. Thou shalt know the sites for

press events and what can be done there and what cannot. Thou shalt take more people than you need to off-site events. And it's not written down here, but thou shalt always have lots of water. Yes, there were all kinds of thou shalts that we incorporated into the courses.

There's something that was interesting. In the early days, when I took the course on how to design modules, the instructor said that we had to always have the WIIFM out front. The WIIFM is "What's In It For Me?" Why should I pay attention and why should I listen? To me, that is what needs to be kept foremost in our minds as well when we're trying to communicate policy; What's in it for the listener? Why should they care? Why should they listen?

Then, we had instruction on PowerPoint. We've all sat through death by PowerPoint briefings. The instructor said to identify the major point and concept and keep it simple. Determine what requires a visual; keep it big, simple, clear and consistent. Don't drive people crazy with fine print that no one can read. That was also helpful in so many ways because when preparing materials for a briefing or press releases and handouts you want to be clear; you want to be concise; you want to give them the basic information. If they want more details, you can give it to them, but you want them to get the big picture and the main message you're communicating.

We had a great guy come in and do a session on public speaking. And he had the three Ps; be proactive, be prepared and practice. That could be used in any number of situations. Again, he talked about the importance of being up front with bad news. If there is something that's going to be negative or unpleasant, you should be the one to put it out there and put it in context. You don't want something negative coming out that doesn't give your point of view or the context. You want to get the bad news out; you want to control the dissemination of unpleasant news.

We would also have sessions on the dos and don'ts when you're doing briefings or meeting with journalists and establishing ground rules. You must make sure that the ground rules are well understood. One trick of the trade is when they ask you a question and you need time to think, just repeat the question; that gives you time to really process it and figure out what it is you want to say. If you disagree, say so and then explain why. Also, you can ask the reporter to repeat the question and buy yourself some time to figure out what you want to say. But the best thing to do is to be prepared and don't try to wing it because people will perceive that. And it just doesn't work.

One of the resources we used was a paper Peggy Noonan had written on speaking well and the importance of practicing what you have to say if you're going to go out and give a speech. But also getting feedback from someone, presenting it to someone beforehand and getting feedback so that you can fine-tune it if you need to. Her line was "Successful spokespersons are made, not born" so it's something that everyone needs to work at. It's

not most people's favorite activity, to get up and speak in front of a group of people, but there are ways to do it and do it successfully—preparation is critical.

We've observed this so many times on television with politicians, that they have their talking points and no matter what the journalists ask them, they give back their talking points. That works to a degree but you can't just hide behind talking points all the time. You also have to be prepared to answer hard questions if asked, ones that you don't want to answer. That's why it's so important to work with your colleagues in the mission to make sure you have all the different possible questions and answers prepared and blessed by whomever needs to bless them before you use them. The clearance process can sometimes be a nightmare, and that is one of the frustrations that many press officers have faced trying to get headquarters to approve something when it's a fast-moving situation. Sometimes the ambassadors are the ones who say look, this is what we're going to say, and let the chips fall where they may. But often, if it's really a delicate situation, the ambassador's not going to want to go out on a limb. So sometimes the PAO or IO has got to get the press office in Washington to jump up and down on somebody's desk to get clear guidance.

Some of the other advice that we got from some of our speakers was that people like stories, and you want to humanize whatever information you're giving out. If you can tell a story that illustrates it and that uses something that people can relate to at their level, the story will stick more readily. It's that mantra of meeting people where they are; who's your audience? What is the best way to craft your statement so that it'll resonate with your audience? You don't want to talk down to people; you want to have a conversation with them, maybe you want to share an experience, or someone else's experience related to whatever the point is you're trying to make. Why is this good policy? Well, this is the story of so and so, and you relate the story that shows that by implementing this policy you protect this person, or you protect this industry, say, if it's an issue of intellectual property. In many places it was a big challenge, trying to get people to stop making knockoffs, for example. So, you break it down and make it relatable. How will this affect the average person, how would it benefit people? Well, if you have intellectual property rights protection, if you invent something in your country it will be protected. Another person won't be able to steal it and you'll be able to benefit. Maybe you can start a company, start a business, employ people, the country's economy improves. Those kinds of stories were relatable. Often the best way to do that was for the U.S. Government not to tell the story, but to have someone influential in the country give a testimonial as to how a certain protection would help them be successful in that country. So, find people in the country who benefitted from the policy or who would benefit from it if that policy were to be implemented. That's one of the times when in order to explain something, you go to your colleagues in the mission to see if they have examples that you can incorporate into what you're going to be talking about.

It was funny. In this training course for press officers, we even had sessions on how to dress, how to sit, how to comport yourself, your body language. All kinds of things like

that were part of the training program. Which colors to avoid and which colors work best on TV.

Q: Which colors should you avoid in public?

JOHNSON: Okay. If you're going to be on TV, the expert said dark solid colors equal authority. So, black, navy, or charcoal. Also, the dark colors would absorb the light in a studio. Avoid beige, brown, cream, or yellow. If a spokesperson is dark-skinned, you want to avoid white shirts because of the contrast, so you might get an off-white shirt so that the contrast isn't as stark or use a light blue or any light-colored shirt. Red is okay for a female spokesperson but beware of backgrounds and how it might clash. No herringbone patterns because it causes a shimmer. What the camera sees is important. Double-breasted suits do not do well at sit-down events.

Q: Ah.

JOHNSON: Two-button suits are best and keep it closed because it creates a nice V. And preferably a solid tie because a design can be distracting. Unless you're trying to communicate something with the design in your tie, which sometimes people do. For women, longer skirts as opposed to miniskirts. Cross your legs at the ankles. No blue jeans unless the situation warrants it. Also, he suggested we keep a camera-appropriate spare outfit in the office because you never know when you might be called.

Q: As part of this did you also give tv training, put them in front of a camera and get them to watch themselves?

JOHNSON: That was all part of it. As a consequence, we ended up designing a module like this in conjunction with our colleagues who did DCM training and ambassador training. The public diplomacy team collaborated with those offices to arrange media training for their students as well.

Let's see. What else did the media expert suggest? Ah, yes! He even talked about jewelry. Men can wear a watch and a wedding band but no gaudy ostentatious stuff, and women should avoid anything too trendy and distracting; even jewelry matters. He told us what a person should and shouldn't wear. Although it seems to me that Madeleine

Albright wore lots of gaudy pins and was famous for that, and it did not seem to detract from her messaging.

Q: She did, yes. They've had a great display of them down at the Smithsonian.

JOHNSON: Yes, yes, yes.

So, yes, there was on-camera training, too, as part of the IO course. And then, there were little things like pausing; that was deadly on radio but okay on TV.

Let's see. What else did the experts talk about? Do not answer hypothetical questions. Always let the journalist finish asking the question. Don't interrupt. And before an interview, do not drink coffee because it creates dry mouth. Drink water.

Q: Okay.

JOHNSON: Oh, goodness. So…

Q: Well, you've been talking about the course and sometimes you say courses; you had mentioned specifically the eight-week information officer course and basically everything you've been talking about deals with that, right?

JOHNSON: Right. That's what I worked on. Sometimes I got involved with the cultural affairs courses; sometimes I would sit in on those. I don't think I had much to do with the FSN or local employee courses. I know that there was some cross-pollination with the cultural affairs course. There was also an effort to design a course for more senior public diplomacy officers. It was called New Trends in Public Diplomacy. We did several iterations of it. As a matter of fact, I think that was one of my first rehired annuitant jobs, helping out with that course. Janet Miller was the division director at the time and she felt that there needed to be something for more senior officers that gave them a chance to focus on the latest communication innovations. I can't remember whether it was something that the undersecretary for public diplomacy and public affairs suggested or someone else. I can't remember now how that came about. The PD training unit had done one course and it had gotten mixed reviews. Using the feedback from that effort, we tried to design something slightly different. After we ran it and it got more positive feedback, indicating that it was going in the right direction. Then a new PD training division director came in and I guess he came in the summer of 2005 because I retired in 2005. Matthew Lussenhop took over. Yes, I think we ran the New Trends in Public Diplomacy in the summer of 2004 and then Janet Miller rotated out and Matt Lussenhop came in, and asked me to come back and do that through some contracting entity that they were using. That must have been in 2006.

Now I'm going to have to go back and look at my 2005 calendar or '06 calendar and figure out what all I was doing back then. But I'm just looking at a few other notes from my time at FSI. One of the things we did, in conjunction with the cultural affairs people turned into a handy tool. We sat down and tried to make a grid of all the different

communication tools and then all the different kinds of PD activities we normally conducted. Then we looked at what those activities would require in terms of media support. Across the top we had the different types of public diplomacy programs at a given post, and then down the side you had all the different tools at our disposal, whether it was press or cultural. I think it was a joint project. We were trying to come up with a little cheat sheet so that we could get people thinking about the array of resources they had and how those resources could support their program as a first step in coming up with a press plan, say, for a given event. That was one of the things that we did, and I don't know if they still use it. We designed it for use with some role-playing and hypothetical kinds of situations. We would give a scenario and ask, "What are you going to do in this situation?" "What would you do if you had to organize media coverage for a STAFFDEL visit?" Or "What would you do in support of an American cultural expert coming to the country?"

