

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

MOISES MENDOZA

*Interviewed by: Mark Tauber
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INTERVIEW

Q: Today is November 5, 2024. This recording with Moises Mendoza is part of ADST's project on constructive dissent. Moises, where were you born and raised?

MENDOZA: I was born in Los Angeles, and I was actually raised in Portland, Oregon.

Q: Your entire youth from elementary school through high school and so on was in Portland.

MENDOZA: Yeah, in the suburbs, Washington County.

Q: Did you go to public school, private school, what was your early education experience like?

MENDOZA: Sure. I went to public school through seventh grade, and then I got in a little bit of trouble in seventh grade, so my mom put me in like a religious school, and so then I went to like a religious school through high school.

Q: Looking back on that time, did you work? Did you learn anything about employee-management relations?

MENDOZA: Well, what I remember is I was always a little bit of, like an outside the box kind of thinker, especially in high school and in this I went to, like a pretty rigid religious like institution, and so in German, there's this word *Querdenker* which means "outside the box thinker." I always kind of challenged and pushed back, and that got me into a little bit of trouble sometimes. And that's where I learned that it can be really hard to change complex organizations and complex ways of thinking even if you're right. That was a good education, a good insight to get early on.

Q: Without going into any sensitive issues, is there a particular example or experience you recall that was really salient at that time?

MENDOZA: I mean, one that was personal to me. I'm gay. And the school that I went to was really opposed to that, right? Now, I didn't come out when I was in high school, because it was just really scary. But they just kept pointing to justifications that didn't make sense to me for why being gay wasn't acceptable, why that was against the religion or whatever. That was a powerful experience. It was very traumatizing because it was very personal. But that's a place where I pushed back, and I think I made some good points. People understood what I was going through. I didn't really change the system. But I did have an experience of what it meant to push back and be heard.

Q: Also during this early time, did you have an opportunity to hone your public speaking skills in debate, etc.?

MENDOZA: Yes. I was in Model UN. My first year in Model UN I must have been a sophomore. My team represented the DPRK, North Korea. The next year, we represented Iran. I was very excited to represent both of those countries, because we could really push back and think outside the box. Of course, representing Iran was very controversial in my school, because I went to a Christian school, and people didn't like that so much. In any case, my teacher let us do it and that was a really great experience. It forced me to think differently and carefully marshal my arguments. I didn't personally support a lot of the arguments, but that turned out to be a valuable skill in the Foreign Service where you have to advance policies that you don't necessarily agree with.

Q: Sure. Now as you're approaching the end of high school, are you talking to your parents and teachers about college?

MENDOZA: I was a very ambitious kid. Many of the graduates from my high school went to secular universities like the University of Oregon, Oregon State, as well as Christian universities. But I wanted to get as far away as I could and get into the best possible school. So I applied to Harvard and Princeton. They all rejected me. I applied to Georgetown because I was interested in maybe being a Foreign Service Officer. They rejected me too.

Finally, I got a scholarship to go abroad to Germany, and that was a very formative experience. It was a program called the Congress Bundestag Youth Exchange. I spent a year at a German high school just learning German and having fun. It was also a hard year. I had a few issues with my first host family, and I ended up having to move to a second host family, which worked out OK. Also, since I was starting to learn German from scratch. It was a little traumatizing. But, looking back, it taught me something about working with people from a different culture with different opinions, and again, learning to express myself effectively. The experience was also good in that I applied a second time to Georgetown and got in.

Q: Is it the School of Foreign Service? And when do you arrive?

MENDOZA: Yes, SFS in 2003.

Q: When you arrived, college now is a brand new experience coming from, I guess, a relatively small private school. Are there important adaptations you make there that also were helpful to you as you went along?

MENDOZA: Yes. Georgetown was, of course, a little intimidating. I had never been in a school with so many different types of people and different points of view. But I think the most formative experience that I had there was I got really involved in the student newspaper, *The Hoya*. By the first semester of my senior year, I became editor-in-chief. I loved journalism because that was another opportunity to seek the truth, seek solutions, and gain information to marshal in presenting news. It was very exciting for me because it was my job to find things that were right or wrong, and expose them to the student body. For example, there was a small deli on campus called Vital Vittles. They ran a little network including a cafe and other student-run stores. And so I went to the Department of Health to see if there were any food service violations. I found that there had been. I pulled all the public records and I exposed this in *The Hoya*. And of course, people were mad at me, but it was an empowering experience. And Georgetown was cool because you were allowed to think differently, to think outside the box, to question everything. That was what I loved about that college.

