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

CARRIE MUNTEAN

Interviewed by: Mark Tauber
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INTERVIEW

Q: Today is July 8, 2025, and we're beginning our interview with Carrie Muntean. Carrie, where and when were you born?

MUNTEAN: I was born on August 7, 1973, in Middletown, Connecticut, in a hospital that was about a fifteen minute drive from my house in East Hampton, Connecticut, where I grew up.

Q: Did your family stay in that area while you were growing up? It was your home for all that time?

MUNTEAN: It was. My dad was in the U.S. Navy before I was born, but once he married my mom, he finished his tour of duty and got a job at Pratt and Whitney, which is also in Middletown, Connecticut, and he worked there my whole life growing up. We lived in that same little house and my parents still live there today.

Q: How did your parents meet?

MUNTEAN: My parents met at a Navy sock hop. Maybe that isn't exactly what they would call it, but that was the generation they were in. My mom actually, at first, thought my dad was very self-centered. Which is ironic, because my dad is many, many things, including quiet, shy, reserved, and one of the most wonderful people in the world. I don't know how he gave her the impression that he was self-centered, but he won her over eventually, and they got married right after my mom turned twenty-one.

Q: What about brothers and sisters?

MUNTEAN: I prayed for a brother or sister for six years before I finally got one. My family is very Congregational Church Christian, New England Christians, and welcomes everyone. Everyone is loved. I prayed from the time I remember praying, my prayer always said, “Dear God, give me a brother or sister.” Finally, when I was six and a half years old, I got a phone call at school. I was called to the office. I remember this distinctly. I was in first grade; I thought I was in trouble, but it was my parents calling to

ask if we should name my brother Todd Shane or Shane Todd, because they couldn't decide. So, I'm the one who chose Todd Shane.

Q: Great. Before we go any further in your life, are there any stories you want to tell about your ancestors or the people who came before you?

MUNTEAN: I don't know a lot about my dad's side of the family. They were probably immigrants from somewhere in Germany in the 1800s, but the family bible on that side doesn't go back quite as far. My mom's maiden name is Aldrich, a very old British English name. Pretty sure, even if they weren't on the Mayflower, they came over shortly thereafter. Definitely an interesting mix. My dad was raised in Missouri on a dairy farm, and my mom, whose parents were both college educated, grew up in Maine. It was quite a clash of families, I guess.

My mom tells this amazing story about flying out to Missouri to meet her in-laws for the first time. None of them came to the wedding in Maine because it was too far to go. My mom and dad flew out there, and she walked down the ramp off the plane, as you used to do, and she said to my dad, "Oh my gosh, look at those funny men with their overalls and corn cob pipes." It was his family. Quite the culture clash there. All of my dad's siblings, except his sister and one brother, entered the service to be able to see the world, so we have Navy, Air Force, and Army all on his side of the family, all of which I think stopped with their generation. None of their kids went into the military, but his was a family that definitely used that military experience to better themselves and to provide better opportunities for their children.

Q: Great. Did you go to the dairy farm?

MUNTEAN: I did, not in recent years, but yes, I did have an experience visiting where the dairy farm was. By the time I was born, my grandfather had passed away, and my grandmother lived with her sister in a suburb of Kansas City in a little house, so they weren't on the dairy farm anymore. I got to hear lots of stories from my aunts and uncles about growing up on the dairy farm and playing with Coke bottles and trying to shoot the coyotes with their little – what are those called?

Q: BB guns?

MUNTEAN: Not BB guns. The even more primitive weapon that David used to get Goliath.

Q: Slingshot.

MUNTEAN: Yeah, slingshots! They used slingshots for everything. From trying to get a fish to trying to kill a bunny. They were very into their slingshots.

Q: All right, then let's follow you into school. Was it a public or private school?

MUNTEAN: It was a public school. I did not go to preschool or nursery school, whatever they called it then, so my first day of kindergarten was a really big deal. I remember getting on the bus and being very scared to be on the bus. Kindergarten at that point was not in a one room schoolhouse, but in one single purpose building. It was a building only for kindergartners.

There was nobody else there, which was kind of unique. At playground time, at recess, it was all the kindergartners, everybody who was in the same grade. I didn't grow up in a very big town; there were less than a hundred people in my graduating class from high school. The vast majority of people I graduated with, were in that kindergarten building with me. A real feeling of well, family, or enemies, frenemies, whatever you want to say. Everybody remembers everything about each other for those thirteen years of school. There wasn't a lot of privacy.

Q: What about the rest of your elementary and high school experience? What stands out in your recollections about that time?

MUNTEAN: Well, I'll start with elementary school. I had an amazing first grade teacher whose name was Kaczerowski, she unfortunately has passed away since. Her family and my family became very close after I finished first grade with her. My mom provided daycare for her children. Her children were the same age as my brother and a little younger than that, so our families were very intermixed. While I had her as a teacher, I distinctly remember being very pissed off with her when she cast the school play, and I was not given the lead. That was a big deal.

I remember from a very young age being very competitive. In kindergarten I won second place in the coloring contest. I was pissed. I should have won first, I very much wanted to be at the top of the class. This was not something my parents forced on me. It was just that I was born to succeed, according to myself. Nobody else told me that, I just thought so.

In second grade, I had an amazing teacher, Mr. Bodolato, who has also passed away. I know this because my mom was friends with all those teachers afterwards. He was a die-hard Red Sox fan, and he was also someone who did an amazing job of doodling and drawing cartoons. He would teach us through art, which was very different and very exciting. Then, in third grade, I got picked up for gifted and talented. I think there were three other people in my grade that were picked up, and I remember being surprised that I was one of them, not in a bad way, but in a good way, I had gone from first grade, where I thought I should have been the top, to third grade, where I wasn't quite sure. Should I be at the top or not? It was interesting to have those two data points. Nothing else really sticks out about elementary school.

In middle school, I started getting involved with theater. I went to a summer camp called YPCCA, Young People’s Center for the Creative Arts, or something like that. It was run by my sixth grade homeroom teacher, Mike Mansfield, who has also passed away, but his daughter Rachel has taken over that camp. What they do is, every summer, they put on a

musical, and it's like a day camp. You don't stay overnight or anything. It's usually at the high school. Every day we would do different acting practices and techniques, and then we would practice the play.

The first year I was in the chorus, as you might expect, right? It's your first year. You're still learning your ropes. By the end of it, the last performance I did with them was Grease, and I played Jan. The most remarkable thing about Jan is that she had pigtails, and I had very short hair, so they were very upset about that, and she ate Twinkies nonstop. Never since then have I had a Twinkie because I'd eat so many Twinkies on stage. The theater was a big part of my life. Through high school as well, I really enjoyed being on stage. In my senior year, I was the director of some short plays, which was a lot of fun.

Q: In high school as well, other than acting, were there other extracurricular activities you got involved in, sport or music, or language?

MUNTEAN: Yes, all of those. I went to a very small high school, so if you wanted to be on the team, you were on it. It wasn't super competitive in that respect. I started cheerleading when I was in eighth grade, and I did that. I was the captain of the team by my senior year. I did theater. I never took an instrument, but I was in the chorus, and I competed. I was selected for regionals, which was a big deal at that time. I did theater, Student Government, and Model United Nations, which I actually partnered with my social studies teacher to create that club at our school because no one had been interested in doing it before then.

I took Latin and Spanish. My Spanish teacher had to create a new level of Spanish for one of my classmates and me, because we wanted to go past Spanish four. She taught Spanish five to just two of us, our senior year. The most interesting thing about her, —Mrs. Dellavolpe, she is still around— she was actually from Brazil, so every once in a while, a Portuguese word would come out of her mouth. She had to be very diligent about separating those two languages. Now I find myself in that same position where I speak both Spanish and Portuguese, and it's so muddled in my brain because they're so similar. It takes a real Herculean effort to be able to separate those two.

Q: Sure. Now, also in these years, did you take any trips or have other opportunities to be exposed to international affairs or relations, or than the Model UN?

MUNTEAN: Model UN [United Nations] was pretty much it. My parents did a lot of traveling with us when we were kids, but it was all within the United States. My dad had five siblings spread all over the country, and my mom's siblings were in Massachusetts and Maine. Basically, every big holiday or every summer break, we were in the car traveling somewhere. It wasn't until after I got my graduate degree in international affairs that I took my first trip overseas, which is kind of unusual for a U.S. diplomat.

I did apply to study abroad, but at the time, it didn't feel like my parents could afford that. They were getting ready to send my brother through school, and I was very cognizant of

their financial situation. I got full scholarships for both my undergrad and my masters, and so I kind of felt like I couldn't ask them to do that for me. I know a lot of people do get that. That's when they really get the travel bug, doing an exchange program in high school or in college, and I didn't get that opportunity. I did have a Japanese student as my roommate in college, so I got the reverse experience of hosting someone.

My first overseas trip was in 1998. By then, I was twenty-five and I went to of all places for your first trip, Bangkok, Thailand. Because I had a friend who was teaching Spanish at the international school there, it seemed like it made sense at the time.

Q: Now, as you're going through high school, I assume your parents are talking to you about college, or others in your circle are talking about college. Did you begin having aspirations for it, and where did you see yourself going?

MUNTEAN: I was the high school salutatorian, so the local newspaper did little interviews with all of us who were in the top three. In my interview, I said that I wanted to be the next Secretary General of the United Nations. So clearly, I knew a lot about the UN and how it worked, right, but that an American was going to be the Secretary General, not so much. I did go to college planning to intern at the United Nations or get as close as I could. That's why I chose the university I chose in New York - Adelphi University. I did get a chance to do an internship at the United Nations Association, which is the nonprofit that runs the Model UN platform, basically.

Through that internship, I learned that there was little to no chance that I would ever get a job at the UN because I was not natively bilingual or trilingual. I had learned too late in life [starting in seventh grade] and was never going to be successful enough at that to be a translator, and that most of the other jobs there were actually not for Americans. When I had my heart broken, which was about junior year of college, I had a very good advisor who said, “Maybe you can't work at the UN, but you could work overseas. You could be a diplomat for the United States.” I was like, “I could?” Never heard of that. Like never crossed my mind. No idea what we were talking about.

So then in graduate school, obviously, before graduate school, I chose international affairs, and I was at GW [The George Washington University]. We were about to graduate from our master's program. My husband, who at that time was my boyfriend, took the written exam with me, and we both passed it, which was shocking on our first go. We were very excited about that, and then neither one of us passed the oral exam. Like many foreign service officers, we tried and tried again, and eventually, in 1998, we both passed the oral assessment. That was the year we went to Thailand. In October 1999, we had a shotgun wedding to make sure we were on the register together as a married couple, and we started in the Foreign Service in January of 2001.

Q: Well, okay, let me go back one second.

MUNTEAN: I skipped a ton of stuff there. Sorry, Mark.

Q: In college, and well, high school as well. Did you work part-time?

MUNTEAN: I did. I worked as a babysitter from the time I was about eleven. Then when I turned fourteen, which I think was the legal minimum age at that time that you could get a job, I was a page at my local library in the children's room, so I helped restock the books. I helped with children's story hours, with craft time, and I did that from the time I was fourteen until I graduated from high school. Between that and babysitting, was how I earned my extra money to have around the house, for paying for my gas, and all the things that a teenager thinks they need at that time of life.

In college, I only worked in the summers. I was a full-time live-in nanny for a family that I had babysat for before. But during the school year, I just focused on school. In graduate school, I worked part-time at a bookstore and worked part-time as a research assistant. That was part of my scholarship package.

Q: Okay, now in college, since you had studied some Spanish and Latin, did you continue to develop your language skills?

MUNTEAN: Yeah, I minored in Spanish, and I also took German. I don't know why I took German. I figured, well, my maiden name was German, so I guess I should learn some German. I took two years' worth of German, and I got this beautiful book in English and German from the German Embassy as the best German student when I graduated. There were only three of us. I mean, it wasn't a huge crowd to compete with, but I have a beautiful book that says *Deutschland*, and it's gorgeous.

I finally went to Germany, only relatively recently in my life. It was when we were posted in Moscow, so I studied German, but then didn't use it for years and years and years, other than for the GRE. It's useful for vocabulary and that sort of thing. But Spanish has always been part of my existence, since sixth grade, basically.