Then we would periodically, I think I already mentioned this, we would have experts come in and give their tips and advice on what had proved successful for them in their careers. But we also had some come in to talk about speech writing. One person who served on the Secretary of State's speech writing team said, " If you're going to write a speech for someone you have to get to know the voice of that person." If this person has written things, read what they've written, listen to some of their speeches if you can get them online or any way, shape or form you can access them. Then, you have to figure out how to tell stories, how to illustrate points. The rule for effective speeches was: Tell 'em: tell 'em what you're going to tell 'em; tell 'em, and then tell 'em what you told 'em. That's the basic format for the speech. Finally, the tone is important. You figure that out by knowing who's in the audience. If you need help in terms of making sure you've got the policy right then you go to the policy experts and make sure you get the substantive material the way it should be.

One of the things we did came about because at that time there was a lot of upheaval in the Middle East, resulting in discussions about religion and how religion was influencing political events. We started talking about whether or not officers knew enough about the religious landscape in the U.S. and our own history and how the founders viewed religion. We wondered if they would be able to speak about that, if asked. So, in one of our modules we ended up having some experts come in and talk about religion in society and American history. Periodically, something would happen where we would say well, maybe this is an issue that we could get a speaker to come in and engage with the officers. We thought there might be opportunities for them to speak about religion in the U.S. and it would be good for the officers to have an overview of the role that religion played in both the nation's founding and contemporary life. We've always talked about religious freedom but a little bit more substance could be added to that discussion.

When looking at our political system, I remember sitting in on a lecture on the Presbyterian Church and the Church of Scotland. It struck me that the church's structure was like our political system; that the DNA of our political system is in the Church of Scotland. The way it was divided up power with representation and its governance. It was fascinating because this person came in and was talking about the Church of Scotland,

the history of the Church of Scotland, and as he was talking I was thinking about the founding of this country and some of the ideas and relationships that ended up becoming the two houses and representation and the things that were prioritized and there was a parallel there. It's interesting to see how religion influenced our founding, yet and still there often isn't a discussion of that in any of our classes. I think people are afraid of saying anything having to do with religion because they think that since there's separation of church and state, we can't talk about religion. Well, we are not proselytizing; we're talking about the effect that different religious traditions have had on the society, and there's nothing wrong with talking about that because every society is influenced by different factors and religion is one of the factors that influences any society, even the lack thereof. One way or another it's there, it's out there.

Anyway. That's my story and I'm sticking to it.

Q: Well, it sounds like a perfect last assignment, enabling you to share the knowledge of all your years of experience there with the young people who were going out.

JOHNSON: Yes.

Q: Almost a good practice in itself. Maybe more people should have that kind of thing as their final assignment.

JOHNSON: A lot of people do, I think so, yes, you're right. It's a good thing. I think it's also not a bad thing for a mid-level officer to do too. After a certain number of years out there, they have something to share. Yet, they will still have more years out there to make substantive contributions. I learned so much from that assignment and I used it in my next life. Yes, it was a really wonderful assignment, and I think FSI could do much more. If there were an opportunity to partner with some of the universities in the area that were also doing some amazing things, everyone would benefit. George Washington University has lots going on and the Public Diplomacy Council does a lot of joint programs in their facilities. The PD Council also has a relationship with some of the professors there. When I was artist-in-residence at Wesley Theological Seminary, I was able to take a course at American University (AU) on the role of religion and society in conflict resolution, which was fascinating. I told the professor he needed to be teaching that course at FSI. It turns out he had been invited to give lectures at FSI. But the course I took was a five-day course where a whole semester's worth of work was condensed into five days, and it was amazing. That's something that would be doable, I think, at FSI. Actually, State should send people to just sit in on that course at AU. But anyway, that's a whole other conversation.

So, yes, there are lots of offerings in the local academic community. There's the cyber-security program over at the University of Maryland that, oddly enough, I got involved with wearing my artist hat. I was asked to be on a committee that did a fundraiser for the University of Maryland University College art program and cyber-security program. Yes, art and science. We did a silent auction of artwork to raise money for the programs. That was interesting, going to the event and listening to, I think it was Michael Hayden who

was the guest speaker, the keynote speaker. Yes, there are all these different programs all over town and there are a lot of officers who, during their Washington assignment, enroll in master's programs at some of the schools. But for those who can't do that, it seems like a shame that State can't bring more of those courses to FSI or give scholarships for officers to take some of those courses at the universities. The other thing that was interesting about sitting in that conflict resolution class was the student body. There were foreign nationals who worked at NGOs overseas and there were graduate students from American University. I was the only person who was actually working at or had experience working in the State Department or in the U.S. government. So, I had a different perspective and brought a different knowledge base to the class. I learned from them but I was also able to share some of my experiences with them. I think it's a shame that FSOs have not been in those classes over the years. It would be an opportunity to learn from others and share experiences and insights with the people in the class.

Anyway, at FSI there is the potential to do so much, if only there were more resources. It could be the State Department's test kitchen for all kinds of ideas and policy discussions and research into things that are specifically important to the State Department. It would also be a wonderful way to form some meaningful partnerships with academics that have an interest in specific policy areas. It doesn't mean they have to agree with a given policy, but they have a body of knowledge and expertise and a way of looking at things

that is different from ours and sometimes we could benefit from that and perhaps they could benefit from engaging with us.

Q: Yes. A lot of good suggestions. And just to put it in a geographical context, this was FSI at the current FSI campus?

JOHNSON: The current campus out in Arlington? Yes, I guess. My geography of Northern Virginia is not the greatest.

Q: Mine as well. Yes, I believe it is Arlington and _____.

JOHNSON: Yes, FSI is part of the National Foreign Affairs Training Center, yes.

Q: Okay.

JOHNSON: And it's grown because they were building a new extension when I was out there that's since been completed. I imagine they may be building more because they still have some room for growth on the property.

Q: Yes. In fact, I've heard they've grown so much that they're starting to move classes back to Roslyn again because they don't have room anymore.

JOHNSON: Yes. Yes. So, it seems like they need another building there and it needs to be a little bit taller.

Q: Sounds like it, yes.

Okay. So, that would bring us just about to retirement, which would have been when?

JOHNSON: 2005.

Q: Summer 2005?

JOHNSON: Let's see. Yes, the end of summer because I took the October/November Job Search Program. So, I probably finished up in September of 2005. Larry Bair was the head of all of the training divisions and had asked me to stay on for another year. But I felt like it was time to move on. I felt like it was time to end this chapter. I came back to the U.S. in 1998 and had not served overseas after the merger, so I felt like the value I could add to training was increasingly limited. The universe that the officers were going out to work in was going to be so different from what I had experienced. Granted, there were certain things that were universal that no matter who was running things or how we were structured these practices would hold true. But, there were new situations and new

challenges that I had never faced, so I could not be a credible guide in navigating those choppy waters.

Q: Like all the lessons you've just described.

JOHNSON: Yes, like the tips that we got from all of these experts. These were evergreen. But I felt like there were a lot of other things, navigating relationships with front offices in a different way from the way I had had to navigate. So, I thought it was just a good time to move on before I wore out my welcome and people would say well, she doesn't know what she's talking about; she hasn't served in seven, eight years or whatever the amount of time was. So it was time for a change.

Q: So, you got your engraved gold watch and-

JOHNSON: Yes. Yes, I got my 25 years of service certificate, presented by Kathy Peterson and Lawrence Bair, because Kathy Peterson was in charge of the entire FSI operation. That was also ironic because she and I were in the leadership training class in 1991. It was nice to circle back and have my last tour of duty working with her.

Q: That's great, yes.

JOHNSON: Yes.

Q: Okay.

JOHNSON: And so, I retired formally, my formal retirement date was November 30, 2005.

Q: Okay.

Okay. Well then, next time we'll spend a little bit of time on your retirement activities, especially the State Department ones.

JOHNSON: Yes. I always tell people I flipped the script because when I was in the Foreign Service I did my art part-time and the Foreign Service full-time; and after retirement my plan was to do the art full-time and the Foreign Service-related stuff part-

time. I don't know if it's worked out that way, but. I'm doing a lot more art than I did before.

Q: Well, that's good. And retirement goes on. You're not finished yet.

JOHNSON: There's still another chapter.

Q: Yes, okay. Well, thank you.

JOHNSON: You're welcome.

Q: Today is April 24, 2019, and this is Peter Eicher beginning another session of our continuing interview with Cynthia Johnson.

Cynthia, when we left off it was exciting times. You had just retired from the Foreign Service in about November of 2005, but that was not going to be entirely the end of your State Department career.

JOHNSON: No, it was not. Dara Dozier, the deputy director of public diplomacy training asked me to come back on a part-time basis and help with special projects. One of them was a course called New Trends in Public Diplomacy that had been conducted a few times, and I think part of the problem was there was not a lot of clarity as to the purpose or goal of the course. There was a feeling that there needed to be something for senior public diplomacy officers that would give them time to sit back and think and focus on what's new that could be useful. What was going on in the outside world? What was new in technology and communication and that kind of thing? What were the new trends and new things going on that they should be aware of? What should they focus on that might help in their practice of public diplomacy as leaders in both the profession and in the embassy, in their embassy work?