Q: Now, this experience with the newspaper certainly was helpful in understanding how you began to get the skills to eventually write or take part in a constructive dissent. But were there any other particular things that took place while you were in college, perhaps a part-time job or anything else where, in a hierarchy, you began to question processes.

MENDOZA: I had a few student jobs. I worked in academic departments. But, to be honest, my whole life was the student newspaper for like two or three years. I ended up being like a columnist too, which was another sort of opportunity to question. One of my favorite beats was crime reporter. I kind of appointed myself in this role. I would go to the DC Police Department, and try to convince them to give me police reports and stuff when they really weren't supposed to. And sometimes they would, sometimes I found someone who would share some of that information. And so that was another kind of experience, dealing with a bureaucracy, negotiating with that, with that bureaucracy. That was also very helpful for later on.

Q: As you're approaching the end of college, what are you thinking about next? Graduate school or taking a year off and going back overseas and so on?

MENDOZA: Right out of college, I went to work for the Hearst Corporation, which owns a network of newspapers. I was in a program in which I started in San Antonio at the *Express News* as a reporter, and then I moved to Seattle to work for the *Seattle Post Intelligencer*, which no longer exists. It's now online only, and it's a shell of what it used to be. Ultimately, I worked at the *Houston Chronicle*, which hired me in a full-time position.

Q: What was your beat at the Chronicle?

MENDOZA: I was kind of a general list. When you're starting out, you do a lot of cops and courts. So that was a lot of what I did. I covered religion for a little while, I just covered a little bit of everything. At the Chronicle, I think I must have joined the Chronicle. It was from 2009 to the end of 2010.

Q: All of this background, and as you mentioned, even working with the police and courts, it also requires you to do a fair amount of research, marshaling facts and then organizing them, distilling them in a way that a reader would want to see. I imagine that was also helpful for you, both in the Foreign Service and then in constructing your dissent?

MENDOZA: Absolutely, it was helpful. I think one thing that I experienced, though, as a reporter is it was the first time since being in high school that there were a lot of people who got mad at me. Also at Georgetown, when I was pushing people for information, they would sometimes get upset. But for me, it was all part of my intellectual development process. When I was a reporter, I would get a lot of hate, and that comes with the territory, right? I would write something bad about the police or whatever, and then get so many angry emails. Whatever I wrote about, it was always controversial. I remember once someone sent me an email that was just a picture of a vulture. That was the whole email. And sure, it hurt a little bit, I mean, sometimes when you're pushing, even if you're doing the right thing, you're trying to do the right thing, you will get negative reactions. And that comes with the territory. That is one thing that I really learned as a cub journalist starting out.

Q: During this time or also in college, were there people who gave you advice or mentored you and began to give you some pointers on how to manage this whole thing? Reporting and handling negative reactions.

MENDOZA: Oh, yes, there were tons. At Georgetown, our advisor for the newspaper was a guy named Eric Wee who was a great *Washington Post* journalist. He was actually a Pulitzer Prize finalist. His mantra, his ethic was: Do the right thing. Sometimes people aren't going to like you. Sometimes you're going to get pushed back, but do the right thing and pick your battles. Every story isn't worth pursuing. Some are more important than others. Be professional. Pick your battles, be ethical 100 percent of the time, and then no one will have anything on you. And so I really took that advice.

Q: In all these experiences, were you also able to ingratiate yourself with stakeholders or with key players, champions inside, who were able to help you without jeopardizing their own situations? That is sometimes important in gaining support for a constructive dissent.

MENDOZA: When I was a journalist, I worked for really good organizations where they let me be free and push the envelope and find the stories that mattered and didn't really hold me back with very limited exceptions. But of course, I had to develop sources. And I think that's what kind of what you're talking about there. I had to talk to sources, convince them that it was in their interest to give me the information I needed to do my

job. And sometimes I was good at that, sometimes I wasn't. But I really followed the admonition to care about ethics. I wanted to tell the real stories and tell the truth. People have different views of journalists who are committed to this. I think that, back when I was a reporter, people might have been uncomfortable with the stories I wrote, but they weren't as distrustful as they are today.

Q: During this period as a journalist, were you sure it was going to be your career, or are you thinking of other paths as well?

MENDOZA: I always knew I wanted to do something international. Georgetown moved me towards journalism, and I had such a great experience at the student newspaper, but I wanted to do something international. And so in 2010 I got a Fulbright fellowship for young journalists in Germany. which obviously made sense, because I had been there before, and I tried to be a freelancer. I tried to make it as a freelancer in Germany. And I realized that it wasn't going well. I knew I could be a good journalist, but I wasn't going to be a great journalist. Also, the industry was changing a lot. It was really hard to sell things as a freelancer. And so I started to look for other possibilities that would scratch that international relations itch. And so I did, like a series of fellowships. I worked in the German parliament. I worked for the European Commission. I went and I improved my Spanish in Guatemala. And that's when I applied for the Foreign Service. I got in through the Rangel fellowship in 2014.