Q: In college, you minored in Spanish, and remind me you majored in?

MUNTEAN: Political Science.

Q: Which university did you attend?

MUNTEAN: I went to Adelphi University, which is in Garden City, New York. It's like a forty-five minute train ride from downtown New York.

Q: Okay, what made you choose that?

MUNTEAN: They offered me their presidential scholarship in the Honors College, which was a full ride, and no other university offered me a full ride. It was very much a financial decision, but also the fact that it was in New York and that it was not huge were attractive to me, as well. My other kind of fallback universities were large state

universities, and I didn't like the feeling of going from my small, nurturing high school to this massive monolith of a university.

Q: When you arrive at Adelphi, are there sororities? Or how did they organize students to become a student body?

MUNTEAN: There were definitely sororities and fraternities. I didn't belong to those. I was in the Honors College, which was the special kind of subset for kids that I guess you would call us, like the gifted and talented kids in college. We were the ones who'd been picked up based on our performance in high school, and we took special seminars with visiting professors, we had special trips into the city to see museums and all of that, and we all lived in the same dorm, so the Honors College was very much my home.

It's where I made all of my friends, with the exception of one fellow classmate from my high school, who applied and was accepted at the same university. She and I were roommates the first year, but then she ended up switching to a different part of the program, so she could no longer stay in that dorm. Then I had a Japanese roommate, and after that, I had a roommate who is now an English professor. Everyone who was part of our Honors College group has done incredibly well for themselves. I'm pretty proud to say they created some amazing people in that incubator.

Q: How large is Adelphi?

MUNTEAN: There were just about 1,500 students, and a lot of them were commuters. The residential population was, I want to say, between three hundred and four hundred, maybe. It was very small when I was there. It felt a little bit like the size of my high school.

Q: While you were in college, you mentioned that you worked in bookstores. Was that right?

MUNTEAN: Yeah, so I worked in bookstores in graduate school. I worked at the library in high school. Then in college, I just read a whole bunch of books, as one does. In graduate school, I got a job at a B. Dalton in the mall in Ballston, it was close to where I was living. I love books. It seemed like a no-brainer. It was the kind of job where, if there were no customers, you could read your articles for school and not be in trouble.

Q: Then, once again, looking back on your college career, what are the major things you remember in terms of your formation, in terms of the talents and skills you acquired for the Foreign Service?

MUNTEAN: I think one of the biggest things I learned in college, and I also learned a lot about it in high school, but I feel like, for some reason, at a very young age, I decided that I needed to be in a leadership role. I wanted to be the captain of the cheerleading team. I didn't just want to be a cheerleader. I wanted to be the captain. I wanted to be the director of the play. I very much enjoyed being in charge. In that time of life, I'm sure most people

would have called me bossy. Now we don't use that word, because that makes it sound like it's not a good thing.

When I was in college, I started a Model UN chapter there, the college had not had one before. I was on the school newspaper, and a couple of us did some investigative journalism and found ourselves sued by the president of the university, who was then canned. So clearly, our investigative journalism was effective. Things like that. I was always kind of pushing the envelope and doing things at the next level, if that makes sense.

In college, we had to do a senior thesis, and I was told by my thesis advisory committee that mine was almost at the level of doing a PhD dissertation. I always kind of felt like I gravitated toward people who wanted to be in leadership roles or who were in leadership roles, and I tried to learn as much from them as I could. In college, I had a couple of key mentors. One was Hugh Wilson, who was in charge of a big part of the political science department. He did all the American politics stuff. His classes were so popular that he could offer them at eight in the morning, Monday, Wednesday, Friday, and still fill a room, which is pretty impressive at a largely commuter school. I took every class that he ever taught. He was also my thesis mentor, and I helped him with some research along the way as well.

When I went to grad school, the main person who was my mentor was Dr. Andrea Schneider, and she is still in academia, just no longer at The George Washington University. I loved being her research assistant, and I helped her do a leadership training seminar for Smithsonian Institution employees. I distinctly remember being so impressed that all these adults were taking the time to be in a room together, to strengthen their leadership and their communication. She was teaching them negotiation skills, she was one of William Ury's students, so she worked on *Getting Past No*, not *Getting to Yes*, but the sequel to it.

Anyway, that's a long way of saying I've been infatuated with leadership for a very long time. I wouldn't have been able to call it that in seventh or eighth grade, because I wouldn't have known that's what it was. But I feel like I've now, in the last twenty years or so, arrived at a point in my life where I understand why it's so important to have a good leader in a position, what that should look like, and that leaders aren't born, they're made. I really ascribe to the idea that people can be trained to be better leaders if they're open to being trained. That was a long way of saying I liked all the people who were good leaders.

Q: Okay, just to go back one second, what was the topic of your thesis in college?

MUNTEAN: It was racism and the Voting Rights Act of 1965, institutionalized racism, and the voting structure. It was not international in flavor at all.

Q: But it fit with political science. Then, going through college, because you then chose to go to GW as a graduate school, and obviously, it has very good international relations.

You're in Washington, where there are lots of think tanks and so on related to international relations. When did you begin to think about that kind of master's program?

MUNTEAN: It was shortly after I had that United Nations Association internship, like junior year, and it became obvious that the UN was not somewhere I could go. I then thought to myself, okay, what am I going to do in the real world? I have a year left of college, and I started panicking a little bit. So, I went to our Career Center on campus, and they basically were like, why do you think you have to go out into the world, like you could keep being in school? Plenty of people do that. I was like I love being a student, and I'm really good at it. I took the GRE, and I did really well. GW offered me a full ride, and it seemed like a no-brainer to stay in school a little longer.

Q: When did you graduate from college?

MUNTEAN: 1995, the spring of 1995.

Q: Fall of '95, you go to GW.

MUNTEAN: Exactly.

Q: Certainly graduate school courses kept you busy, but how did you stay up on top of international relations issues? Were you reading newspapers? Or I guess when newspapers went away, online reporting, and so on.

MUNTEAN: I had a professor who adored *The Economist*. Every time a new *Economist* came out, I would go into the library and read it. I mean, that's in the old days, right? When we didn't have the internet, you actually had to rely on the library. Every Sunday, I read *The New York Times*. That was a big deal in being in New York, right? Then I would read *The Economist.* Those were my two main sources of keeping up to date on things.

When I decided I wanted to join the Foreign Service, all the little advice you get about how to prep for the exam included reading *The Economist*, be up on those types of issues. I doubled down more on reading *The Economist*. When I moved to DC, I read *The Washington Post.* I subscribed to *The Washington Post*, and it was delivered to my house every day. I'm a big newspaper supporter.

Q: Yeah, okay, all right, the other thing is, you're moving to Washington, DC. It's now a much bigger city than you've been used to before. Was there a kind of cultural conflict? How well did you adapt immediately?

MUNTEAN: My aunt, who is like a second mother to me, Aunt Nancy. She came down to DC with me to help me find a place to live. She lived in Boston, and she was very cosmopolitan. She did a great job, kind of steering me toward the north Arlington suburbs instead of living in DC, let's live in a place that feels a little more like home. I signed a lease for a group house near the Ballston Metro and then applied for that job at B. Dalton. I could Metro easily into Foggy Bottom, but I felt much safer, I would say, and more

comfortable in Arlington than I did in DC. I loved Foggy Bottom, and I love the GW campus, but it didn't feel like you were all the way in DC yet, because it's the very first stop over the river. You're not quite in downtown DC.

It took me probably a year before I was super comfortable walking around in other parts of Washington. A big part of that is just I didn't have a ton of exposure. I came from a really small town, and I went to a really small university. Now that said, I would walk around New York City with no problem. That doesn't make a whole lot of sense to me, but I did. I think in part, because it's laid out like a grid, you don't feel like you can get lost.

Q: Then, similarly, in GW, how did you organize your specialization?

MUNTEAN: I forget if it was a minor. I think it was a minor in Latin American Affairs, because I spoke Spanish. I tested out of the foreign language requirement, then three or four of the classes I took for my masters were focused on Latin America. That was my specialty within international affairs. International law was the other thing I concentrated on.

Q: Oh, interesting, because obviously international law, your background in the UN and so on, would be a natural choice. But did it end up being satisfactory for you? In other words, once you actually started looking into it in depth, were you happy with those specializations?

MUNTEAN: I was happy with Latin America, for sure. I would say that my graduate degree prepared me really well for the amount of time I spent in Latin America in the Foreign Service. Even though it took me a few years to get the Foreign Service to align with Latin America as my destination. I was definitely happy with that, international law was a little too —my husband and I call it—like a little too philosophical, a little too theoretical for me. I think I'm much more of an applied person when it comes to education. When I first entered for my master's, I was seriously considering getting a PhD, and after the first semester, I said, No way in hell. Like, no, this is going to be enough education for a while, because the philosophy really tortured my brain. I wasn't good at theory stuff.

Q: However, the other thing that often happens in graduate school is whether you love the classes or not, they help prepare you in terms of thinking through how to find information and how to organize it and turn it into something that is not just readable but actionable. How did that develop for you?

MUNTEAN: The big place that that developed for me was I did an internship with a small nonprofit that was called ISIS [The Institute for Science and International Security], it was like an international institute of scientists who had come together to rally for nonproliferation of nuclear weapons, and I did a lot of research and writing in that job. It was the summer between my first and second years of graduate school. I had two

amazing mentors in that internship who really helped me switch my gears a little bit from writing for academia to writing for action.

Q: I often ask that question to everyone I interview because once you get into the Foreign Service, as good as your academic work was, writing for the Foreign Service is considerably different. Were there other transferable skills you acquired in graduate school?

MUNTEAN: I was in charge of several study groups, of which I became in charge because I had a tendency to want to organize things in a particular fashion, to have an agenda, and to delegate the different chapters. The things you do in graduate school to survive. There's way too much reading for everyone to read. So, you read this part, you read that part, and then we'll brief each other, and I took on that role in most of my study groups, the coordinator, the one kind of keeping us all on track.

My husband likes to joke about grad school. He worked probably forty hours a week to put himself through graduate school. He always worked at coffee shops because he could get free coffee and free food. He didn't have enough money to buy the books. The reason he dated me was that he could borrow my books, since I could afford the books and had a full scholarship.

Q: There are worse reasons.

MUNTEAN: There are definitely worse reasons. I mean, that's as far as reasons go. It's not horrible.

Q: Right, bringing together people, getting them to become sort of a team. That's also an important tool and skill for getting into the Foreign Service. Now you mentioned that you met your boyfriend there. How did that come about? I mean, was he in your classes or?

MUNTEAN: Yeah, we were in two classes together, and originally, he was dating this woman who became my best friend. They broke up over differences in religion, and then I asked her permission to date him because I was trying to be very loyal to her as a friend. She gave me that permission, and we started dating right at the beginning of the spring semester of our first year in graduate school. We've been together ever since.

Q: Did you get married in graduate school?

MUNTEAN: No, we got married after graduate school. We started dating in January of 1996, we then got shotgun married in October of 1999, and married again for the party in June of 2000.

Q: At that time, both of you decided, however you went about it, that you were interested in the Foreign Service and that you would both apply. Did you have an opportunity when you were in GW to talk to people in the Foreign Service about foreign service life?

MUNTEAN: We did. They had little receptions periodically with folks from Georgetown, American, GW. We all had our own little sessions with people from the Foreign Service to talk about what it was like. I don't have super specific memories of those conversations. I just remember that the test was free. We lived in Washington, and it made sense as international affairs candidates to apply. That was the extent of the thought that went into it.

Then in 1998 we went together to Thailand, and my friend was working at an international school there, and I just remember thinking, gosh, I kind of wish I was a teacher, because then I could do this international school thing. My husband said, "You don't need to be a teacher. We can just go be diplomats." He reminded me that, hey, this is an option because after graduate school, I basically used my skills as a researcher, and I was a research assistant from the time I graduated in 1997 until I joined the Foreign Service in 2001.