I think I had mentioned before that I had joined the Public Relations Society of America (PRSA) because I thought maybe that would be one avenue for getting insights into what communication specialists were doing on the outside. There might be some implications for public diplomacy. Well, not all of my colleagues favored that or felt that PRSA was something useful. For some reason there was a lot of resistance and pushback to engaging public relations professionals, and I still don't quite understand why.

Q: That is a little hard to understand. It makes it seem a little insular and foreign, which I guess can happen.

JOHNSON: Yes. And to me, I thought we have all these universities in Washington that have communications courses, so those are resources for figuring out who's doing interesting research and who might be able to come and do useful presentations on current trends. The Washington area probably has the largest concentration of public relations practitioners because of lobbyists and professional associations and all the different unions. Everyone under the sun is here trying to influence Congress and

government agencies. So, we've got a lot of public relations professionals. Plus, the military is very serious about public information, public relations and all of this, and they pay for their public information staff to take courses with the Public Relations Society of America and in other places, at the university level. The military has got very highly developed communications courses as well.

So, I was trying to plug into and communicate with and get a sense of what was available from some of our counterparts at DoD, in the academic community, and in the professional PR community. I had hoped to come up with what this course should look like. We basically came up with a three-day course. We got a sense that participants wanted to hear from inside the structure, they wanted to hear from the senior people within the State Department to find out what their expectations were for public diplomacy. They wanted to hear from PD leadership, you know, the undersecretary and the folks in that office, depending on who was sitting there at the time.

There was also a focus on planning and research and what's going on in the outside world in terms of what are the tools and what are the practices and what are the things that might be adaptable. Of course, technology was a huge thing—this was 2006—and there were already so many changes taking place in terms of technology and communication trends.

The other thing was what was the role of Congress, because they fund us, and if they don't give us money to do what we need to do, it's not going to work too well. We thought that hearing from some of the staffers who focus on public diplomacy was also important. There were a couple people who were identified, and they were more than willing to come and do a panel. Think tanks also influenced policy so getting some feedback from that part of the communications spectrum also mattered.

Finally, on the last day there was discussion of the challenges that folks felt they were facing out in the field. Things that they were trying to get done but could not because they were limited by the bottlenecks in the system, or other frustrations they faced. There were also recommendations that they wanted to send up the food chain to let senior decision makers know some of their thoughts or possible solutions. We tried to compile all of that to send forward to the undersecretary for public diplomacy and public affairs

so that he or she would get a sense of the thinking of the senior public diplomacy professionals.

Q: And this was all in preparation for the course or this was part of the course?

JOHNSON: This was basically the course.

Q: This was the course. Okay.

JOHNSON: This was what we ended up doing. It ended up that the two or three times that I ran the course it was a variation on that outline.

Then the deputy director wanted me to work on an online course, to design an online Introduction to Public Diplomacy course.

Q: Well, hang on. Can I stop you a minute before we move on to the next course? Let me ask you first about this one. You retired and they brought you back as-

JOHNSON: I returned as a contractor through one of the staffing companies. I ended up being placed on the When Actually Employed rolls, and did the New Trends course, I think, on the When Actually Employed program. But when they wanted me to work on the online course, that was going to require more time and I think that's when they switched me to a contract because it was for a specific period of time and…

Q: Did you actually get any time off or did you retire and effectively continue working?

JOHNSON: I think I took some time off, but not much. Since the New Trends course was in summer of 2006, I had to work on it in the spring. So, maybe I took the winter off and, in the spring, started working on that. I think it was during the winter that I did the paperwork to become a When Actually Employed employee. Since my anniversary date is February, I think I took basically December and January off and just did the paperwork at the end of January- no, beginning of February, because my anniversary date is the end of February.

Q: Okay. Sorry I interrupted you.

JOHNSON: No, no, no, that's okay. At some point I stopped again and then came back to do this online course. And I was working with a person who was a specialist in course design, so I was a subject matter expert and this person was the person who helped design or craft the sequence and how things were organized. I worked on it for a period of time then there was a change in leadership. The director left for a new assignment and then the

deputy director, Ms. Dozier, took a job elsewhere. Once settled into the job, the new deputy director decided not to do this course. So, I said okay, fine.

Q: It had been an online course so that people at embassies-

JOHNSON: What they were trying to come up with was an online course that mirrored a course that was offered in the classroom. It was a general introduction to public diplomacy to help people who were not public diplomacy officers understand what public diplomacy could and could not do; how it's organized and what non-public diplomacy officers can do in terms of working with public diplomacy officers to achieve their goals. They wanted to do an online version of an introductory in-class course.

I'm not sure how long I worked on that project. Maybe, I think that was a 2007 project. But after several months they decided they didn't want to do it that way. So, I ended up not doing anything more with FSI. I think that was around the time I told them that I had been away from the field for too long. I came back to the U.S. in 1998 when USIA was still an agency, and I had not worked overseas under the reorganization of public diplomacy within State. So, I felt there were certain things that I could speak on, but that increasingly there were lots of things that I would not have a clue about because I had not worked in the same kinds of conditions. I said maybe this is a good time for us to have an amicable parting of the ways and I'll just move on and do something else. That was around the time that I started serving on a board of a local youth newspaper, ***Young DC***.

Q: Oh, right here in the DC area?

JOHNSON: Yes. It no longer exists because, as you know, these things change, and technology changed. The way things were done changed and there were other opportunities for young people to do journalism online as opposed to in print, so it closed down. But for a while, I did that.

Q: Yes. It's another non-State Department example of how you can use things you've done in your career.

JOHNSON: Well, that was just it. How I ended up getting into it was when I went out looking for someone to speak on youth outreach and other things. I met some of the staff and board members from ***Young DC***, and they said oh, maybe you could help us with this, that and the other. They had this wonderful event called Cartoons and Cocktails, where editorial cartoonists from all over the country donated cells or the sketches or the cartoons themselves and they were auctioned off, some silent auction, some live auction, and the funds were used for two organizations, for ***Young DC*** and also for the Cartoonists

Rights Network. The Network went to the aid of cartoonists who were being persecuted around the world or who were at risk.

Q: Wow, it's amazing what's going on that you don't know about until-

JOHNSON: Yes. And of course, this was very interesting because in my time as a press officer in Panama there were a number of cartoonists who were jailed because of the anti-Noriega cartoons they drew. So, again, my Foreign Service experiences made this a logical organization to be involved with and to use some of my talents to help with the organization of and the actual conduct of the event. It used to be in the National Press Building in that big room. It was fun because I got to meet different journalists who came to do the live auction. I remember one year, Hari Sreenivasan from "The PBS NewsHour" was one of the auctioneers, and Derek McGinty was an auctioneer; you know, individuals who were well-known in the DC journalism world. That was a lot of fun!

The other thing that was interesting during this time was I was doing exhibitions and working with different local artists groups, helping them with press releases and helping them target appropriate media outlets to publicize the exhibitions and things like that. I ended up using lots of different tricks of the trade learned in my public diplomacy career in my new career as an artist and as a board member of ***Young DC***.

Q: Well say, you might be able to do it anyway, so sorry if I'm interrupting, but I think it would be worth saying a few words about taking up your career as an artist since we talked about that in your various posts throughout the Foreign Service.

JOHNSON: Oh, okay. Yes, when I first retired several people suggested, and I can't remember who gave me this advice, but they said go visit some practicing artists and do some informational interviews. Maybe it was in the Job Search Program where they said go talk to people who are doing what you want to do and then ask them for advice. Which I did, and I visited artists' studios and they gave me lots of very practical advice. People like Tim Hinton who does fabulous portraits was very generous with his time. Everyone was forthcoming, providing lots of helpful advice. I even took some courses. There was one gallery owner, Catriona Fraser, who offered a daylong course on how to get into the art scene in Washington. She and Lenny Campello held forth on the pros and the cons, and outlined all the different things we had to do, things like taking pictures of our artwork. No, do not do it yourself! Have it scanned professionally so that it really shows well. You absolutely have to have a website. I think this was pre-Facebook and Instagram days. Maybe some of those things were already out there, at least I think Facebook or maybe it was My Space, whatever. They talked about all the different ways to show work to let people know you were a serious artist. So, yes, I did my homework in terms of trying to figure out what was within the realm of possibility. I even took some Small Business Administration classes on how to set up a business. I talked to one person at the SCORE, which is a retired executives' organization that gives advice to people who want to start a business. The gentleman I spoke to said, "Well, you've got to have a business plan. It's like trying to go to Seattle without a map. Won't get there if you don't

have a good map. You've got to have a business plan." So, I went online trying to find business plans for artists and couldn't find a thing. I talked to different artists and they just looked at me like, business plan? Really? No. But I did find some books on art marketing for artists, and of course, chapter one, verse one says spend as much time marketing your artwork as producing it, which I didn't want to hear.