Q: Take just one moment to explain what Rangel Fellowships are.

MENDOZA: Sure. It is an agreement between Howard University and the State Department that allows recipients to go to grad school for a couple of years. The State Department pays for everything, and then you're guaranteed a job as a Foreign Service Officer. There's the Rangel Fellows and the Pickering Fellows. They are pretty alike in that both seek to attract diverse applicants.

Q: Did your time as a Rangel Fellow add to your abilities in framing and advancing constructive dissent?

MENDOZA: I had learned as a journalist to be pretty aggressive in my questioning of people because it could lead to really good stories. As a Rangel fellow, your summer program brings in diplomats and other experts to help you understand the nuts and bolts of diplomacy. During that time, I was still in the journalist mode. I loved asking questions of all of our speakers and catching them in kind of gotcha moments because that's what I was used to doing and it had been successful for me. I don't think that rubbed everyone the right way. And so I learned that in diplomacy, there were other skills I had to develop in order to be successful. The next year, I went to the Columbia University School of International and Public Affairs. I was one year at Columbia and then one year at a school in Germany called the Hertie School. I got a dual master's degree. At Columbia and at Hertie, I again had to navigate big bureaucracies to figure out how to get things done like putting on public events. This was very helpful in preparing me for the State Department.

Q: If I understand correctly, you learned how to question and gain information without making people feel like you were an adversary.

MENDOZA: Absolutely, and that was extremely vital. I'm not perfect. I've got that journalist in me, and that's good skill in the Foreign Service as long as you use it with care. Alienating people, whether in the Department or in a foreign government seldom gets you to the finish line. This insight helped me advance my constructive dissent once I identified what I wanted to change.

Q: Moving on, when you entered the Foreign Service, did you choose a specialization?

MENDOZA: Yes, I entered as a political officer, but my first tour was as a consular officer in Matamoros, Mexico, right on the border.

I'll start with the entry-level training. I loved it because it felt like being in college again. We had great instructors who even brought in constructive dissent winners from previous years. And I remember thinking, wow, that's cool. That's the kind of officer I want to be. Then I started reading the stories of constructive dissent award winners in the *Foreign Service Journal*. I found one, her name is Amelia Shaw, to ask her how she brought forward her constructive dissent. That got me excited. I mean, I never thought that I would win the award, but I felt prepared in case I found a reason to submit a recommendation for change.

Q: Amelia Shaw worked in Consular Affairs and her constructive dissent took quite a while to work its way through the bureaucracy. Did you contact her for advice?

MENDOZA: Yes, Amelia made it very clear when I communicated with her that I would need patience and persistence. But, in our training, we were advised that if you see something that doesn't make sense, push back because we have to have people who are courageous enough to push and I think that's what they want. But the reality is not always that simple. Sometimes it does take a lot of effort. We also learned this in our training. You can't just change things, all of a sudden. And part of that is by design, I think, because we don't want these rapid or random changes in our foreign policy. So there's a pretty extensive clearance process for everything. There has to be considered thought as well. And I learned that too.

Q: And one other consideration about dissent, did they also explain to you the use of the State Department Dissent Channel, and what did you think of that?

MENDOZA: They did explain it. They made clear that it was to be used only within the Department via a classified channel. It would first go to the Office of Policy Planning and then, according to the procedure, to the Secretary of State. I thought that was cool. I don't think there's any other organization in the government that has it.

Q: After your first consular tour in Matamoros, where do you go next?

MENDOZA: After Matamoros, I went to Haiti, I went to Port au Prince.

Q: And was that a full two-year tour, did you have to curtail due to natural disasters or other dangers?

MENDOZA: I was actually there only six months because I ended up getting sick, and so I had to come back to the States a lot earlier than I was planning. I became a desk officer in the Department covering Panama, Belize and Guatemala. From there I went to the Operation center, and then I ended up at the U.S. mission to the UN which is where I am now.

Q: Alright, now let's go back to your constructive dissent. When and how did it happen?

MENDOZA: Sure. It began in my first tour in Matamoros. One of the first things I realized in Matamoros is that it was a very tough post. Nevertheless, I wanted to go there for a variety of reasons. I wanted to join the Foreign Service in part, to go to challenging places that I wouldn't otherwise have a chance to see. Also, I wanted to improve my Spanish language skills. Finally, given the high caseload of consular services, I was happy to hone those skills as well.