That's what I did in between, and it wasn't international affairs focused. The first two and a half years, I worked at a very small firm that did vehicle safety research. I mean, I know more about airbags and torque, all sorts of things like that, than I have any business knowing as someone who's not an engineer. Then I worked at the National Academy of Sciences on their Census project. All the time in the back of my head, thinking, I want to join the Foreign Service.

Q: Let's go back just one second. You graduate from GW, you get your master's degree, and you take the Foreign Service exam during that time, or shortly after?

MUNTEAN: Yes. The first time we took it was shortly after we graduated.

Q: Both of you did not pass the first time, if I remember correctly, right?

MUNTEAN: Well, we both passed the written but not the oral.

Q: Can you talk a little bit about the oral exam, because there are a variety of aspects to it. There are the basic background questions, and then negotiating and office management, managing your inbox, and so on. Were you prepared for it?

MUNTEAN: Not the first time, for sure, I was not prepared for it. Even though I had had a job in the real world, I had not had a job anything like the Foreign Service. I'm very much someone who likes to play by the rules. I like to know what success looks like. So, I did a lot of prep to the extent you can prep for the oral exam, and the first time I took it, I missed by a very small margin. I just remember being so disappointed in that, and thinking, like, what more could I have done? You don't really get feedback. I mean, now I guess they do give you feedback, but back then, you didn't. It was either green light, red light, right, yes, or no, they sent you home, and that was the end of that.

So, then the next year, we both passed the written, and my husband had to go on a business trip the week that I was supposed to take the oral. I was so nervous about the

oral and couldn't sleep the night before. I just had decided I would take NyQuil to help me sleep, and the next morning, I woke up for the exam, and I'm not feeling fully awake.

That feeling of like, you've been a little too drugged. I hadn't overdosed or anything. It just happened that I didn't wake up feeling very refreshed. I distinctly remember standing in the bathroom in that Rosslyn building, splashing my face with cold water, slapping my cheeks, and saying, "wake up." This is so important. I tell this story all the time, because basically, the bottom line is that the drugged Carrie is the one who passed the oral exam. Maybe the true Carrie is a little too much for the Foreign Service.

Q: One of the reasons I ask is because in all of your background experience, it sounded like you were good or you acquired skills for negotiation, which is one of the things they're really looking for. Not simply for negotiating with foreign countries, but as a leadership skill, negotiating to create teams and delegate.

MUNTEAN: Right. I did that much better the second time around. The first time around, I thought the goal was to win. I didn't realize the goal was to negotiate. Afterwards, I learned that your project may not be the best, and you shouldn't die on that hill. You should try to get the best possible overall solution. Once I learned that, I did much better the second time.

Q: Was that the same experience for your husband? Did he describe the experience the same way?

MUNTEAN: No, my husband's a very different human as we all are, right? Like, I'm very extroverted and very much take charge, help figure out who's going to be who, and maybe I'll be the timekeeper, but like, let's kick this off. My husband is very introverted, and he sits with things, he watches, and he's observant. We're very well balanced in that way; we each bring our respective skill set to the table. I don't think he found the oral exam as taxing, because he actually thinks before he speaks, a skill I've been working on my whole life.

Q: Extroverts typically think out loud. Introverts typically think before they speak. But that's also just a generalization.

MUNTEAN: It's a super big generalization. I will say, I don't think it's wrong to say that the stereotype at the time, at least, back in the late 1990s, early 2000s was that anybody who wanted to be a successful Foreign Service Officer needed to be largely introverted, analytical, and have good negotiation skills. Not in an interpersonal way, more in a how do you get to success sort of way. I think only in the past ten or fifteen years has the Foreign Service really embraced the full array of humans. Before that, it felt very much like I was a square peg trying to fit in a round hole. That is what it felt like for the first several years that I was in the Foreign Service.

Q: Now, one thing, I don't mean to dwell too long on the exam, but I think people outside the Foreign Service don't quite realize what sort of a right of initiation it is, and how

much people remember from that experience. Though the one thing they can't test for is your ability to communicate, cross-culturally, and develop networks that are important to your job, to the embassy, and to the United States. When thinking back on all of your preparation before you go into the Foreign Service, did you have those skills, or did you feel more or less comfortable in that aspect of foreign service work?

MUNTEAN: I did, and it's kind of ironic that I say that, but even though I'd never left the United States prior to passing the test. I lived in the international dorm at college. All my friends were a mix of people from all over the world. I really approach every person, but especially people from a different place, with an attitude of curiosity. I think as long as you come to any conversation with some element of curiosity, people want to talk to you because you're interested.

I think that trait of me being always curious, probably to a fault sometimes, I should probably stop asking the questions. I remember when I'd been in the Foreign Service for about five years, and I was put on a passport task force. Do you remember when there were passport surges, and they recruited everyone to adjudicate passports? I was adjudicating passport applications with another relatively new officer, and I was just asking him questions, making the time go by. He turned to me after about fifteen minutes of talking to me, and he said, "If you don't mind, could you be quiet?" I said, "Sure." He said, "I'm just having a really hard time focusing. And by the way, are you a consular officer?" I said, "Yeah, why?" He said, "Well, I can tell, because all you do is ask questions."

Q: I've been interviewing after I retired, and I started working in this job. I've been doing it for about eight years, and friends now tell me, Mark, stop interviewing.

MUNTEAN: It's a hard thing to get out of. Once you've got that ingrained in how your speech patterns work. You have to flip a switch, like Spanish to Portuguese, right? Interview versus conversation.

Q: Yeah, exactly. All right, then, when both of you pass, you're now looking at a dual career. Do you both go into the same orientation class?

MUNTEAN: We do, and that's an amazing story as well. We got a phone call. I don't want to misstate it, but it was like December 20 or 21, right? It was like the very last workday before everything in Washington closes for a week and a half for the holidays. I got the phone call first, and I got it at my office. I answered the phone, and they said, "We want to offer you a seat in the class starting January 6." The shortest possible amount of time they could have given me as a heads up. But I was a local hire, and I didn't want to miss this opportunity.

I said, "That's great. Is my husband also getting an offer in this class?" They asked me what cone he was going into, and I said, econ. They said, "No, we've already filled all the slots for that cone." I said, "Okay, well, then if he was willing to switch cones, would you give him a spot in this class? Because it's really important to us that we start together."

She said, “Well, maybe.” I said, “Great. Which cones are you offering spots to?” She’s well, “Only two – consular (which was my cone) and management.” I said, “Well, if he’s willing to switch to management, will you offer him a slot?” And she replied, “Yes, have him call me by four o’clock today.”

Then Mark, I spent the rest of that day trying to track my husband down, pre-cell phones, Christmas parties galore. He’s never at his desk. I must have called him like forty-two times before I finally reached him, and it was, like, three o’clock, so we had an hour to make this life-changing decision. He said, “Yeah, I’m all in. Like, if you’re in, I’m in.” So, yeah, that's how it happened. At the time, I didn't think anything special about how I had asked those questions, but I thought to myself, that’s what makes me a good Foreign Service Officer. Here’s the box, let’s think a little outside of it, so I can get to the solution that I need.

Q: January 6, just a few days after you're taking the holidays and so on, you start your orientation class. This is January of 2001. Okay, well, the both of you had not worked for the federal government in any way before, or had you and your husband?

MUNTEAN: My husband did. He was a Presidential Management Intern at the Department of Commerce. And then after his internship ended, he went full time. So, he had been at the Department of Commerce between 1997 and 2001, so he was already in the government, just a different agency.

Q: Oh, I'm sorry I forgot. After you graduate, —

MUNTEAN: —I don't think I said that yet so you couldn’t have forgotten. —

Q: But for you, after you graduated. GW, you did work. You mentioned two different jobs before. Talk a little bit about those experiences.

MUNTEAN: Sure. So the first one was with a really, really small company. It was five or six of us, and we basically did vehicle safety research for litigating attorneys in vehicle safety incidents. For example, there was a huge spate of minivans that had problems with their latches for child seats, and a bunch of children had lost their lives or been seriously injured. We were helping the prosecuting attorneys collect data on patents, safety testing that had been done, and whether the company had ignored signs that they should have paid attention to.

Really, I spent a lot of time at the Patent and Trademark Office, which was kind of interesting, and a lot of time online, just delving as deep as you could into all the various chat boards or whatever about these vehicles. I did that for about two and a half years, and then, there was a problem within the company that did not involve me but made me and the other three people decide it was time to leave the company.

Then I became a temp at the National Academy of Sciences as an administrative assistant to one of their directors. As soon as a research assistant job opened up, he asked me to

please apply for it, because he really liked me, and so I was in the research assistant job there on the Census Bureau project. That's when I was offered the job with the State Department. I had been there about a year.

Q: Is there anything about the research project on the Census that, thinking back, was useful for being in Foreign Service?

MUNTEAN: Ironically, that is an amazing question. I've never made this connection before, but what I did on the Census Bureau project was that I called and called and called and called and called people and interviewed them about local jurisdictions. How do you conduct your Census? How do you conduct yours? How do you conduct the Census? It was basically visa interviews, one-on-one, but with Census takers, right? I think it prepared me pretty well.

Q: I often ask this question because I think people considering the Foreign Service often want to know, well, how do you prepare? How does being a Census researcher have anything to do with the Foreign Service? Obviously, it improved and strengthened your interviewing skills, which turned out to be a really important thing.

MUNTEAN: I did a lot of writing in that job too. I've done writing my whole life, so I always forget to mention it, but I did learn a different style of writing there. Which I think held me in good stead when I joined the State Department, because we have our own specific kind of writing as well.

Q: Given the fact that your husband had a fair amount of time working in the federal government. I imagine his transfer to State was relatively easy in terms of understanding the corporate culture. What about you?

MUNTEAN: We had an inordinate, from my perspective, at the time, an inordinate amount of time in FSI training before we went to our first post. We started A-100 in January, and we didn't go out to our post until mid-November. I felt like that was more than adequate time to kind of learn the idiosyncrasies of our organization.

I had a colleague in my Portuguese class who would turn his back to me and stare at the wall every time I talked, just a special human who decided to retire at the end of his Portuguese training and not go to his post. There were things going on in his life, I assume, that he did not talk about with me.

We took the consular training course, which I was very serious about because A, I'm consular coned, and B, I knew I was going to be the only person at post — we were going to Angola — I was going to be the only vice consul at post. It was my husband and I, both of whom had had the same amount of training, which was not enough to be the only ones in charge. What I took out of the ten months that we spent in Washington was a really strong network of support. When I got out to the field, I knew who I could email, who might be able to help me with questions. I learned as much as I possibly could about how to search the darn FAM [Foreign Affairs Manual] for what you need.

Q: Take one second to define the FAM?

MUNTEAN: The Foreign Affairs Manual. There are 7 FAM for American Citizen Services, and 9 FAM, which is for visas. There's all sorts of other FAMs, but those are the two that I tried to memorize.

Q: At that time, was it still principally hard copy? Because once again, I think people outside the Department don't realize that it is an entire bookshelf of regulations that address every aspect of foreign service life.

MUNTEAN: Yes, and if it's on paper, it's not easy to search. You cannot "control F" a piece of paper.

Q: The one other thing about it is, when it needed to be updated, it was kind of a wiki where officers out in the field realized that something was now overtaken by events, they would draft a suggestion for the change, and then it had to go through a million clearances, and eventually the department would reissue. The reason they bring all that up is, did you end up proposing any changes to the Foreign Affairs Manual?

MUNTEAN: I did! In my very first tour in Luanda, Angola, where you would think, like, what the heck came up? It was about the maximum age that a dependent could still be considered a dependent on an A-1 visa, because the Angolan government was nothing if not creative about how to get all their high echelon society people into the United States. Everybody was a diplomat. Everybody is like, you're a diplomat and you're a diplomat, and their kids would be like in their 30s and still studying on A-1 dependent visas. That was my big claim to fame, as I did, in fact, get some edits to the FAM in my very first tour from Luanda, Angola.

Q: That's beautiful. Let's go back then to your Foreign Service Institute training and your husband, for Luanda, were you taught Portuguese?