Q: That's why there are so many starving artists.

JOHNSON: Exactly, exactly. But I got in touch with a friend, Rosemary Crockett, whose niece was very much into websites and communications. Gaea Honeycutt became my web master and gave me advice. She taught me how to update my website and still helps me out, but she doesn't have to do as much now. She's the one who said yes, you have to have a Facebook page—you can have your personal Facebook and you should have your art business Facebook page. Another artist named Karlisima showed me how to set up my Instagram account a few years ago and I'm feeling like maybe that's easier to manage than all this other stuff. So, yes, it was an interesting journey and I'm still on it, still doing the art.

But there were other things. In Foreign Service there's such a big push to analyze and understand elections and politics and this, that and the other. So, at one point I even trained and worked as one of these election officials that checks people in and helps out with elections. In Maryland they call us election judges for some reason. That was 2008 I did that. Actually, I did that, I think, through 2010 or maybe…I can't remember the last election that I helped out with. Maybe it was the presidential election in 2012. At any rate, it was a fascinating experience, because I had been an election observer overseas in El Salvador, for example. It was really interesting being on the other side and actually having to jump through all these hoops to make sure we got everything ready, did it all right, people's votes counted, and were noted correctly.

In 2008, as I'm in the midst of doing that, I had stopped working at FSI and I was just doing art, I got a phone call from a friend. She said that the Meridian International Center wanted to put together a modest election program and wanted to do some joint programs here in Washington but connecting with an overseas post, like Mexico. The vice-president in charge of such matters wanted to know if I could help with that. So, I ended up working with Meridian International. Up until then my involvement with them was related to their role running certain International Visitor Leadership Program visits. We would always have consultations with them on what we wanted out visitors to see when they came to the States. Meridian did the programs in consultation with the Bureau of Education and Cultural Affairs staff. That was an interesting experience. Again, being on the other side, involved with the program agency as opposed to being in the Department and working with the program agency was a different kind of relationship. That was a fascinating project. We ended up making connections and doing video-link conversations

with a Mexican university class about the 2008 election, the candidates and the issues being debated.

Q: The U.S. elections?

JOHNSON: Yes, the U.S. elections.

But what was the most interesting thing about that job was that I shared an office with a young student named Ahmad who was from Afghanistan. He was attending Beloit College but he had a summer internship with an organization that worked in conjunction with Meridian International. They were doing a special project for Afghan nationals. I can't remember whether they were in journalism or the foreign ministry. I think it was for foreign ministry officials. At any rate, I shared an office with him and got to know him and hear about his experiences. He had come over to the U.S. as a high school student, in an exchange program, and then he had gone back to Afghanistan and then applied and came back to go to college. Of course, with the war and all the upheaval at home his family said maybe it's not such a good idea to return home. And he eventually was able to get asylum and stay in the U.S. He went on to get a master's degree, and I think he's working now back and forth between the U.S. and the Middle East region, so I haven't seen him in a while. That was an interesting aspect of that particular job, because that wasn't a part of the world with which I was very familiar. Sharing an office with him, I got to hear about what life was like back home and learn a little more about Afghan culture. Little did I know I'd end up learning even more later on down the road, but that was a nice introduction.

Q: Yes.

JOHNSON: That was also the same year that, once again, my public diplomacy experience ended up getting me yet another job.

Q: And the same year, we're talking about 2008?

JOHNSON: 2008.

Q: Right.

JOHNSON: It was a crazy year because things fell in my lap because of the networks we all have. One of my friends, Susan Crais Hovanec, had been contracted to run a course but she became ill and couldn't do it. She asked me to do it. And I was like well, what is it? It was for an organization that ran internship programs, but they also offered courses, and this course was on media in the U.S. A journalist had run it before, but she had moved on because I think she got a faculty position somewhere else, and so she couldn't do it anymore. Then, Susan, a retired Foreign Service officer, gave me the name of the

director and I interviewed, saying yes, I'll help you out, I'll do this. It was quite an experience.

It ended up being a group of Swedish women, young women. Some had just finished high school and some had finished college so it was a mix of age groups. They were all coming on this program to learn about the U.S. and do an internship with some type of media or public relations outlet. I was able to get in touch with the journalist who had run the program before and she gave me some resources and tips and then I got the book, had to read it and figure out how to organize the course. What I decided to do, because of the things that the book covered, I thought well, we have all of these entities here in Washington, so rather than me trying to describe them, I should just make some appointments, and do field trips and classroom activities. It was a learning experience for me as well as for them.

We started out with an appointment with the press officer at the Swedish embassy, because it made the most sense for him to give his take on the media environment here in the U.S.

Q: A good idea, yes.

JOHNSON: And then from there, we just went to lots of different places. We went to the D.C. public access television stations. I knew some folks at NPR, so we did a visit to NPR and had a wonderful conversation with the ombudsman, Lisa Shepherd, and one of the journalists there who does culture as well as politics, Felix Contreras. I had a friend who did media law—her business was working with journalists and small publications on legal issues, First Amendment law and that kind of thing. She did a session.

Q: Maybe the State Department?

JOHNSON: I'm trying to remember. Yes. We went to the Foreign Press Center.

Q: Was this a one-week course?

JOHNSON: No, no, no, no. This was a semester course.

Q: Oh, a full semester. Oh, my goodness.

JOHNSON: And we had to do a mid-term and a final exam.

Q: Oh, this is real work.

JOHNSON: For the amount of money that was paid, I decided this is a noble profession, but I am not going to do this again. But it was fascinating, it really was. I can't remember all the different places we went, but it was like one week where we would go out, and then sometimes we would have discussions in class about the material in the book. There was an NPR program called On The Media that they listened to and each week somebody

had to do a summary and give their opinion on the material covered in it, which was also interesting because of its U.S. perspective. It was interesting hearing them talk about how things worked in Sweden and what the practices were and the differences in the laws as well. For example, I remember them saying you cannot publish the image or the name of a person who's been arrested because maybe they're arrested but they haven't been convicted, and so they have a right to privacy. Revealing the identity of an arrested person is not standard operating procedure in Sweden. I don't think that's a bad thing.

Again, the public diplomacy experience came in very handy teaching that course, and my FSI experience was handy in organizing and running it. The highlight was that we had a party at my house on the eve of Barack Obama's inauguration because it coincided with the class wanting to have a little party before they started their spring internships. It just so happened that that inauguration day eve ended up being the perfect day to do it after their return from winter break. I also had friends and relatives from out of town that had also come in for the inauguration, so it was really a lot of fun. And interesting. Some of the interns went to the inauguration, but I said no, I would watch it from the comfort of my home because it was going to be too cold out there.

Q: It was cold out there. But it was worth going out.

JOHNSON: My brother-in-law, Alan Johnson, and my late sister-in-law, Nikki McGlathery, went, because he's a federal judge. They had tickets to sit in a place where they would be comfortable, and they thoroughly enjoyed it. But I feel sorry for all those people who got stuck in the 3rd Street Tunnel. Not fun!

Q: Well, from here we could just walk.

JOHNSON: Yes. Yes. That was 2008. Then, with the change of administration, let's see, things changed. My husband Steve had a political appointment, so of course, when there was a change of administration he was out. All of a sudden, hmm, no job! So, serendipitously, again, I got a phone call from a friend, Merrie Blocker, asking if I would mind coming back to work. The office was really in need of some help, so off I went back to work.

Q: And this was the beginning of 2009?

JOHNSON: This was the 2009 timeframe. It wasn't the very beginning, but it was the early part of 2009. Maybe it was the spring. The job was in the Bureau of South and Central Asian Affairs (SCA).

Q: Oh, back to the department.

JOHNSON: Yes. The office did not have a cultural coordinator. The way they had the office organized was with a carve-out for Afghanistan and Pakistan. Even though they were in that region those countries formed a separate entity in SCA, but the PD staff sat in the same suite. Merrie handled their cultural programs. Everything else in South and

Central Asia that wasn't Afghanistan and Pakistan, that's what I was to be working on as cultural coordinator, helping with the programs and the budgets and priorities, etcetera.

Q: So, that's like everything from India to Turkmenistan and so forth?

JOHNSON: Yes. Yes.

Q: Okay. And this wasn't another WAE or contract?

JOHNSON: This was a contract because they needed more hours than would be possible with a WAE. So, I went back to work on a contract. And I learned about a totally new region that I'd never worked in before. It was very complex, made up of multiple cultural traditions. Fascinating. And very labor intensive because, of course, we had India, which is huge, and has one set of priorities and goals. Then there was Central Asia and each country with slightly different traditions and issues, so the possibilities for programming could differ from one place to the next. Of course, India isn't monolithic; there are regional differences. Then there was Sri Lanka and we've got-

Q: Bangladesh and Nepal. Yes, a lot of people there.

JOHNSON: So, yes, we had all kinds of stuff going on. Just trying to figure out how to balance things and meet all the requirements and reach out to the posts, find out what they want, what they need was a job in and of itself. And trying to stay informed, both at the bureau level and also as to what the Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs was doing and planning, and what the International Information Programs office was planning and doing, coordinating with the International Visitor Leadership Program and with the Fulbright program. There were all kinds of grants and applications that needed to be read and evaluated and prioritized.