As I said, it was challenging. First, unlike most posts, we had a medical unit, but no staff, and the available medical system outside the consulate was reputed to be of low quality. In the med unit, there were basic medical kits, but no one knew how to use them. That was really concerning to me. I actually did know a little bit about medical stuff from my mom who is a nurse.

My biggest concern was that someone was going to have a heart attack, and no one knew how to do CPR. No one knew how to use the automated external defibrillators, etc. I went to my supervisor, and she suggested that I bring it up with the management officer. They understood the problem, and the next step was to address it with the embassy in Mexico City because their med unit is responsible for supervising ours. So, next I broached with the Regional Medical Officer (RMO) who is supposed to visit us periodically to address medical issues of the staff. He agreed that I was raising an important issue. But months and months went by and nothing got addressed. What more could I do?

Q: At this point, besides the RMO, are you talking to anyone else who might be allies for your effort to get primary care at the med unit?

MENDOZA: Not yet in terms of State Department personnel. I did talk with my mentors in the Rangel program to see if they thought I should pursue this and how I should move forward. They were supportive, but didn't have any expertise to offer.

Q: Were you able to request training in using CPR equipment and maybe some other basic medical equipment?

MENDOZA: Yes, I brought that up with the management officer at my consulate and with the RMO in Mexico City. Although they agreed it would be a good thing, they made no effort to request it. I was becoming impatient because I worried that if there was an immediate medical emergency we had nothing in the consulate to address it.

Q: Okay, so you got some fire in your belly. What did you do next?

MENDOZA: I went back to my supervisor and the management officer and they said, OK, go ahead and send a request to the Medical Office in the Department and see what they might be able to provide. But, I got the distinct impression that they agreed because they did not think I was going to do it.

The first step was to look for a training program. I found an EMT program across the border in Brownsville at a junior college. I signed up for the night classes. Then I found a hospital that trained me in CPR. Six months later I had all these skills, and I had a certificate to train everybody in the consulate. So, I went back to my supervisor and management office and explained that I had done all this training. I asked if they would let me go ahead and do training. Their reaction was that they had allowed me to do it but didn't expect I'd follow through. They said that this wasn't really my lane and that they'd have to discuss it.

I waited a few weeks, and they finally came back and said that they had liability concerns. They said I would have to leave this training to the medical office in Mexico City. I replied that I did receive a license from the U.S. hospital and that I did have liability insurance. I didn't get a positive reply. They said that I was doing well as a consular officer and I should stay in my lane.

Q: All right, you're in this bureaucracy. Your own management is not helpful and you're not getting any reply from Mexico City. What do you do next?

MENDOZA: I believed this was a good idea. I felt so strongly about it that, since I had the training, I couldn't live with myself if something went wrong and someone died at posts because no one could provide emergency assistance. I later found out that my boss went to the med unit in Mexico City and told them to simply ignore me. Then my boss told me that I was not allowed to talk to anyone else about this idea. "You're not allowed to talk to the medical unit about this idea. This is over."

So, of course, I was very upset, and very worried for my colleagues. More than anything, I did not think that this was right. My next step was to start acquiring allies. I obeyed my boss and did not talk directly to the Mexico City med unit. But I did have another opportunity.

There are several consulates in Mexico. The one in Ciudad Juarez also has a supportive relationship with my consulate in Matamoros. If we have an absence in the visa section, Ciudad Juarez will usually loan us a back up officer for a while to fill in. So, to maintain that relationship, I was selected to spend a month in Ciudad Juarez to acquaint myself

with the consular section there – get to know how a larger consulate works. So, I talked to my consular boss over there. I told her that I have this great idea. I'm licensed to do basic lifesaving with CPR, etc. I want to teach people at Ciudad Juarez, and they let me! So I went a step further and asked if Ciudad Juarez, a larger and more influential post, would be willing to promote the idea with the Embassy medical office, which could green light the training in the rest of the consulates in Mexico.

I had built a network of allies with greater influence, and they took on the task of convincing decision makers up the chain. It didn't happen quickly, but eventually the consular supervisors in Ciudad Juarez convinced the Mexico City RMO and he convinced the State Department Medical Office.

Q: Now, I do have one question. Did you have to overcome State Department regulations on this kind of activity since you weren't recognized as a medical specialist?

MENDOZA: It turned out that there weren't any regulations against this. There was, I think, the typical bureaucratic churn wherever someone suggests an idea out of his lane and out-of-the-box. The Med Office had concerns about liability. But as they looked into it, they became more confident since I had a license from an American hospital. And the legal office checked on the good samaritan laws, and they were satisfied that we would not be liable to suits when the lifesaving action was clearly needed on an emergency basis.