MUNTEAN: Yes. We both were in Portuguese language class, and there were only seven students at the time studying Continental (as opposed to Brazilian) Portuguese. There's my husband with three colleagues in one class, and me with a husband and wife in another class, and the husband and wife, I was like, I don't understand how you guys can do this together? My husband and I would kill each other if we were in training together all day long. It worked out that we were not.

Q: Once again, when you're a tandem couple, when both of you are in the Foreign Service, it's generally not advisable to sit in the same office working on the same thing, eight hours a day, and still maintain a marriage; it gets to be a bit claustrophobic.

MUNTEAN: Nothing to talk about when you get home at the end of the day, because you lived through the same experience all day long, not to say anything of nepotism, which is also a concern.

Q: Other than the Portuguese, did you feel adequately trained for going to Luanda when you arrived?

MUNTEAN: No, I can expand on that, if you'd like. Luanda was a huge culture shock. I would say when we studied Portuguese, we studied with one teacher who was from Lisbon, and the rest of the teachers were from Brazil, none of them had ever been to Angola. None of them knew anything more than we did about Angola. The cultural aspects that language training often encompasses were missing for us. We were learning about Brazilian culture or Continental Portuguese culture and there wasn't a ton available separately either, because Angola was in a huge civil war.

It had been a puppet civil war between a Russian-backed side and American-backed side. The American-backed side had lost. There just wasn't a lot of information available about what we were getting ourselves into. We knew that it was going to be difficult. I don't think we ever could have fathomed just how difficult, even with better training.

I felt prepared for my consular job, like my actual day-to-day work, I felt prepared for, but living in that sort of intense environment, I did not feel prepared for, and I don't know that they could ever have trained me some other way. It was just an immense culture shock.

Q: Now, then let's go ahead and start your tour there. When you arrived were there concerns about personal security?

MUNTEAN: Yes. We arrived there in November of 2001 and the civil war was still ongoing. At that point, we had a security perimeter. We were only allowed to be within a very small circle, which was the capital and a little side place where there were some restaurants. Outside of that zone, we weren't allowed to go without approval from the regional security officer and the main part of the embassy was basically a trailer park. They were working out of mobile home trailer type things behind a wall. We didn't have Marines because it wasn't considered a defensible position, which is always reassuring. We were defended by local guards with batons. That's all, they were not allowed to carry guns. My office for consular work was actually above a motor vehicle garage.

To get any airflow, you wanted the window open, but all you could smell was fumes all day long. I think we've gone too far in the other extreme, but I will say I didn't feel incredibly safe in my office the first few months before it was renovated, because the window between me and my clients was chicken wire. I mean, there's not a whole lot of protection out of chicken wire. It was the kind of place where you often felt like you needed protection.

Because Americans were the enemy and it was obvious we were foreign, you could just look at us and know we were foreign. After I'd been there a while, people on the street started to assume I was Portuguese, which is better, ironically (considering they were Angola's colonizer), in Angola than being American, but it was very rough, for sure.

Our Ambassador and DCM were both very stereotypical, ISTP-type leaders, on the Myers Briggs scale, introverted. They're the exact opposite from me, INTP, introverted, and intuitive thinkers. Anyway, they were just my exact opposite, as I am an ESFJ, and I had a very hard time at post the first few months until a new public affairs officer arrived, and she and the new management officer were the saving grace. Cheryl Martin was our public affairs officer, and Mark Biedlingmeier was our management officer, and they just brought an aura of calm to a place that had just been very intense up until their arrival.

Q: Then let's go back once again. Can you share more recollections about the embassy itself, how large and was only the State Department there, were there other federal agencies represented and so on?

MUNTEAN: It was pretty small. There were, I think, at the time, twenty Americans, but five of them were on the construction project for the new embassy compound. Those of us doing the day-to-day embassy work, there were about fifteen of us, and it might have been even smaller than that. The only other agencies that were there were USAID [United States Agency for International Development] and the Department of Defense, and their office was only two people – the defense attaché and an OpsCo, Operations Coordinator. Those two people were some of our favorite people to hang out with, because they had the most amazing stories. The attaché had his wife there. So it was like a feeling of sort of normalcy that there was another couple. USAID constituted a large part of our footprint on the ground. The mission director there was Bob Hellyer, and he and his wife, Ada, were fabulous as well. They hosted great parties!

I think what I took away from that experience was even in a really hard environment, you're going to find people with whom you can relax, and that's really, really important not to be nonstop on the topic, always working. I learned that really early in Angola, and I think that was a healthy lesson that I took with me throughout my career. That we really need to take care of ourselves.

Q: Sure. Now let's turn to your consular work. What did it involve, on a day to day basis, and since you were the only one, did you have local employees as well that sort of thing?

MUNTEAN: The Consular Section had two local employees. One was a cashier, slash visa clerk, and the other one was the supervisory local staff member who focused more on American Citizen Services (ACS) and was like a FAM whiz. I don't think I would have survived my tour without her, because she could tell you the exact page anything was on, and if she didn't know it, it wasn't in the FAM. Her name is Riquita. I think she's still working at the embassy. The two of them were very helpful.

The day-to-day flow in the Consular Section was odd. When I first started there, there was no requirement for appointments to have a visa interview. And there was a very minimal fee to apply for a visa. I think it was five or ten dollars, so the fee wasn't high enough to dissuade people from just standing in line and taking a chance. Probably 50 to 60 percent of our applicants every day were people who had applied as recently as the

day before, because the embassy had an air conditioned waiting room and a bathroom with running water.

It wasn't such a bad place to hang out for five hours while you waited for Carrie to get to you, because even if she said no (which I did more than 50 percent of the time), well at least you had a pleasant day inside. It was very intense from my side of the chicken wire window, because I was the only one who could interview these people. Anytime there was a Country Team meeting or a Law Enforcement Working Group meeting, any of the meetings that I would have to go to were across town, at the trailer park, not where I was, so it would take me two hours to get there, do the meeting, and then come back again. Meanwhile, all those people would just sit in the waiting room. There were no refreshments. I mean, it wasn't like it was a beautiful waiting room. It was what you might imagine, like a single room with one bathroom and no water fountain. The other issue that we had was that that one bathroom that was for the public was also our bathroom, so we had to go out into the waiting room to use the bathroom. It wasn't the best layout, but the workload usually wasn't overwhelming.

There were probably forty-five or fifty people a day who applied for visas, and only ten or so would receive those visas. The American Citizen Services workload was very minute, because most of the Americans who were in the country were there with oil companies, and the oil companies took care of their own. It's not like I had people flooding me with notarial requests or anything like that. I think we had one prisoner the whole time I was there, and thank goodness only one, because that was pretty hairy, going to visit someone in prison. Then we did have Colin Powell visit. I got to be the airport site officer, and my biggest job was to make sure that the advance team knew not to take a bathroom break at the airport, because there was no running water.

Q: Wow. Okay.

MUNTEAN: He came to break ground for the new embassy compound while we were there, and that was pretty cool.

Q: Was the Consular Section separate from the embassy and far away, how well defended was the Consular Section?

MUNTEAN: Not very, we had one guard, it wasn't well marked either, though, it wasn't like we flew an American flag from the second floor of the motor vehicle shop business. It was clear to consular applicants where they needed to go. We weren't waving the flag or anything like that. I mean, everybody in town knew what it was, right, if you've ever needed a visa to America, you knew where it was. There were two sections co-located with us. It was Public Affairs and the Management Section. So actually, in the compound, with all the trailers, it was just the Front Office, the DoD guys, the Political and Economic Sections, our IT support, our regional security office, the medical unit, the CLO (community liaison officer), and everybody else. USAID had their own building, and then we had our own.

Q: Now it's interesting that USAID was there, given that it's still a high threat, high conflict area, was your interaction with USAID helpful for your job? In other words, they must have gone out into the country somewhere, and be able to talk to you a little bit about social conditions, economic conditions, drivers for the things that would typically drive people to get visas.

MUNTEAN: They did that, and they also were really helpful with helping me determine if it was safe for me to go to some of those places. We had small encampments of American missionaries throughout the country, and I really relied heavily on USAID and DOD colleagues and the Regional Security Officer to determine if it would be safe for me to go do outreach visits to those populations. The civil war officially ended about one year into our two year tour. In the second half, I did do American Citizen Services visits to a couple of the main state capitals outside of Luanda.

The other thing that USAID was wonderful for was, I had no American Citizen Services need or visa need to go with them on this trip, but they offered me a seat on a UN plane to go see a feeding camp. Basically, a whole bunch of refugees, internally displaced people who were relying solely on the United States and our generosity in order to stay alive. That was very eye opening to me. I had not been in any situation like that in my life. I was really grateful that they gave me that opportunity to see the reality on the ground and our positive impact. I think being there and smelling and seeing the reality is just so much more valuable than hearing about it or reading about it.

Q: These new experiences in a country very different from the U.S., what did you learn that was valuable for your subsequent career.

MUNTEAN: I think in some ways, it was hard, I will say, going to the feeding camp. I actually saw a baby die while I was there, and I still remember that to this day. The baby was so dehydrated and didn't even look human anymore because it was so malformed from the dehydration, its hair had all turned gray, and it was just, it's the sort of thing you never forget. I don't know if that's a bad thing that I will never forget. I think that a lot of the things I experienced in Angola made me more empathetic, which is something many people who've worked for me have called me an empathetic leader. And I think that's a good thing. I think it's good that I can imagine how much more difficult things can be and try to make them a little better for people around me.

Q: You mentioned that the Angolan civil war more or less ended in the middle of your tour. The U.S. had some role in that. What did you see happening with regard to the end of the civil war from the embassy?

MUNTEAN: So interestingly, my husband and I were on our first vacation out of Angola in Namibia in February of 2002, and we were standing up in the aisle of our plane. I can vividly recreate this memory, trying to put our suitcases up above. I glanced down at the headline of the newspaper of the person in front of me, and it was a picture of Jonas Savimbi, who was the leader of the rebels that we the United States had supported, dead. It said Jonas Savimbi, dead. How much longer will we be at war? Something like that. So

that was like the beginning of the end of the civil war, and we'd only been at post for three or four months.

That gave us a lot more optimism for being able to establish better relationships with the existing government because really, when we first got there, it's a pretty bad black mark or red mark against you when you supported the losing side. When the people who won were supported by the Russians, it's just a very hard environment in which to operate. And it became progressively easier, I will say. There was more access to the government. There was more collaboration with the government as our tour wound down than there was when we first got there. When we first got there, most of our interactions were with NGOs (nongovernmental organizations) or universities, doing the soft power diplomacy that we could still do, but there was very little communication with the government, and that became better and better as we stayed there longer.

Q: Now you speak Spanish. Did that help, perhaps in talks with Cubans?

MUNTEAN: The most interaction I had with a Cuban was a medical issue, because most of the doctors in Angola are either Cuban doctors who've been brought in, or they've been trained by Cubans and so we went to a clinic because one of us, one of our friends, wasn't feeling well, and she was the Regional Security Officer. We brought her to the clinic, and we walked in, and you could just hear everybody was speaking Spanish with a Cuban accent, and the Regional Security Officer said, "Okay, we have to leave." I don't know if she was having appendicitis, like she was in serious pain, and I remember saying to her, like, "There is nowhere else we can take you. This is the choice. Like, do you want this or do you want to be medevaced and hope that you'll be okay?" She said, "I can't be here. We need to leave." So that was one of the most stark experiences of my career because I wouldn't have put the security implication of dealing with a Cuban doctor ahead of my own health and wellbeing.

Q: We didn't have full diplomatic relations with Cuba. I'm sure the instructions that you had were to keep away from Cubans and limit contacts to the maximum extent. You mentioned that the Secretary of State came, that Colin Powell came. Was there anything else about that visit that was eye opening to you, or helped you prepare for the future?

MUNTEAN: He was only on the ground for about five hours. He flew in. Angola wasn't the sort of place that anybody stayed overnight if they were visiting, unless they really had to. I don't even remember what else was on his agenda, because I was so focused on the airport not having running water and hoping that everything would go well there.