Q: But familiar territory, it sounds like.

JOHNSON: Oh, yes. Familiar territory. And it quickly began to feel like I had never retired, because while I only worked four days a week, it was non-stop. There was also an inspection that occurred in the bureau at that time and all that that implies. At the same time, I had an artist residency; I had applied for another artist residency elsewhere, and-

Q: Is that at another place like a university or something?

JOHNSON: The first artist in residency I had was at a senior center that had a special program for seniors.

Q: How nice.

JOHNSON: It was at Iona Senior Services in Washington, DC, and it was fascinating, because of what they offered. Iona had tons of space and the art program director, Patricia DeBroof, wanted me to bring all the art I had and hang it up on their walls. She

said that they wanted visitors to see art when they came into the building. Iona also had an art program for some of the folks who were there in the dementia care program. This was not a residential program; people would come for classes or other activities. They had yoga classes for seniors, they had art classes for seniors; they had all kinds of activities people would come in for. Part of what I did was to teach some art classes there, have the exhibit, and then do a workshop at a partner organization, one of the synagogues in town. Iona also organized an art activity at that synagogue for the seniors in their congregation.

Q: Was that the first time you'd actually taught art?

JOHNSON: I had done a few workshops before, but yes. I wasn't just doing it on my own. Patricia, the director of the art program, was a specialist in how to craft and do these programs. She was also involved in each event. Iona also had a staff art therapist who was at some of the in-house classes. Patricia wanted to have outside people come in to bring something different and so, again, it was interesting to learn new things. I got some ideas on activities that could be organized in the future. So, I was juggling that residency plus the day job. Those were intermittent activities, so they didn't really interfere with the day job.

Then, someone from Wesley Theological Seminary saw my art at Iona and was impressed. That got back to me. Patricia said that since Wesley had an artist-in-residency program, I should apply for it because the guy who ran it liked my art. I applied and actually was awarded the artist residency for the year 2011, so I guess it would have been September 2010 to May 2011, or maybe, no. 2011-2012. Well, whatever it was, the first part of the artist in residency I was working at State Department in SCA, and then the second half of the residency, by that time it had gotten to the point where I was like no, I can't do this, it's just too much. And they had assigned someone to the position, so it made sense for me to move on.

Q: To the position at State?

JOHNSON: Yes, the cultural coordinator position was going to be filled by an active-duty FSO. And then, of course, two weeks before I was to leave, the assignment was broken but I didn't stay because it was just too much. There were so many things going on in that office and the undersecretary for public diplomacy and public affairs' office. It was at this point, I believe, when leadership began to rethink American spaces in libraries because the Chinese, having observed how popular American libraries had been overseas, became more active in establishing their own public diplomacy programs. They were starting up libraries and cultural centers and doing things like that all over. I believe there was some concern about balance, you know, being present, because we had pulled back so much that we were not really engaging the public in the same way. I remember being very frustrated in Uruguay when they made us move our librarians out of the binational center into the embassy building to become like a reference-only library, leaving the open stacks library for the binational center to manage as it saw fit. I was concerned because I felt that engaging young people was an important part of what we did and one way we

did that was through library activities. So, what if they came in just to get out of the heat in the summer or the cold in the winter? They came in and they read books and magazines, or they watched videos and became familiar with our culture and with our language and practices and point of view and politics; what's wrong with that? But we had closed so many of the libraries! Then, during this time in 2010, an effort was made to partner with university libraries, or whatever institution made sense, to have American Corners. Part of the job of the cultural coordinator was to work with the posts to find out which places could actually do something along these lines. There was a lot of communication back and forth…

Q: Well, and that's close to your heart, too.

JOHNSON: Yes.

Q: So, it must have been nice to be trying to reestablish something which had been cut down a lot.

JOHNSON: It was nice, but it was also frustrating because we were only going to have a corner. And yes, there were lots of efforts to use social media, use digital resources and find ways to be present and to have a footprint. But I felt that it wasn't just about having some books on a shelf; it's about having a way to build relationships with people.

The other important activities that we worked a lot on during that time were some of the exchange programs for young people in the former Soviet republics. Some of the newer youth exchange programs that had been created came about because the powers that be realized that yes, we do need to talk to young people and we can't just talk to the decision makers; we've got to reach down and engage up-and-coming leaders, the next generation of leaders. We spent a lot of time working on all these different youth programs and helping the posts, supporting the posts, representing the posts. My job was to represent the posts and their needs, so I had to find out what they needed and what their priorities were, sometimes by reading some of their reports, but also by asking pointed questions and getting feedback.

Another part of the job was sitting in on debriefs with some of the American students who went on State Department-sponsored overseas programs. This was also a time where the U.S. Government had a program for young people to learn hard languages and go overseas to study hard languages, such as Arabic. There's a list of what they call national security priority languages, and some of them were in the SCA region, like Hindi. There were young people who were studying these languages or maybe they were children of immigrants who spoke those languages and therefore they had a facility for them. They were studying one of these languages and wanted to go on one of these exchange programs. When they would come back, sometimes there were debriefing sessions where they could talk about what their experiences had been overseas. I remember sitting in on a couple of the debriefings of the young people who had gone to India on these exchange programs, and some of them had really positive experiences. Others had difficulty. I remember there was one young lady, an African-American teenager. She said that she

had to deal with some discriminatory behavior in India because that was a reality of India. And so when we get that kind of feedback, we have to factor that into the planning process. "How do you prepare the next group going over? If there are any African-American students in the group, what are the things that they're going to need to look out for or be prepared for? And that includes any of the other problems that might have come up for any of the other students during the meeting. That was always a part of the debriefing process.

Periodically, we also would have participants who were in the Iowa Writers Program come through. That was always fascinating because, again, we had authors from different parts of the world who have had the luxury of going to Iowa and spending time there doing workshops and classes or teaching or writing, writing and sharing their culture with others. It's an international group so all of the different geographic bureau cultural coordinators would be invited to hear from the participants. There were Pakistanis and there were Afghans as well as Indians and folks from far flung corners of the world, writers from New Zealand and different countries in Africa, including South Africa. All of them had interesting experiences. One thing was particularly creative. At one point there was a partnership formed where some of the writers worked with choreographers, and they developed a spoken word and dance presentation. We got to go to one of the rehearsals at Strathmore Music Center in Maryland to see how this was all coming together. It was an exciting and innovative undertaking. So, yes this was very special.

Another thing we tried to do was figure out how to knit some of our disparate offices together to support cultural programs. For example, there is the office that manages all the embassy buildings. It manages the Art in Embassies program. But we also have the Bureau of Education and Cultural Programs that does cultural exchanges and sends artists out on cultural programs as well. So one of the things I was trying to do and others in the department were also trying to do was figure out how to better coordinate cultural exchanges, taking advantage of some of the artists whose artwork was already a part of the Art in Embassies program overseas. We thought it made sense to develop some kind of joint cultural exchange program. I can't remember if we were ever successful in getting anything done, but I know we did try to get those two entities to do more in tandem. The State Department didn't used to buy a lot of art, but now when new embassies are built, that has become a part of the program. State will actually purchase art for the new embassy buildings. Again, it would have been interesting to try to coordinate some exchanges with someone who already had their work hanging in an embassy so that the person could go out and do workshops and have some kind of meaningful and practical two-way cultural exchange.

We also worked with the Kennedy Center. The Kennedy Center has arts management programs and all kinds of activities. Some of our international visitors would attend those sessions. I remember going over there with a group and hearing presentations on arts management. I guess it was the graduation or completion ceremony, the final session, and

they were talking about what the participants had done and what they had learned from being part of that particular exchange or training program.

Working in the Bureau of South Central Asian Affairs, I actually got to learn about all kinds of programs that either hadn't existed when I was overseas or they had not been made available to the posts where I had served abroad. I enjoyed that aspect of working in that office. But there were other frustrations. On the education side, the assistant secretary decided to hire a person to work on education programs. Trying to coordinate and figure out what this person was going to do and how that fit with what we did was not always clear. One of the initiatives, which I thought was fabulous, was trying to connect community colleges here in the U.S. with some of the institutions of higher learning in India. India did not have an equivalent to our community colleges. But there were educational institutions there that were interested in how community colleges functioned in the U.S. Their leaders wanted to see what could be adapted and perhaps what partnerships and exchanges might be developed. One of the institutions that they selected was Montgomery College, and it just so happened that I had taken some continuing education art classes at Montgomery College. The college has several campuses and one of their campuses is in Germantown, Maryland, an area where there are a lot of tech and biotech businesses. Those businesses partner with the college so that they can inform the college of their needs, making sure the courses are relevant. Some of the employees of the businesses teach at the college. And that's basically what the Indian institutions wanted to do; find a way to organize things so that they worked with their local industry in a way that ensured that the courses that were offered actually trained people in what was needed and the companies wouldn't have to retrain people all over again. In the situation in India, when the students were hired, businesses found that they hadn't gotten the skills they really needed in the vocational training programs.