Q: Did you ever lose hope that you could pursue this constructive dissent?

MENDOZA: No, I never questioned whether I wanted to do it. I knew right from the start that I would face opposition. And you'll remember that I had long ago received advice that, if you're going to push a new process, you had to choose your battles carefully and get your ducks in a row to show that you had thought out downstream effects and could show how you would address them.

Q: You succeeded in getting approval to conduct lifesaving training with the equipment you had in Matamoros. Once this was accomplished, did you push your luck and try to get a regular nurse or nurse practitioner to staff the Matamoros medical unit?

MENDOZA: Well, remember that the Matamoros assignment was only two years. And during that time it was all I could do to just get the training approved. Had I stayed longer, I might have moved onto that next step, but it would have been considerably harder because that would mean creating a new position – even if only part-time – and that is a much higher hill to climb.

I had hoped that once a giant consular network like the one we have in Mexico adopted the training, that it would spread to smaller posts around the world, but that didn't happen. I did try to convince the State Department medical office to offer the possibility to other embassies, especially those that are remote and have few visits from RMOs, but I

once again faced bureaucratic inertia. Sometimes that happens with constructive dissent. It catches fire, but sometimes it fizzles out.

Q: Your efforts to spread the official training beyond Mexico actually did have some success. In my own experience, as part of evacuation planning during a natural disaster or armed conflict, some of the embassy officers or spouses are trained to deliver lifesaving tools like CPR, wound treatment, administration of epinephrine, and the like.

MENDOZA: I have heard that there are other trainings for people to provide trauma care in an emergency, but I don't really know any details about that. I am thinking about making more recommendations to the Medical Office, but there are a lot of other career management issues I have to consider, and, once again, I have to pick my battles.

Q: How did The American Foreign Service Association (AFSA) become aware of you, or how did you get considered for the award for constructive dissent?

MENDOZA: That's a good question. During the process of gaining allies in this effort, I did talk to AFSA. They were supportive. They told me that as far as they could see, in terms of presenting a constructive improvement to the workplace, it was technically possible. There was little in the way of practical action they could do, but they encouraged me to keep them apprised of the actions I was taking. I not only talked to AFSA, but as I mentioned before, I built a network of support even among my colleagues in the consular section in Matamoros. One of them knew about AFSA's award for constructive dissent and nominated me. A few months later I got an email from AFSA confirming that I had won an award.

Q: Now that you have the experience with constructive dissent, have you also offered assistance to other officers thinking about a constructive dissent?

MENDOZA: I think winning the award did a few things that were positive. One is, after those two tough years when I was being told by some people that I was doing something wrong, I finally felt vindicated. Also, I think it helped others. After the award presentation, and the story that followed in the *Foreign Service Journal*, people would come up to me and they were like, wow, that was really inspiring. When I heard your story, I cried. So for a few weeks I felt like a celebrity, and then it just kind of petered off. But it was wonderful to know that I had at least inspired some people. It reinforced the understanding that it is possible to dissent as long as you do it constructively. Finally, the brief visibility that the award provided helped give me credibility in advising entry-level officers on other aspects of navigating their career like pushing back if they think they have an EEO complaint or how to deal with difficult colleagues or managers. It's a responsibility that I feel I have as a past winner of this award.

Q: My last formal question is, looking back on it, did your dissent provide you with other skills and abilities that were useful in your subsequent career?

MENDOZA: Certainly. The first thing I learned that has helped in other aspects of my career is that you have to acquire allies who can help push your goal forward. That is extremely important as a diplomat since you have to find influencers and stakeholders in the government and society in foreign countries to advance policy objectives. approaching a foreign government and society. Also, I think every winner of a dissent award will tell you that you have to follow your heart. You have to truly believe in your goal in order to overcome the road blocks and setbacks. Finally, if you're in the Foreign Service, you're not there just to have a job. You have a sense of mission in representing the U.S. abroad, and in promoting the policies you're given. If you find a way to improve the process, to give back some value beyond your work responsibilities, that for me is a major achievement.

I have amazing colleagues in the Foreign Service. They're the most amazing Americans in the world. But the Foreign Service does have a conformist corporate culture where speaking out is not always welcome. I'd like to think that constructive dissent is a demonstration that, even if it seems like the bureaucracy is against you, there are ways to push past that and make that difference and be that change that you want to be. And I just want to inspire people to feel that way.

One day, my career in the Foreign Service will end. But what won't end is how I feel about myself. When I'm on my deathbed, I want to know that I did everything possible to do the right thing and to make a difference. I want to feel that, not only through words, but through actions I helped inspire others.

End of interview