But when he arrived, I don't even remember who received him from the Angolan government. May have been the president or - more likely - the foreign minister, but that was actually at the airport, and the other thing I still remember is I got to take a tour of his plane because I was the airport site officer, and I got a little Secretary of State coin. I just remember thinking that it was pretty darn cool that the Secretary would make the time to make a stop in a place that really was very challenging to work in. He took the time to tell us all how much he appreciated our work. Colin Powell was a remarkable

leader in that respect, like he didn't let those opportunities go to waste, where he could say thank you personally to the people who are working so hard for America.

Q: After the end of the civil war, things got easier, and you were working with NGOs. Were there other embassies that you also worked with?

MUNTEAN: There were, so we had an anti-fraud working group, as one always does in the consular world. It was all the EU [European Union] embassies that were in town. I can't remember if there was a Canadian embassy, there was definitely a British embassy, a Portuguese embassy, a Spanish embassy, and so a couple of EU types. Then I think there was, I want to say there was a Canadian embassy, but I'm not recalling clearly, but we used to get together once every couple of months to compare notes about our visa applicants and the socioeconomic situation in general of the country.

There were definitely pockets of extreme wealth in the country, most of which were concentrated in Luanda. Then there were other regional province capitals that were relatively stable and well off. So it was very useful for us to talk to the other embassies who had a little more liberal travel policy than we did. They got out into the field a bit more than we could. It was very useful to exchange that sort of information with them.

Q: Okay, you've described the consular work, and you mentioned Namibia briefly. How did you relax? What sort of recreation was available?

MUNTEAN: Our ambassador was great. When we first arrived, he said, "I require that everyone take a trip out of this country at least every three to four months" because we had that very small security parameter around the city, and it was very stifling. There was nowhere to go to relax, right? There was a pool at the embassy compound, but that was basically a trailer park with a pool. There was a tennis court near the ambassador's residence, but it was hotter than Hades; who wants to play tennis? Then there was this strip of, like a beach and three or four restaurants, and that was it. That was like what there was to do. We had book clubs, we had mystery nights, we made friends with people who weren't necessarily in our embassy, and so that you'd have people to hang out with who were slightly less inclined to talk about U.S. politics or the U.S. state of play, or whatever.

Some of our dearest friends from there were Lisa Leal and Rui Dias, who were architects, and they were there doing engineering architecture projects for various companies at the time, and they were wonderful. They were Portuguese and British. They were in Angola at the same time as us, and they had a movie night every Sunday night, and it was open to whoever wanted to come. You'd have people like, sitting on all sorts of furniture and the floor and whatever. It was just a nice way to, like, wrap up the weekend before you started another week of craziness.

Q: But you did travel to Namibia. Any other regional travel?

MUNTEAN: We did. I was in South Africa a few times. I got to go to Mauritius for a conference, and it was back in the day when you would print all the cables. They printed the cable about my conference for the ambassador; he wrote on the top of it, "you lucky dog," and put it in my mailbox. Then we did an amazing trip to Botswana as well. Yeah. So, we did a ton. I mean, every three to four months over two years is a lot of time.

Q: Now, a two-year tour is relatively short, and especially your first one. You're almost thinking about the next post shortly after you arrive, because within, say, nine months or so, you're already having to fill out your bid list and submit it. Was anyone at the embassy, the ambassador, or any of the other more senior officers giving you advice?

MUNTEAN: Yes, the person who gave us the best bidding advice was the Public Affairs Officer, and the reason her advice was so valuable was because she actually had a very close friend who was working in the post we wanted to go to next. Even though that's not how it's supposed to work when you're entry level officers, because we were in Luanda, Angola, which was one of the worst places one could be assigned at that time, we had a lot of equity, is what they called it. We had built up a lot of goodwill with the assignment officers, because we were in a very difficult place, and had done a good job.

Our Career Development Officer (CDO), when we came back to DC on an R and R trip, we had an appointment with him, and he said, "You guys are like the poster children for positivity. I don't know how you can put a positive spin on the crazy tour that you're having, but you do." That had built enough goodwill that basically, when it came time for us to bid again, there was no Portuguese language post that wasn't via language, and we already had Portuguese. My husband didn't have any other language, he had to do a consular tour, because originally we were supposed to be consular and Assistant Public Affairs Officer and then swap, but another officer came in and took his consular tour. He still had to do a consular tour, and it had to be English.

I mean, that's a pretty short list of places where you can find two jobs. Basically, the best choice was Manila, and our Public Affairs Officer at the time said, "I can't believe that that's true. I can't believe that London doesn't have two jobs. They're always looking for more people for London."

So she emailed her friend, and her friend emailed our CDO, and we got London. I'll take it. We had no idea the system could work that way, right? I was following the rules, like, here's my deadline to submit my bids, and I guess Manila is the best we can do. But that kind of stinks, and not that Manila is bad. I mean, we had already been through a really, really, really challenging tour, so we were hoping maybe somewhere in Europe, at least once in our lives. We got London, it worked out.

Q: Then, what were the two positions that you bid on in London?

MUNTEAN: Mine was a two-year consular tour, and Bill's was a consular slash political rotation. So, he did his first year in the Consular Section and second year in the Political

Section. While we were both in the Consular Section, he did visas the first year and I did passports. We weren't on the same team.

Q: In going to London, were there other considerations that you had, because you're going from a lesser developed country to one of the most developed in the world, and you had never been overseas before.

MUNTEAN: Yeah, so I will say, if you're asking about, like, our bidding considerations, the only bidding consideration we ever had that was the absolute be all and end all was that we wanted to be assigned together, and everything else was gravy. Once we had kids, we looked at schools as well. We weren't super picky about what the job was or who we'd be working with as long as the two jobs were together.

Q: In London you didn't have children yet—

MUNTEAN: —Correct—

Q: Because obviously, Luanda would have been a very difficult place to have a child. London, on the other hand, would have been the easiest place because of good health care and so on. By the time you left Luanda, you were both in good health. You hadn't contracted anything in Luanda.

MUNTEAN: Exactly. Okay. The only thing I had contracted was a little bit of absent mindedness. I would lose things periodically, but other than that.

Q: Now you get to London in 2004. Once again, a little bit of context, I imagine you're not restricted at all, even in terms of personal security, regarding crime and so on, or?

MUNTEAN: There's no restrictions. Yeah, we take public transportation to and from the embassy. We have a local bank account. We use rental cars to drive around the country. Yeah, no restrictions.

Q: Okay, were there any other unusual things about the arrival that you remember any other briefings or things you needed to be aware of in general?

MUNTEAN: I remember being picked up at the airport by someone who was our sponsor. And the original sponsoring officer got sick, and so she didn't meet us at the airport. Someone else did. I had no idea who this person was. He said his name. I was like, "Okay, that's great."

He said, "Well, what sort of questions do you have for me?" I said, "Well, what's morale like in the Consular Section?" He turned around, he was in the front passenger seat. He turned around and looked over his shoulder at me and said, "Do you know who I am?", just like that, really intense. I said, "No, I'm sorry to say I don't." And he says, "I'm the Deputy CG." And I said, "Well, all the more reason you should know what morale is like in the section." He and I are still friends. He was just over for a barbecue not too long

ago, so I guess I didn't alienate him completely, but I remember thinking at the time, "boy, I just stepped in it."

Q: But you're certainly right to ask that question at very large embassies. There are a lot of professional relationships to cultivate, not only with other embassy officers, but with our local hires. How did that work out?

MUNTEAN: I loved my team that I worked with. I started in the passport unit, and there was a chief who was like a FSO-3 level, an early midlevel person. Then there were three entry-level officers, me plus two others, and then there were about twelve to fifteen local hires, several of whom were American, which was kind of unusual, but because so many Americans live in London. I quickly became really good friends with several of the American local hires, as well as the entry-level officers.

It was really kind of a unique experience having locally engaged staff as such close friends, because you really heard all the ins and outs, the nitty gritty of how hard it can be to be treated like that second class citizen because you're not an American officer. Especially hard when someone in the window says, "Well, let me speak to an American," and you are an American, but you're not the American that they mean. That was interesting.

Then we had several like, very stereotypical British people on staff who were very close to the chest, and very introverted, but the whole team really knew how to have a good time together, which was important because we were in a huge passport operation.

Doesn't sound like something that's all that hard, but we were the second largest passport processing post outside of the United States after Frankfurt. We did almost as many passports as we did visas every day. I mean, it was like it was a machine. So it was good to be able to have people with whom you could just let off steam. There was a pub in the embassy. I mean, it doesn't get much better than a pub in your own embassy.

Q: Once again, I don't think anybody from outside the Foreign Service would understand why we have such a huge passport workload. Can you talk about what that was about?

MUNTEAN: Sure. Every American who lived in the UK needed to come to us to get their passport. So anywhere they lived, like London, Birmingham, Liverpool, Northern Ireland, Scotland, they all had to come to London to renew their passports. Anybody whose baby was entitled to U.S. citizenship had to come get a U.S. birth certificate from us. Any American who died in the UK and needed a death certificate, their family had to come to us. If they wanted to notarize documents that they would use in America, they had to come to us. Our line for U.S. citizen services was almost always as long as the line for foreigners wanting to get visas, because there's just a lot of Americans living in the UK, a lot of dual nationals, meaning they're both British and American.

We provided all sorts of services; Maura Harty, the Assistant Secretary I worked for, said, "We provide cradle to grave services for Americans overseas", which is true. Like you

provide the birth certificate all the way up to the death certificate and helping people get their remains back to the United States. Then we had a separate unit that did Social Security benefits in London. That was a huge workload as well. They were from the Social Security Administration.

Q: Now, passports for Americans, in most cases, you're dealing with an American who has maybe an expired passport or other proof of citizenship. Was there a fair amount of fraud you had to look at?

MUNTEAN: There was not much, but I distinctly remember the one definitely fraudulent case I caught, and we never caught the perpetrator, which to this day drives me insane, because we had just started being able to compare photos from old passport applications through the computer. There was this man whose name, date of birth, and social security number was exactly the same as someone who just got a passport two years before. When you went back through history, one of them was like a six foot two Aryan man, and the other one was a five foot seven man of Mediterranean descent, something wasn't adding up, right?

I just remember being so proud of myself because I was the one who caught that. Then, of course, the guy never came back in. We never arrested him or anything. There was a lot more fraud on the visa side than there was on the U.S. citizen side. Though, I think that most people believe it is harder to get away with fraud with a U.S. document than it would be with a visa interview.

Q: Before we go on, given your responsibilities, were you beginning to develop supervisory skills? Are there things now that you think back on that helped you be a good supervisor in the future?

MUNTEAN: Well, I think since I had been in charge in Luanda, I had a hard time stepping back from being a supervisor. When I first got to the passport unit, I was just an adjudicator, so I didn't have any supervisor role over anyone, and within about three weeks of me getting there, my boss said to me, "You seem to want to be in charge of something." I said, "Sure, I'll be in charge, what do you need me to be in charge of?" And she said, "I want us to create a new online appointment system for all these American Citizen Services, so we don't have people lining up out the door." I ended up with a small team of local staff that developed one of the first overseas online appointment systems, which was pretty cool.

I think that's basically the attitude that I brought to the workplace of wanting to help, wanting to do more, wanting to make things better for people. I was pretty transparent, pretty obvious, pretty early on, and I was lucky to have a supervisor who wasn't threatened by that. You can always have supervisors who are afraid you're gunning for their job or whatever. She was not like that at all. She said, "I see an opportunity here for you to do something amazing that will help all of us." That was the big project I worked on with a small team shortly after I got there.

Q: Now, when you do something like that, a major new innovation. Often it can be the subject of an award. Did you get an award for it?

MUNTEAN: Yes, I did. I got a Superior Honor Award.

Q: Which is about the highest award you can get before you're starting to be considered for worldwide awards. Did that help you in any way? At least while you were in London. In other words, the recognition.

MUNTEAN: I think that it probably helped somewhat, because when I moved over to the visa unit, I was made the acting NIV chief for several weeks during a gap between incumbents, very shortly after I arrived there. I think the only reason is that people weren't very upset by that. As I'd already been there a year, so they kind of knew me. They knew that in Angola, I had done visas by myself, so I knew how to run a visa operation, and they knew that I had run something successfully in the passport unit, so I do think it kind of gave me a little more credence with my peers when I was put in charge of them shortly after rotating over there.