Those were the kinds of education initiatives that she was working on, and our office, to the extent that we could be supportive and helpful, put her in touch with other academic exchange offices within State Department. I felt like that was probably the best way to ensure that we would not work at cross purposes, but that we would actually support what she was brought in to do. I think she had some other projects but I do not recall all that she was working on.

The assistant secretary also brought in a fellow to work on connecting business communities, focusing on entrepreneurship and that kind of thing. He was trying to take advantage of the local or rather the domestic U.S. South Asian business community that already had ties and interests and connections in South Asia. The bureau wanted to capitalize on those relationships to share best practices and promote mutually beneficial relationships, business or entrepreneurial relationships. He ended up sitting in the public diplomacy office. So, again, I felt like it would be important for me to let him know about any of the programs we had organized or had in the works that focused on entrepreneurship and related matters. It was important for him to have a sense of what

kinds of exchange programs and other types of resources we were trying to make available to the posts overseas to support small business creation and that kind of activity.

Oh my goodness, there were so many things! It was really intense.

Q: Well, like having another assignment to a busy office.

JOHNSON: Yes.

Q: In fact, not like it, was it?

JOHNSON: Yes. It was! And then, there was a constantly changing cast of characters, people coming and going.

Q: Was this for most of the year or-?

JOHNSON: This must have been for a year and change. I ran out of my calendars in 2012, so I think January 2012 is when I think I stopped. I would have started sometime in 2009.

Q: Well, that's almost three years, right?

JOHNSON: I'm trying to think if that's right.

Q: Okay.

JOHNSON: Yes, I guess it was.

Q: So, it was a full Foreign Service assignment then. My goodness. No wonder there was so much going on.

JOHNSON: I was exhausted by the end of my time there. We had been in one office at the outset, and then we had to move to another office. There were all kinds of things that went on.

Q: Well, after a gap of several years from the State Department, I guess it hadn't been that many years, but you'd been at FSI and Board of Examiners and such for your last few years; did you find much difference in the way the department operated from your previous similar job?

JOHNSON: You mean when I went back to SCA?

Q: Yes.

JOHNSON: Yes, yes. There were lots of different ways of doing things. And it was a unique bureau because of AFPAK, as it was called, the Afghanistan/Pakistan Office that

Richard Holbrooke ran at the time when I started. We coordinated with them, but they operated in another universe with lots of money to do good programs. We in SCA were left to our own devices, trying to do the best we could with the resources we had at our disposal. By then, how should I say it? The transition period of USIA being merged into State had taken place so long ago by then, yet there was still this feeling of things being unsettled. There had been so much turmoil in the undersecretary's office. First we had Evelyn Lieberman, then Charlotte Beers, and when she left Margaret Tutwiler took over. She was…

Q: She was back?

JOHNSON: Yes, she was brought in as undersecretary, as I recall. And then there was Karen Hughes, James Glassman, and eventually Judith McHale of Discovery Communications. It just felt like there was always instability in that office. The political appointees did not stay long enough to really get things settled, and each person came in with new ideas and different ideas and reorganized everything. There was all this uncertainty all the time. That also contributed to a feeling of things being unsettled because we were never quite sure from one leader to the next what programs would survive or where the focus was going to be. That's one of my lasting memories of my time doing all these different part-time jobs and going in and out of the department. There was always a feeling of not being quite sure where things stood from one moment to the next.

Q: So, that would have taken you up to 2012, did you say?

JOHNSON: 2012. And I spent almost one year out of the department not doing anything in the department because I wanted to make a go of some of the ideas I had with the art, and I felt like working there was just too much.

Q: Well, you were retired, after all.

JOHNSON: Yes, yes.

Q: Or you thought you were.

JOHNSON: I thought I was. By then my husband had found another job and was working full time. I think both boys were in college by then. We were doing okay financially, but there's always something that comes up with kids in college. At one point I felt like I needed to find something that paid a little extra so I would have made money for when I got that inevitable distress call. One of my colleagues, Patricia Norman, said, "You should do FOIA." I had known a lot of people who had gone to work in the Freedom of Information Act unit of the State Department, but I had never thought of doing it because I had said to myself, "Oh, my goodness, that probably is boring; I don't want to do that." But she said, "No, no, no. It's probably one of the more interesting jobs you can do at

State, and it's probably one of the more satisfying jobs because you get a case, you take care of it, you close it and you're done and you don't take any work home."

Q: Nice.

JOHNSON: It sounded interesting. So I asked her who do I talk to. She gave me Keith Marsh's name and I did all the paperwork. I had to get recommendations from two Deputy Assistant Secretaries from the two bureaus where I had worked. I went through all the rigmarole, got all of the recommendations and handed in all the paperwork, and then silence, as is usually the case. Now, when I first joined the Foreign Service it was two years before I actually got sworn in from the day I had applied, so I figured okay, it's going to be one of those things. I think I had put in the paperwork at the beginning of 2013 and all of a sudden, I get a call to come in for training in May of 2013. I wasn't quite sure what that meant, but I went, and I was trying to figure out…

Q: I mean, did that mean you were hired? Was that clear?

JOHNSON: That's what I was trying to figure out. I went to this training to find out what does this mean, and how does this work? They said they had some openings and they needed more reviewing officers, and then they said well, we have-

Q: Reviewing officers in the sense that you're reviewing documents or people?

JOHNSON: Yes. Okay, reviewing documents. So this is what a reviewing officer does: there are seven exemptions in the Freedom of Information Act with sub-parts within those seven, but basically seven exemptions. For example, the (B)(6) exemption in the Act is information that is excised or redacted because it would be an undue invasion of personal privacy. Then there are exemptions for law enforcement, there are exemptions for national security, and there are exemptions for matters relating to visa adjudication. What a reviewing officer has to do is upon getting a case, look at the documents then look to see, first of all, what the person actually requested. Then also check to see if all the documents are actually relevant to the request, because sometimes there are documents and when we look at the request, it turns out that the documents have nothing to do with what this person is requesting; why did they pull this? So, we get rid of all the non-relevant material. Then we look at the documents to see if there is anything that should be protected by one of the exemptions. So, that's what we do. And when we have gone through all the documents—a case could have five pieces of paper or 5,000 pieces of paper—we go through all of them and when we finish with the reviewing process, we draft a letter that would go to the person. I am an initial reviewer. Then there's a senior reviewer who is a person who's much more experienced and well versed in the art of reviewing. It's always good to have another set of eyes.

Q: Of course.

JOHNSON: The senior reviewer will go over it and if there are any fixes and changes that need to be made, that is done. Sometimes I'll do a redaction and the reviewer will

challenge it. As an initial reviewer I have latitude and discretion, but the senior reviewer could say we're supposed to release as much as possible or ask what's the justification for this and why'd you do that? So, we have a conversation and if I can demonstrate why it should stay, it stays, and if it's one of these borderline things then a lot of times the decision is made to just release it if it's not really going to do damage. In a nutshell, that's the process.

Q: But now, is this-

JOHNSON: At least from the point of the view of the initial reviewer, that's my universe.

Q: Right. But is it all cases that people have requested? Isn't there a part of the office that also just tries to declassify everything as time goes along?

JOHNSON: There are different parts of the Office of Information Program Service (IPS). There's the Office of the Historian, those are the people who publish the different volumes of Foreign Relations of the United States (FRUS). There are the declassifying

people. There are people who review manuscripts to see if there is any classified information in said manuscript. There are all these different offices and I am in-

Q: And you were in _____ office, if you want to call it that.

JOHNSON: I'm in the FOIA office.

Q: Okay. So, that's the FOIA office.

JOHNSON: And then, there's also the Privacy Office of the Department of State. I mean, there are all these different pieces.

Q: Okay. I guess I thought of most of them as a FOIA office, but I guess no.

JOHNSON: There's FOIA and then there is all the other offices and teams.

Q: So, FOIA is the specific request people make.

JOHNSON: FOIA is the specific group of people who deal with the thousands of requests coming into the Department of State every year.

Q: I can imagine this must be just an enormous job. How many people are working on that kind of thing? It must be-

JOHNSON: Not enough.

Q: Not enough, okay.

JOHNSON: Not enough. Probably in any government agency it's not going to be a priority because there are so many other fish to fry and there are limited resources. But unfortunately-

Q: And does that mean retirees such as yourself?

JOHNSON: Sorry?

Q: Is it mainly retirees such as yourself?

JOHNSON: Up until now State Department has used retirees as reviewing officers, but I think the backlog is so horrible that the director of the IPS program, the Information Program Services chief, he wants to figure out a way to bring in contract employees; they could be retirees on contract or could be people with FOIA experience in other government agencies or private companies. Other government agencies use Civil Service

professionals to do reviews. He wants to do the same thing. I don't know if he'll get the budget to do it, because that's always the challenge when trying to make changes.

Q: Yes, and a little more complicated at State than a lot of agencies since there's so much foreign government stuff as well, huh?

JOHNSON: Right. So, I'm not sure what the future holds. I know I'm going to call it a day in February of 2020.

Q: Well, let me ask you the most important question about FOIAs; did you find Hillary's email?