Q: All right, before we go over to that section, was there anything else I failed to ask you about passports that stands out in your mind?

MUNTEAN: I don't think so. I mean, there was one event that happened just as I was transferring from passports over to visas that I do want to highlight, which was the London Tube bombings that happened while we were in the UK. My husband and I were up in Glasgow, helping staff the G-8 meeting that was happening at the same time. We had worked an overnight shift, and I remember waking up and him turning on the news before he went into the bathroom, and I said, "Bill, come back out here."

It was like 9/11 all over again, but in London. It was so scary. We had all these missed calls on our cell phones from people in London, from our family, trying to find out if we were okay. We had just been sleeping through the whole thing. It was one of those moments where you think. "I wish I had been in London instead of up at the G-8 helping press" because I was so much more needed in London. When the event happened, of course, all of us who were up in Glasgow were volunteering to come down. And the answer was, we don't need more bodies down here. We've got the crisis under control. What a crazy time to be in the UK for sure.

Two fond memories from our two years there was getting all dressed up to attend the Ascot races and a garden party at Buckingham Palace with Queen Elizabeth II (and hundreds of members of the diplomatic corps!).

Q: Alright. You spend the first year 2004 to 2005 in the passport office. Then it's 2005 to 2006 in visas.

MUNTEAN: Yep, exactly.

Q: Wow! Visas in London. British citizens still needed visas.

MUNTEAN: Only for certain purposes, so, like, if they were going to be a student, not for tourism.
Q: Were you head of section?

MUNTEAN: No, I was just a second-tour officer. I was the team leader, which was an informal role given to the most senior officer who was at the entry level. Basically, I helped with the scheduling. I was the first line of defense when people had questions at the interview windows. I helped with FAM research, and I made sure that all of our caseload was moving as smoothly as possible. I was kind of like an informal supervisor.

Q: Often in London, you don't have Brits applying, you have third country nationals.

MUNTEAN: Many third country nationals, so many. I don't know if I should admit this or not, but we used to play a bingo game, and every week, we'd have a new sheet. Like the center would be a Polish nanny, the top left would be a Russian engineer, and like, whoever got the random assortment of things first won a small bag of chocolate. We did what we could to make it fun. Honestly, I will say, if you have to do what everyone supposedly has to do, a visa tour, it's fascinating to do one in a place where you meet people from a hundred different countries, right? Even if that meeting is only two or three minutes, you still are looking at someone's passport and synthesizing their story as quickly as you can. From Jamaica, from Nigeria, from Sri Lanka, from the Philippines. It doesn't matter, there are people from all over the world in London,

Q: Yeah, yeah. Also, there are people who are visa shopping trying to get into the U.S from places they were already denied and sketchy people and dodgy people and all of that.

MUNTEAN: Yeah, and this was right after 9/11. We had all those screening things in place, so that if you were from any of these forty-five or so countries, we had to do extra administrative processing. There was a lot, we had a whole separate unit that handled administrative processing, because there was so much of it happening in London. Then there was also, we have another special processing for people who we were afraid might do tech transfer. Scientists of a certain caliber, if they're coming to the United States, you worry about them committing espionage or something like that. Those are remarkably detailed interviews, because you really have to hone in on what the person's expertise is and where they've studied and what publications they have.

There was a lot of special processing that we had to do in London because of the variety of applicants. Then everybody's favorite portfolio was the "drugs and thugs" portfolio, that was the one where, if the applicant had perhaps had a run in with the law previously, and you'd be amazed how many pedophiles apply to go to Disney World. That's all I'll say about that. It's not good. Dark humor comes naturally to consular officers.

Q: Oh yes, it does. Absolutely. I had a consular tour, and if you could not laugh at some of the craziness, it would be painful.

MUNTEAN: It would drive you crazy.

Q: Other aspects of visa work that make things difficult are times when you have to contact Washington and ask for visa waivers. What sorts of waivers did you have to ask for? Were these people from countries that were considered adversarial and so on?

MUNTEAN: One of the ones that I most distinctly remember, and it was in the news, so I feel like it's okay for me to talk about is Amy Winehouse. I don't know if you remember her, but she was a super popular pop star, she had a very public drug problem, and so she was not allowed to enter the United States because of her drug use without a waiver. She'd been invited to sing at the Grammys, but she applied so late that we didn't have time to get her a waiver, so she performed virtually from the UK. It was all over the newspapers how the U.S. Embassy in London had screwed this up, of course because it's always our fault.

Q: Speaking of which? Did you need to do much public outreach?

MUNTEAN: We had public outreach, but it wasn't usually about visas. We had a public speaking tour where we would go out to universities or high schools and talk to the kids about America, American government, and American culture. It was more of an education outreach, I would say, than the visa outreach, stereotypically, that we do in other countries.

Q: Are there other aspects of the job that stand out to you?

MUNTEAN: I think one of the things that stood out is how much time we would spend searching on the internet for the place this person was from, just to get a sense for what it was because, I mean, it's one thing to be an American and say you're from Spokane, Washington. You know what that is. But imagine if you were applying for a visa at a Japanese embassy in DC. What do they know about Spokane, Washington? Not a darn thing, right?

For us, it was multiplied by a hundred different countries and all the different scenarios in those hundred countries. We used what we call a temporary refusal pretty often so that we could reach out to, for example, colleagues in Pakistan, and say, is this part of Pakistan? We would get lots of people from the former British Empire applying in London, even though they're originally from India or somewhere like that, because the wait times in their home country were so long. We would just make sure we did a due diligence check with that home country where they should have applied before we would issue the visa.

Q: Did travel documents from Hong Kongers, who received that special overseas British passport as a travel document, create issues when they applied for visas?

MUNTEAN: It did, but I can't remember what they were. I feel like we used to have to put visas on a special insert page for them, so that they could remove it if they needed to for security reasons. I think that's what I'm remembering about them.

Q: And then, in terms of your career, once again, what skills or talents would you say you accumulated there that were useful for you later?

MUNTEAN: Well, my colleagues there nominated me for a Superior Honor Award, which was really lovely. In the visa section, the fellow first- and second-tour officers took it on themselves to nominate me as the team leader, because they thought I'd done such a great job. That just reminded me that you lead from where you are right, like you don't have to be in a leadership position to be acknowledged as a leader. The other thing that I did there, that helped me in my further career, was I was the control officer for Maura Harty when she came to visit London, so I got to spend time with her and her special assistant. That translated into me becoming one of her staff assistants the next year when I went back to Washington. We can talk about that later, but that was one of the most fabulous jobs I had in my career, for many, many reasons.

Q: Now, I don't want to ask you a lot of questions about your husband, because this is your interview, but was the overall experience for the two of you good? Were there pressures or particular things that you had to accommodate that were unusual for a married couple?

MUNTEAN: No, we had a great time in London. My husband, when he moved to the Political Section, he was the Wales officer, the Welsh, —not the whales, like the beluga —and so he got to visit Wales quite frequently, which was awesome. He tried to learn a little bit of Welsh, which was not as successful as visiting Wales. We had a great community of first- and second-tour officers at post that we were very close with. I would say our one regret as a couple, I think, coming out of London, was that we didn't make more local friends because we had such a strong network of people at the embassy. It wasn't like Luanda, where we reached out beyond the embassy to try to create friendships.

Q: Sure, okay, then the one last thing I want to do before we conclude here is, you had a visit from Maura Harty, the Assistant Secretary for Consular Affairs. Was there something substantive that you were working on with her, or was she just there once again for taking a look at one of the largest visa operations, and acquainting herself better with the issues on the ground?

MUNTEAN: Yeah, I think it was the latter more so than the former. I don't remember. You would think I would have her briefing book memorized, since I had to put it all together. I don't think she was there for a bilateral engagement or anything like that. I think she was just on a tour of a few different stops in Western Europe. London was one of her favorites in general. I think she just made a reason to stop there and say hi.

Q: Okay. I would say, unless there are other issues or questions that I failed to ask you about London, let's move on to your next tour in Washington. You were beginning a tour as staff assistant to Assistant Secretary Maura Harty. How did that come about?

MUNTEAN: How that was determined was an interesting story, actually. As I mentioned earlier, Maura visited London while I was working there, and I was selected to be her control officer, which basically is the person who organizes the visitor's schedule and makes sure that the visitor has all of the briefing papers they might need in advance. I basically was like her staff assistant for this visit, and I impressed her so much in that role that she offered me the position as a staff assistant.

Q: One last thing, how did your husband's bidding go since tandem couples always try to bid on the same location.

MUNTEAN: He knew that I was a front runner for the staff assistant job. He pursued a similar job in the Bureau of Legislative Affairs, a one-year assignment. I got back to Washington in April of 2006. I was thirty-four weeks pregnant. I waited until the very last minute to fly back, and so I spent the first several weeks waiting for my daughter to arrive. I didn't actually begin my assignment until August because I took some leave to be with my daughter.

Q: Well, staff assistants have very long hours, you have a new baby. How did you balance that?

MUNTEAN: Because my husband had bid on a similar job, we negotiated so that we were on alternate shifts, meaning when I was on late shift, he was on early shift. We spent the money to get a nanny. We had a nanny who would be there from about nine to five each day, and one of us was with the baby in the morning or the evening, depending on our relative schedules. It worked out surprisingly well. The nanny was wonderful. She was from Peru, so she taught our daughter some Spanish, and we were just really lucky that the people we worked with in our respective offices were very understanding and tried to help make it work for us.

Q: Okay, then when you arrived there, what were your duties? How do you work with Maura?

MUNTEAN: There were three staff assistants there. One was Civil Service, and the other two were Foreign Service. Then there was a Special Assistant, which was like, kind of like the chief of staff for Maura. And we reported to the Special Assistant, and basically the staff assistant jobs were, we sat in on many of the Assistant Secretary's meetings to make sure that if she had assignments that she was giving to people, we recorded those, we established deadlines, we created templates for how to submit paper to Maura, and then we were the ones who edited that paper to make sure it fit her criteria. So basically, we spent a lot of time managing paper. Depending on how much listeners/readers know about the State Department, it lives and dies by its paper by 1,000 paper cuts, some might

say, because you always have to get clearances from everywhere in the building, and the staff assistant is kind of the last traffic cop before those papers go up to the principal.

Q: Now, one question about that process. You cover it. You watch it. You remind people about deadlines. But as you work yourself into the job, do you also direct them to organize it in a way that Maura wants? In other words, do you develop that skill of separating wheat from chaff and keep up with the most actionable information?

MUNTEAN: We did. The group that I was staff assistant with was really proactive, and we did a bunch of training across the Bureau for how best to prepare papers for our principal. Anytime that we had been in a meeting with her and took note of a task, we gave the drafter as much context as possible. So if we knew that Maura was leaning in a particular direction, we would make sure they knew that. If she really wanted to see all options on the table, we would make sure they knew that. Maura was a very open-minded principal, and she really relied a lot on suggestions from the working level. When it was more of a brainstorming situation, we made sure people knew that she wasn't going to be overwhelmed if they sent up four or five different options, if all of those were equal from their perspective.

Q: Maura also had deputy assistant secretaries. Did you have significant contact with them?

MUNTEAN: They sat in the same suite with us. There were three deputy assistant secretaries who sat in the suite: the Visa Services DAS [Deputy Assistant Secretary], the Passport Services DAS, and the American Citizen Services DAS. They each had their own Special Assistant, but those special assistants did not sit in the suite. They sat in the other office of the DAS, which usually was co-located with the division that they were in charge of. Every once in a while we would get a DAS coming out to us saying, "Hey, could you assign this task to my team because Maura and I just had a conversation about it?" We were more directly working with the PDAS, the Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary, and Maura herself, that's who we worked for.

Q: Okay, then the other question about moving all this paper along to its final destination – general to top officials. To get there, you have to negotiate clearances, sometimes with many offices. How did that work out for you because that can be really time consuming?

MUNTEAN: We were lucky in that usually the majority of the paper that we processed was for Maura herself, and so Maura did not require clearances outside of CA [the Bureau of Consular Affairs], very often. When we would have to get other clearances is if Maura was essentially the drafter or the proposer of something going up to the Seventh Floor [under secretaries and above]. Then we, as the staff assistants, would help her get the clearances from the staff of the Seventh Floor. The Seventh Floor staffers were very, very proactive as well. They did a ton of different trainings about how to prepare things for their principals. The Line, which is basically the team that staffs the secretary, also did a lot of trainings for us, so we felt relatively comfortable, and we knew those staffers well enough to call with questions, which is essential.

Q: It sounds like, as a staff assistant, you were as forward leaning as you could be in terms of making the process work as efficiently as possible. To drill down just a little more, you're working directly with Maura, but were you assigned specific areas of expertise? For example, preventing fraud, digitizing records, changing the lookout systems, whatever Consular Affairs might be most seized with at the time.

MUNTEAN: I think one of the things I loved most about my staff assistant job was that we didn't actually have portfolios like that, and we got to touch the substance that came from every single one of the directorates, so fraud prevention and passports and visas and American Citizen Services and the executive director's and computer systems offices. The amazing thing about that for me is, it was only my third tour in the Foreign Service, so I'd been in Luanda which was very isolated, and I'd been in London, which was huge and exposed me to a lot of different people, but Washington is just a whole other level of the amazing number of people that you interact with. When you're a staff assistant, it's very, very important that you balance the pushiness that you might need to have on behalf of your principal with a real collegial approach because everyone you're working with is someone you'll work with again in the future. It's really important to remember that.

I felt very lucky in that I touched a whole lot of different themes during my time with Maura. One of my favorites was, it was around the time that I was working for her, that she established a Consular Leadership Development Committee. Basically, it was a group of people from the mid- and senior-levels who were trying to determine what the leadership tenets should be for Consular Affairs. I just really enjoyed being in those conversations talking about what we aspired to be as an organization. It just inspired me. It was great.

Q: Yeah, now when you say tenet, that's one of the areas in which an average Foreign Service Officer, or even going up to higher levels, is evaluated each year. In other words, you're trying to establish what the key goals are and how to carry them out in that particular evaluation area, if I understand you correctly.

MUNTEAN: The leadership tenets that Maura had this committee develop were basically, there were ten of them, and the idea was that this is how we would measure leadership ability in the Consular Affairs (CA) Bureau. We wanted people who could inspire, who knew how to communicate effectively, who could deliver 360° feedback effectively, who knew how to build great teams. It was all of these kinds of, whether you're in CA or somewhere else, they would really resonate with you. After CA established them, the Economic Bureau and Diplomatic Security very quickly thereafter adopted very similar ones. Then a few years later, it became part of the FAM [Foreign Affairs Manual] for the whole Department as leadership and management principles, and several of them overlapped with the tenets that had been developed in CA. It's a little broader than the very specific measurements we give during evaluations. It was around the time that Colin Powell was Secretary of State, and he was putting a lot of emphasis on leadership training and developing our leaders, like they do in the military, and I think it was just the opportune time to be able to be in those conversations.

Q: Now, one other area you're probably in regular contact with, besides the Line, who were more or less the staff, the outside staff of the Secretary, watching the paper and then advancing trips for the Secretary is the Operations Center (Ops). Usually, your connection to Ops is when there's going to be a crisis or a developing crisis. Did you experience that? Were your relations with Ops also important?

MUNTEAN: For sure, and I would say that Ops had most of our people on speed dial because anytime there was a crisis, there would be the immediate question of whether there's an impact on American citizens, which was CA's primary purpose, to protect American citizens abroad. We also worked closely with Ops. At the time, the way that you issued cable guidance, which is like the telegrams we would send out to the field, is you would have to carry up a paper copy and an electric copy on a floppy disk. This is how old I am. You'd have to carry that up to Ops so that they could officially release it for you because they didn't delegate that authority. If you wanted to send a cable to everyone in the field, then Ops was the place you had to go.

Q: I remember that vividly. I was in Ops in 1988-1989 and that was the way it was done. The other thing about Ops is that you get a bird's eye view of the whole Department because they're routing telegrams and taking calls from the field and so on. Was there anything else of value in terms of your future assignments that you were able to take from the interaction with Ops?

MUNTEAN: Well, I would say that it helped prepare me better to be a manager in a crisis myself, knowing how deep the bench was in Ops, and that you really are never alone overseas when you're facing a crisis. I think that was brought home for me quite well because I was in Maura's office when we had to evacuate Lebanon. That was a huge crisis that occurred during my tenure with her. Then toward the end, we had the domestic passport renewal crisis where there were too many people applying for passports and not enough capacity to process them. We had a good bird's eye view of how the Department rallies to really respond to those crises, and how each individual person all around the world can make a difference. I mean, the Beirut evacuation, we flew in people from just about every continent to help with that. I think one of the things that I took away from being a staffer was not just inspired by Maura herself, but inspired by the mission of our bureau in a way that was very fulfilling to me. I spent the rest of my career being a consular officer in large part because I believe wholeheartedly in the mission.

Q: Yes, the staff assistant in any office also develops some contacts with other staff assistants. Was that networking also valuable for you?

MUNTEAN: Well, I will tell you one of the most valuable networking relationships was with my husband because he was in Legislative Affairs, and he was there during a time that Maura and her team were trying to get a better handle on all the congressional reporting requirements. When you asked if we have portfolios, that's one of the only things that I was quote "the expert" in was talking to the Legislative Affairs Bureau because I could do it outside of business hours and still get an answer.

Q: That is a very lucky break, rare in the Foreign Service that your spouse can actually help you carry out your job. Are there other examples or other events while you were there that stand out in your mind, that you were part of the response?

MUNTEAN: No, I already told you the two biggest ones that I remember. I mean, some wonderful things I remember about Maura herself is that at Thanksgiving and Christmas she would make phone calls to our consular chiefs in some of the most difficult places in the world. Just a personal phone call from her, thanking them for their service, and reminding them that they weren't alone, even though they were out in the field on an important holiday. She was just a really compassionate, empathetic leader, and she was, I think, one of the first role models I had who really embodied those traits in a way that I aspired to do myself. And yet, she was also hard as nails when she needed to be like she had the whole toolbox of being an effective leader.

Q: Yes, you can learn a lot simply by watching an effective leader. Did she also mentor you?

MUNTEAN: She did. One of the reasons everybody wants to be a staff assistant is often it helps you with your next assignment because the person you're staffing for is often involved in deciding where people go. That's definitely true in the regional bureaus. It's also true in CA. It was less true in the Legislative Bureau, as you might imagine. But, Maura really helped both my husband and me with our onward bidding, putting together a good bidding strategy, and growing as a consular officer in a domestic position after the staff assistant job. One of my fondest memories of Maura is, I think it was only a few months after I started working for her, she started calling me Radar, after Radar O'Reilly [of MASH], because she said I was always like a step ahead of her and knew what she needed before she even knew it. She still, to this day, calls me Radar. She sent me an email recently to congratulate me about something, and she called me Radar on that, and she sends me Christmas cards that say Radar.

Q: How was your next assignment planned and carried out?

MUNTEAN: My next assignment, I originally wanted to go back overseas again. My husband and I both joined the Foreign Service wanting to live abroad. We weren't really keen to stay in Washington for another couple of years, but we weren't able to find two jobs together that would work for both of us. I ended up working in the Visa Office in the Diplomatic Liaison Division, and I took over for a man who was retiring due to the mandatory retirement age of sixty-five. I remember distinctly the Managing Director of the Visa Office, who was a woman, said to Maura, "I don't know if Carrie can handle this job, because she's a young woman." Because it was the diplomatic liaison position, was the person who got all the calls from the Saudis about their visas needing renewal, and she just felt like it needed a firm hand. Maura said to the woman who was in that position, "I think you're underestimating Carrie."

It was really an awesome job. There were times when I had to push back on foreign diplomats, but we were the first team to pilot online visa renewal because our visa application for foreign diplomats was much more streamlined than the usual application. We got to do that. We did a ton of training opportunities for the foreign representatives. I went up to New York and did one for the foreign missions to the United Nations about domestic employees, about their own visa requirements, about visa eligibility for their spouses and children. I got to rewrite large portions of the FAM, which only a consular geek would be excited about. The two years went very, very fast. I got pregnant with my second child during that tour and gave birth to him. We were very busy, both at work and at home, and then one of the nicest things about the job in the Visa Office was that I was finally in a job domestically that had kind of normal hours, so I had a lot of time at home with my kids, which was great.

Q: Sure, as you're doing your work in the Visa Office at this point, you're in about five years. Did you get tenure? Did both of you get tenure? And now you're thinking really, very seriously about making the Foreign Service a full career?

MUNTEAN: Yeah, so I joined, fully intending to stay in forever. I was a Kool Aid drinker from the first day, and my husband, similarly. We both got tenured during our second tour in London, and I got promoted to an FSO-3 before I left London. I think he was promoted the next year, and then by the time that I had taken this job in the Visa Office, it was actually what we call a stretch assignment, meaning it was an FSO-2 level assignment, but I was still an FSO-3 officer, and I got promoted to an FSO-2 while I was in that job.

Q: That's actually a rapid promotion. You must have been doing something right?

MUNTEAN: Thank you. I like to think I was. Although I will say, when we got around to bidding again, I kind of regretted that I'd been promoted so fast because there's more FSO-3 jobs than there are FSO-2 jobs, and especially as we were bidding as a tandem, there's just a lot more flexibility the lower rank you are. It sounds ironic for me to say I was promoted too fast, what a shame poor poor me? But, it did cause a little bit of complication.

Q: You've covered all the work responsibilities, but were there any famous or special cases that really required a great deal of work for you?

MUNTEAN: Gosh, any famous or special cases. Oh, I know this is very niche, but one of the things that I worked with the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Service on was the foreign diplomats who basically decide to claim asylum in the United States because of regime change in their home country, or whatever it might be. Working on those was fascinating because when you apply for jobs in Washington I don't think people generally think about the overseas component to those jobs. What I mean by that is, I mean I didn't know anything about most of these countries that the diplomats came from, so I would be corresponding with our consular officers in those posts to really better understand, would

this person really be in danger if they came back? Then I had to write a memo either supporting their application or not, and citing some good evidence from posts in the field.

I enjoyed being a liaison to the diplomatic corps, but even more than that, I enjoyed being kind of the subject matter expert on diplomatic visas for people in the field. I did get a lot of inquiries from people overseas, and I found being able to help others to be very rewarding as well.

Q: Looking ahead, how do you and your husband determine where you're going next?

MUNTEAN: Well, we looked at the world and we looked at the places where there were two jobs, one for me and one for him, and I wanted to do a consular job. Luckily, every place in the world has a consular job, and then he wanted to do an economic or management job. We found two jobs in Panama, and I already spoke Spanish, and he had time to take Spanish. That's what we were selected to do. He was one of the economic officers at post, and I was the Deputy CG [Consul General], or the Visa Chief in charge of nonimmigrant visas, immigrant visas, and fraud prevention. We were there for three years, and living in Panama with two small children was amazing. I mean, we could afford to have a nanny, which was awesome. She also made us dinner sometimes, which was even more awesome.

We felt like we were living a charmed life. We lived in former military officer housing in the Canal Zone, and we were literally walking distance to the Panama Canal, which was pretty cool. It was just a fabulous time. I learned a ton about being a manager through that job because I was managing quite a large team of local staff and three or four Americans and we landed quite well out of our two jobs in Washington.

Q: Now that you're describing the added responsibilities, this is also the first time you're supervising a fair number of people. Can you describe the office? How many people?

MUNTEAN: Sure. We had four American first- and second-tour officers, and then myself and the CG. So the CG was an FSO-1 officer. I was an FSO-2 and everyone else was FSO-4s or FSO-3s. Three of those officers would focus on Visa Services and fraud prevention, and one was in the American Citizen Services (ACS) unit. My boss had a strong preference for being the oversight for ACS. He handled the most complicated ACS cases, and I was the one responsible for training and adjudication review and all of that for the three officers who were doing visa services.