JOHNSON: Oh, boy, did we find anything else?! That was an adventure. But let me…

Q: You were actually involved in that?

JOHNSON: Yes. Let me go back to the beginning, though, if I may.

Q: Okay. A good place to start.

JOHNSON: When I started in May of 2013, I was assigned to a unit called MPD, Management and Public Diplomacy.

Q: Well, that's a good place for you.

JOHNSON: So, I assumed I would be working on mainly management and public diplomacy cases. But as it turns out, that was basically the unit that worked on everything that didn't go to all the other offices because we ended up with a lot of consular type of material. A lot of people writing in saying they had lost the paperwork for the application for their immigrant visa and needed to reconstitute their file and could you please send us our papers. We did a lot of coordinating with the Bureau of Consular Affairs to try to help people find their papers. We would get lots of letters like this from lawyers, and sometimes they failed to put in the third-party authorization, because we cannot release information on a person to a third party without that person's authorization. We often would have to go back and call the lawyer and say please submit this form or we would email them the form and say please submit this. Sometimes they would, sometimes they wouldn't, and if they didn't, we'd have to close the case without sending out the material because we can't send it to the lawyer without a third-party authorization. We could send it to the individual if the individual made the request and wanted it sent to them. That was the easiest thing to do. But if it was going to a lawyer then that made it more complicated. So, we had tons of those types of cases.

And then, there were also cases of people who wrote in because they wanted all the documents that the State Department had on a missing loved one when the loved one who had gone overseas and went missing. Those are very sad cases. We would get requests to find out if a notable person had been a speaker or had done a program for the U.S.

Government. Sometimes the requester wanted the reports on what this person had done. And then, of course, there were people who were competing for contracts and wanted to get the documentation associated with a contract that had been awarded to a program agency to do a particular activity. Complicated because by law, we had to let the program agency know that Freedom of Information Act requests had been submitted for X, Y and Z, and we had to let them have an opportunity to go through the documentation and decide what was proprietary information that couldn't be released. A lot of times these requests weren't straightforward; they were complicated. Sometimes we got requests that didn't make a lot of sense and we had to call the person to find out what exactly it was they wanted. That should be done at the beginning, but sometimes it ends up on your desk with a bunch of documents and we end up trying to figure out what is needed.

Early on I got the sense that there was some reorganization or reinvention that might be helpful to make things work more smoothly in the FOIA universe. And some of the other senior managers figured that out. But it was a challenge because we just didn't have the resources that were needed to make the necessary changes. But I hear they're going to be doing some upgrading and getting new software and things like that that should make life a lot easier.

Q: Well, on a day-to-day basis, you would arrive at your desk and there would be a new case or the request letter in a stack of documents?

JOHNSON: No. No. I would arrive at my desk and go upstairs or go across the way to the main office for MPD. There were so many of us we all couldn't fit in one office, so we were split on two floors. In the main office there were file cabinets filled with folders containing documents, and some documents needed relevancy check, meaning that you need to check to see if these documents actually were responsive to the request. And then, other cabinet drawers with cases that were ready to be reviewed and hopefully closed.

Speaking of the relevancy, for example, there was one case I want to tell you about. Okay. A request comes in and the people who receive it must decide if it's something that belongs to State and should go forward. So they do that. And they send it to a case analyst in our office if it's a case that our office would handle. The case analyst looks at the request and decides which bureaus in the department should be tasked to search, and the case analyst does that oftentimes in conjunction with one of the reviewing officers, because sometimes the case analyst may be new and new to the department, and therefore will need to work with someone who has experience in the department and understands basically where all the bodies might be buried, as it were. So, then you send out the search tasks and you ask the different offices to search for material that would be responsive. When it comes in, the material that comes in from the different offices is organized into segments. So, for example, the missing person case, you would task the overseas embassy, you would task the Bureau of Consular Affairs, and you would task the geographic bureau that the overseas embassy is attached to. There might be a couple other entities in the department that might have information. Each one of those boxes of papers that come in associated with that case is a segment, and if there are a lot then, the

analyst will break the material up into multiple segments. In one particular case we got boxes from the posts, boxes from the bureau and boxes from consular affairs. My job was to go through all of these boxes, because there were so many emails and cables, and eliminate the duplicates because, of course, these days, when we send emails, we cc the world.

Q: Yes, of course.

JOHNSON: So, each office was sending back material, but there were a lot of duplicates in there. I remember, one of these very complicated cases where I spent weeks going through these boxes and trying to determine where there were unique email chains and where there were duplicates. Ah. I did that for several cases.

Q: Wow. Wow.

JOHNSON: And mind you, I'm working part-time, three days a week. And that was the other thing; the reviewers, the maximum we can work is 20 hours a week or the equivalent of, I think, six months out of the year. So, think about how many reviewers you're going to have to have to cover the year. Some people liked to work the full six months full-time and then go off and then come back after six months. Some spread it out over the entire year.

Q: And you spread it out over the entire year?

JOHNSON: Yes, I spread it out over an entire year and didn't work more than 20 hours. I rarely worked a 20-hour week; I usually worked fewer hours so that it was spread out over the year because I had my art activities and other things that I was working on. I didn't want to be there long hours.

Q: Now, tell me; you work on one of these big cases and you narrow it down from several boxes to one box or one big file folder and then what? You send all of that-?

JOHNSON: This was called the relevancy check, to check for responsiveness but also to check for duplicates, because then it all has to get scanned into a system because we are going to do our redactions electronically. Back in the day they used to do the redactions by hand!

Q: Yes, so you're not taking a magic marker anymore?

JOHNSON: No.

Q: Okay.

JOHNSON: It's all done electronically. Now what they are trying to do is to eliminate all paper and have everything electronic, but sometimes this is difficult because of the long email chains. Sometimes it is easier to print it out, lay it out, and look at all of the

different pieces because it's so hard scrolling up and down and back and forth. It is our hope and prayer that a new software system will make it a little easier to identify duplicates in email chains, memos, and cables and things like that.

Q: That would save a lot of work.

JOHNSON: But then you have the other thing, for example, press guidance. You end up with a god-awful stack of drafts that are going back and forth and back and forth and-

Q: Do people actually ask for drafts of press guidance?

JOHNSON: When they ask for any and all documents related to something, the drafts pop up. Now, there is an exemption for incomplete work and draft items, but sometimes the senior reviewer says, "Eh, yes, but there's nothing sensitive or hyper-sensitive here, so just release it." But other times there are sensitive things in the drafts that were internal discussions and are legitimately not releasable, so those determinations have to be made based on the content. When we have all these drafts going back and forth, it's not

automatic that because it's a draft it's going to be exempted, but it could be, so we still have to look and decide.

Q: And sometimes you would end up sending a whole box or more of things off to whomever the request there was?

JOHNSON: Oh, yes. Yes, yes.

Q: Do they pay for this?

JOHNSON: Sometimes. Because if we delay and it takes more than X number of days, then the requester only pays for certain things, not everything or nothing at all. It's complicated.

Q: Is it all relatively current stuff or is it things that come from the National Archives that are being requested? I mean-

JOHNSON: Well, if things have gone over to the National Archives then they have to request them from the National Archives. We don't pull them from the archives.

Q: And it would be up to the archives to declassify them if-?

JOHNSON: Apparently there's a process. There used to be State people at the National Archives out in suburban Maryland. I don't know how they manage-

Q: It's in College Park, out there.

JOHNSON: Yes, College Park. I don't know how they do it nowadays because I hear that they don't have reviewers out in College Park anymore, so I honestly couldn't tell you what happens, whether…

Q: You know, you must- somebody gets requests for the Iran hostage thing or the Noriega or whatever it may be.

JOHNSON: Yes. I don't think those have gone to the Archives. They're probably still sitting in a warehouse in Newington because I remember there were some things that we thought were in the Archives and they were not; they were still sitting in the department over there.

Q: Oh, okay.

JOHNSON: Yes. So, to be perfectly honest, there is so much that I don't understand and don't know about all the vagaries of when things go out and then when the things go out what happens. It's such a huge undertaking. With the advent of social media, email and now tweets, now all that material is a public record. If it's work-related, you know, all the Blackberry stuff, on official government devices, that can be requested. If an employee is

doing official government business on an official government social media platform, it can be released.

Q: Oh, my goodness.

JOHNSON: That's another reason why I think that 2020 is a good year to retire because I don't even want to begin to have to figure out how to redact somebody's tweets.

Q: Although some of them could do with some redacting.

JOHNSON: We won't even go there. Ugh.

Yes, so in 2013, for the most part that first year was just trying to understand this universe and here it is six years later and there are still things that befuddle me. It's basically on the job training; you do things, you get corrected and little by little you pick up how things are done. There's no training manual but there is a manual of operations and there are all kinds of instructions, and if you can figure out how to follow them and find them, they're helpful.

Okay. So, that's 2013, 2014. I can't remember when all of the drama began. I guess it was 2015- when did Hillary Clinton write her book? Was it 2014?

Q: I do not know.

JOHNSON: I can't remember either, but at some point, we got a request for how State Department determined what could be released or how her book was reviewed; not FOIA reviewed but reviewed by the people who do the review of manuscripts for classified information. Someone sent in a Freedom on Information Act request for that material. Somehow, I ended up working on that. Basically, what the requester wanted was the email exchanges that discussed content and the email exchanges with her and with her staff as the book was being reviewed. That was interesting. It was a long process, some of which we ended up sitting down with the lawyer to be clear on what could and could not be released—what was and was not exempt in the whole process. I got to read some of her manuscript before and compare it to what was eventually published. It was interesting. So, we had that, and we thought okay. We're done!

And then the emails and the server scandal exploded. Not only were there Hillary emails that had to be reviewed, but also Huma Abedin and all these other people who worked with then-Secretary Clinton. Everything else had to be dropped to deal with these thousands of documents. I don't know where to begin other than to say that it was a nightmare. It was truly a nightmare because there's so much material. And then the other challenge was figuring out how to coordinate and how to identify duplicates. Can you imagine? Anyway, I was only on the periphery of that, fortunately; I was not one of the main initial reviewers of that material. I just ended up having a few odds and ends to deal with and was able to consult with the folks who were by then expert in what the dos and

don'ts were and what could be and could not be released. It was an interesting time, shall we say.

Q: I guess it was. It sounds like overall it's rather an interesting office to work in, contrary to your initial expectations.

JOHNSON: Yes, exactly. Because I had gone in with trepidation and after a while it was like if I were a writer, boy, you cannot make up some of the fixes Americans get themselves into overseas. And you cannot make up some of the crazy stuff that people ask for.

One of the things that concerns me about this whole FOIA law and process, I think it is a really good thing to have transparency, but I don't think it takes into account how complicated the process is and how difficult sometimes it is to identify and gather up all the material. The act only gives you 20 days, 20 business days to do this, and after that, on day 21 the requestor can sue, and often they do. It's just crazy. I think the law needs to be updated to take into account the proliferation of material that has to be gathered up and examined. Twenty days is just not realistic. Maybe it's fine for an agency that does not do a lot in various places, but for an agency like the State Department that has how many embassies overseas, embassies and consulates overseas? It has hundreds of places to search sometimes. Then, you get these requests that want any and all? When you have to call them up and try to narrow the scope, sometimes they will and other times they won't. If you don't give them what they want in 20 days they sue? It's not that the department doesn't want to give people things; I think a lot of times it's just that it's so hard to collect it all up and get it pushed through the bureaucracy quickly. And when you contact an office and say we need everything you've got on X, Y and Z; they've got other priorities. They may have some senior official breathing down their neck for other things, so searching for old documents is not going to be high on their list. There's been a push to try to get more offices to dedicate more time and resources to fulfilling these requests so that we don't have to pay out so much for litigation. But it's difficult because these offices are constantly juggling a variety of priorities and there's a finite pool of money and people to do the job. I really feel sorry for the people who have to try to figure out how to deal with a backlog of 10,000 or 13,000 cases.

Q: Wow.

JOHNSON: And State gets about 20,000 requests a year or some crazy amount like that. I don't know what the statistics are; I've given up on trying to keep track of it.

Q: My goodness. Were you getting requests, I suppose also from "New York Times" and other-?

JOHNSON: Oh, we regularly get requests from journalists and we regularly get requests from think tanks and from academics and from political action committees and from organizations, non-governmental organizations that feel it is their responsibility to unearth everything they can about whatever the government is doing. There are lots of

folks with legitimate reasons for wanting things, and then there are people who, I think, are serial abusers of the law who just want any and all information about everything and I just wonder what are they going to do with all of this.

Q: Just going fishing.

JOHNSON: Yes, fishing expeditions.

Q: Yes. Do you get Foreign Service people wanting to get the cables they wrote and so forth?

JOHNSON: You know, the people, the staff members who write in usually want their personnel records for one reason or another. Maybe they retired or they left the service and all of a sudden, they realize they need something that they don't have and then they write in for it. Sometimes it ends up being a privacy case and then other times it's a FOIA case. But I don't recall people writing in and asking for any cables or things like that. Academics will write in asking for specific types of documents that they need for their research, and on more than one occasion I have had the sad duty of calling someone up when I've found the case that has languished for years in the files, asking them, "Are you still working on this?" The answer was usually, "Oh, no, I finished my master's; no, I don't need that anymore," or "I finished my PhD, no, I don't need that anymore."

Q: One way to close a case, I suppose.

JOHNSON: At one point there was this big push to look at all the oldest cases and try and figure out what was going on with them. Sometimes, using my library skills, I would see this was a journalist who asked for X, Y, and Z; I would go online to see if this journalist actually wrote an article already or broadcast something, and so if I saw that this had already been covered ad nauseam in the media, I would still call up the person. I would say, "I just found this file, do you still need this information?" The answer was usually no, I don't need this. So, we were able to close out a bunch of cases that had languished because the people had gotten what they needed elsewhere, they'd done their story and that was the end of it. But it was unfortunate that it took so long for us to get back to them. I mean, in some cases it was years after they had made the request.

Q: And it's kind of embarrassing to have to be the one to make the call, yes.

JOHNSON: Yes. But you know, we do what we have to do. I remember calling one person and although it was a local phone number, she was actually halfway around the world. It was her cell phone for international calls and she no longer even worked for that news outlet connected to the request. She didn't need the material and it was just as well because it would have been 10,000 documents; the bureau had come back to me and said

really? So, I said let me check. And so they did not have to crank out all those documents.

But a lot of times, in trying to check some of these older cases, I would get a case file and look at it and say I don't recognize this document that they're asking for; it doesn't sound familiar because not all visa cases or not all visas are issued by State Department. There are some visas like work-related visas that go through the Department of Labor. I happened to find one of these old files where this person had asked for all of the records associated with a certain type of visa. So, I Google searched the visa form number and found out that it was a Department of Labor matter. We sent the letter back to the person. I don't even know if he still needed or wanted the material, but I said this was not a record that is in State Department, he would have to contact the Department of Labor. Oftentimes we would come across those kinds of situations where the person is asking for something that's not a State record, it's another agency's so we write back to tell them. But to me, those are things that should have been caught in intake; the case should not have been opened because it wasn't our record. They used to have people who evaluated requests like that in the intake office, but then someone decided it needed to be reorganized and that the evaluation function wasn't necessary. Now they have gone back to that practice, thank God!

And I do believe that now the Department of Justice has some language on how to deal with people who write in with any-and-all requests. They can't do that; they need to be more specific, and I think there were some rulings that gave agencies the authority to say that the requester has to narrow the scope, that this request is too broad. There are efforts being made to make it easier to be responsive in a positive way and not send us out to collect 17,000 documents on something. But it's a work in progress.

So, that is adventures in FOIA. It's fascinating, a lot of food for thought. And it even inspired a painting.

Q: Oh, how nice.

JOHNSON: I did a painting of a woman with stacks and stacks of papers and folders around her, and she said words to the effect that there are no FOIA exemptions for stupid, crazy or embarrassing, so think before you hit send.

Q: Do you have that hanging in your office?

JOHNSON: Yes. Several people had asked for copies and I've made color copies for them to hang in their offices.

Q: Speaking of your office, where is the office?

JOHNSON: Well, right now it is in the building called SA-2, State Annex 2, on Virginia Avenue, on 22nd Street at the corner of Virginia Avenue. It's across the street from the main State Department building. But we're supposed to be moving, and I'm not quite

sure where we're moving to, but I think the owner is taking the building back or maybe George Washington University bought it since they're buying everything in the neighborhood.

Q: Buying all of Foggy Bottom.

JOHNSON: Yes. We're supposed to be moving. And as I mentioned, I think in February of 2020 I will have 40 years of federal service and I think that's enough, so I think it's really time to move on and do something else in my dotage.

Q: Not quite. In the many happy years that remain.

JOHNSON: Yes, that remain. I already have some plans; I'll continue on with my artwork. But one of my other duties that I haven't mentioned is for the past two-and-a-half years I've served as an elder in my church and one of the committees I'm on, is the mission committee. We have some partnerships with non-governmental and community organizations and with a local public school, and I think I'd like to do more helping out with those institutions. So, that's what I think I will be devoting my time to going forward. One is a girls' school in Anacostia, and one is an organization that runs a book club and writing workshop for incarcerated youth.

Q: Wow.

JOHNSON: Part of what they do with the book club is have a re-entry program that helps them either continue on with their education or find jobs. I think at this point in my life, helping with that would be a better use of my time, since I feel like we're all called to help repair the world in some way, shape or form. Now that I've done 40 years of helping repair the world through the State Department I think I want to help repair the world in my community.

Q: There's many ways to do it; you have a lot of repairing that needs to be done.

JOHNSON: Never ending.

Q: Yes. But that was a fascinating career, a fascinating 40 years; took us around a lot of the world. I appreciate your sharing it with us and we will get you the transcribed copy.

JOHNSON: Okay. And I'll hopefully fill in some blanks if there are any blanks to be filled in.

Q: Okay. We can do that. And we will call this the end of the interview with Cynthia Johnson.

End of interview