There were about, I want to count correctly, about eight local staff that were on our team across immigrant visas, nonimmigrant visas, and fraud prevention. I also was the supervisor for the cashier because I was responsible for reconciling our fees every day and making sure that we didn't lose any money. It was a pretty awesome team all around. The visa services jobs are usually an entry-level position for local staff, and so we did get a lot of turnover during the time there, which is pretty normal. The supervisor there had been promoted mostly due to how long she had been on the job, not due to having supervisory skills per se, and so we spent a lot of time with her trying to get her to

supervise. She was definitely a subject matter expert in visa services, but she wasn't leading her team. And so that was the first time that I worked with someone who I was trying to train to be a better leader themselves, if that makes sense.

Q: This is an American that you're talking about?

MUNTEAN: No, she was the local staff.

Q: It's not uncommon that local staff have a wealth of knowledge of their country and an institutional memory about how the section has run in the past. But they can be slow to adapt to change or take on different responsibilities.

Separately, let me drill down on the other activities in your section, starting with the cashier. At that time, the fees collected by the Consular Section were used for maintaining the Consular Section. In other words, it is one of the only State Department offices that actually funds itself through the collection of fees.

MUNTEAN: Yeah, that's true. I think Consular is widely renowned as the only self-funded part of the State Department, and because we do a cost of services study every two or three years and set our fees for visa and American citizen services based on the actual cost of doing business, and that's averaged around the world. Obviously, it's going to cost a lot more in Switzerland than it is in Nigeria, per se, just because of different benefits and different local compensation packages. The State Department gets to keep the majority of the fees collected by CA, not all of them, some of them go back to the Treasury, but enough that we get kept in business. Usually, if there's a gap in federal funding due to a lapsed budget or continuing resolution, consular work can still happen, because we have our own revenue.

Q: The other thing about the Consular Section in Panama is that it is moving into the digital age with more data available on line and more capable of being stored. How did that affect your work?

MUNTEAN: Yeah, so during my three years there, we transitioned from collecting everything in person, and it wasn't our cashier, necessarily, who did it. We had a contract with one of the largest banks in Panama, so visa applicants could walk into any branch of that bank and pay their fee, and they just sent us their receipt. While I was in Panama, we transitioned to online payment, which was a big development, and I remember us having to spend a lot of time trying to convince Washington that Panama's banking system could be trusted enough to allow for online payments. There was a lot of reticence in Washington to really expand that very fast or very broadly, for good reason. Fraud is for real. There are operators in various countries who would buy a hundred MRV [Machine Readable Visa] fees and then resell them at a higher price, and all the nefarious things, but it definitely made everything much smoother for our applicants.

We also had gone to an online visa application by then as well, so almost everything was electronic and relatively or, I mean, I would never say the State Department was on the

cutting edge of technology, but relatively soon after you could do it other places you could do it for your visa, which was pretty impressive.

Q: Great. Rollout was okay. There weren't huge and frequent glitches.

MUNTEAN: There weren't huge frequent glitches. There were a couple times when our whole worldwide database for name checking went down. That was a big deal because they didn't have enough servers for it. Basically, in Panama, we were often the guinea pigs, because so many people in Washington knew me from my time in the Visa Office that we often were the ones helping to test out things. We probably had more glitches than other people did, but we did get to help fix those glitches which I found very rewarding.

Q: Unless there's anything about that aspect of computerization I want to move on to the next section of your office, American Citizen Services (ACS), because so many Americans live in Panama. What was the nature then, of all those American Citizen Services?

MUNTEAN: We were one of the only embassies in the Western Hemisphere that had a Federal Benefits Unit. The reason why is because everybody who worked in the Canal Zone was actually a U.S. government employee, and so they got U.S. government benefits. So, we had a six-person team dedicated to federal benefits, which include veterans. There were plenty of military veterans living in Panama. It also included Social Security and the Railroad Administration. There were all these very specific to Panama, type of federal benefits that were done.

On the ACS side, there were special rules for citizenship acquisition related to being born in the Canal or working in the Canal. It was a really unique place to do ACS work for that reason, because it was the only place covered by those specific regulations. And we had a couple of people on our local staff team who were really, really well versed in it. We would have to go look people up on old microfiche. I don't know if you remember microfiche, that was how we proved whether or not someone had worked in the Canal by consulting the microfiche. I remember one time my boss, who preferred the ACS work, said to me, "If you end up in my ACS window, you've either made a series of very bad life decisions, or you need a document. Those are the two choices."

Q: I worked in Costa Rica, and there were far fewer American citizens retiring there, but significant enough to have one federal benefits officer, and there were a lot of Americans who made bad life decisions living in Costa Rica.

MUNTEAN: And because it doesn't cost that much for them to get there. We would have Americans show up who'd literally bussed down from California. We're like, why in the world would you decide that was a good idea? They'd run out of money in Panama and realize they couldn't get through the Darien Gap [at the southeastern tip of Panama], so they may as well go back home. Lots of repatriation loans.

Q: One thing you have to do with ACS is deaths and death certificates, births and birth certificates. Was that a lot of work, or, because it was a special location, there were other means of doing all that?

MUNTEAN: No, we definitely still had to do lots of reports of birth and death. The other thing was that we had a pretty high workload of prisoners, which you haven't mentioned yet, but is the dark underbelly of Americans making bad decisions. We had two people who were in for mass murder, one of whom had eaten parts of his victims' bodies. You hear these stories about these people, and then you have to go visit them and bring them magazines and vitamins. Crazy times.

I will say one of my favorite stories from my career came from visiting a prison in Panama, and we were in this kind of an open-air conference space, but it was open to the outdoors. There was a roof, but no walls, and there were probably about fifteen Americans, all men sat in a circle around me, and I was in the middle with my local staff member. That was the privacy we were given to talk to each of these prisoners. The prisoners very nicely had their chairs turned outwards so it wouldn't look like they were watching, at least. Then all of a sudden, I'm in the middle of talking to one of the prisoners, and a siren starts going off, and the prisoner I'm talking to says, "Get under the table." I was like, "Get under the table?", and he said, "Yeah, there's a riot happening. We will protect you. Just get under the table and put your shirt over your eyes in case they use tear gas." I got on the phone to our regional security officer, and I said, "I know there's nothing you can do, but I at least want to call you to let you know I'm in this situation." We got through it fine because the Americans created this lovely little cordon of security around us even though there were no prison guards in sight, but yeah, that's one of my craziest stories from being a consular officer.

Q: Wow, that's pretty crazy. Okay, then with the visa section, were you more or less disposed to issue visas because Panamanians would be more or less reliable to come back to Panama?

MUNTEAN: Yeah, the vast majority of our visa applicants in Panama were middle class. They had good careers, and they would much rather be living in Panama than in the United States. They just wanted to take their kids to Disney World once or twice. We had a lot of airline crew. So, we would do probably twenty or so of those every day, lots of crew for cruise ships as well. We ended up with people from all different walks of life, including people from other countries. We would often have Filipino seamen coming in with their seamen's book to get C-1/D crew visas. The most challenging ones we had though, were, and this was like a special project I worked on with the law enforcement community and post, was people who'd been accused of terrorist financing. There was quite a large Lebanese origin population in Panama, and some of their political contributions were not looked upon so kindly by the U.S. government. Those were some of the more challenging visa cases that we dealt with. We had a really great collaboration with our Federal Bureau of Investigation attaché at post, as well as we had a Customs and Border Protection attaché and Drug Enforcement Agency attaché who worked with us

quite closely. When we were looking for fraud or nefarious wrongdoing, or anything like that, we had really great resources at post to help us out.

Q: Okay, then anything significant in immigrant visas? Because basically, Panamanians, as you said, with the visitor visa, could pretty much go back and forth.

MUNTEAN: The immigrant visa workload was pretty small. I wouldn't say that Panamanians had a huge desire to immigrate to the United States. I mean, it wasn't like Mexico or the Philippines or India, where there's a twenty-five year wait time or anything like that. Honestly, I think most Panamanians preferred to be in Panama. Unless they had married an American who refused to live in Panama, they tended to stay where they were because they could afford a great lifestyle there on less money than they would have needed for a similar life in the United States.

Q: You mentioned seamen and crew. Was there anything particular about the fact that ships went through the Panama Canal? Was there something unique about that?

MUNTEAN: Not really. You would think that maybe we'd get, like, lots of cruise ships, sick people, or anything like, but I don't remember any incident. The only thing I do remember is a couple that was on a private yacht, and they got washed ashore, and their boat was no longer seaworthy, and they were in a very remote part of Panama. I remember them calling, and a U.S. congressman calling on their behalf, saying, we really need you to get out there and save them. I was like, "I don't know what you think the Embassy can do, but we don't have those resources. We can talk to the Panamanian authorities," so a lot of what you do as a consular officer is really manage people's expectations back home, and especially when their loved one has gotten themselves in some sort of trouble. If we had permission from the prisoner, we would call their parent or whatever to inform them that we'd done a visit and that they were well and every phone call ended with, "Well, when will you get my child out of prison?" That's not what we do, actually. We don't get them out of prison.

Q: On average, how much of your work was related to prisoner visits?

MUNTEAN: Well, we had anywhere between twenty and forty prisoners at any one time during my three years there, and we were required to visit them once every six months. But, they were concentrated in maybe three or four different prisons. The women's prison, which is where all the women were held, and I think every woman who was held there while I was there, was convicted of drug trafficking, so being a drug mule, basically. They were often women who were down on their luck in the United States, and someone had approached them for a quick and easy way to make money, and lo and behold, they end up in a Panamanian prison without access to their children.

There were some very sad stories that you would hear, but our role is basically just making sure that the Americans are getting at least equal treatment to what the locals are getting, that there isn't any sign of abuse or neglect, that if they do have some sort of medical need, that they're getting the attention that they need. We had a small budget to

be able to give everyone multivitamins, which was, I think, one of the most popular things we brought, and if we had new magazines, they got very excited if we had new magazines.

Q: Then, you mentioned working with your senior local employee to develop leadership skills, but you were a leader in your own right there, could you share any examples of how you developed as a leader?

MUNTEAN: I will say that I did lead a small team when I was in the Visa Office, but that was mostly fellow Americans. That was very different from what I was doing overseas. When I was in London, I was put in acting unit chief roles a couple of different times, as we discussed before, so I had supervised local staff before. But again, London is a very different beast than Panama. I think one of the keys for me and developing as a leader was always asking my team for feedback. I felt very strongly that it wasn't a one-way street. It wasn't just me telling them how they were doing, but I wanted to hear from them about how I was doing. I think, generally, I was able to establish open enough lines of communication that people felt comfortable telling me when I was pushing too hard. I mean, one of the things that you alluded to was this idea that if you're on the cutting edge or being innovative, or volunteering to test the new things, that then more and more of that may come to you, and that can be tiring for a team if they're always having to try something new. That was valuable feedback I got pretty early in my career: make sure your team is bought in before you volunteer them for yet another pilot program because that can get exhausting after a while.

Q: Managing your work with your supervisor is also a skill. Were there any aspects of that that are worth recounting?

MUNTEAN: I had two different consuls general (CGs) while I was there. They both had their own quirkiness, as we all do. I think the Foreign Service attracts quirky people. My first one was like, very by the book, real stickler about if your day starts at eight, you must be in the door at 07:59, otherwise you're late, and really alienated a lot of the Panamanians, who were more of a Central American culture – a little relaxed, perhaps around time strictures and including a couple of the Americans felt like the clock watching was a little much. Then he left, and someone came in who hadn't done consular work in about twenty years, and I had to do a lot more managing up the second time than the first time. The first time my boss really knew his job, and it was just a matter of like the ways that each of us preferred to lead. My second boss was not familiar at all with what we did, and often did things wrong.

Q: Well, certainly learning to manage up is also an important aspect of developing as a manager, developing as someone who can make judgments about when and how to talk to their boss about some difficulties that are going on.

MUNTEAN: Exactly and often the mid-level position, the one between the CG and the entry-level is really a conduit, like you try to buffer any frustration from above to the people below, and you try to absorb some of the frustration from below before it gets to

the above. Many people say those mid-level positions are thankless jobs. I really loved it, but it was definitely stressful because there was definitely some dissatisfaction among the entry-level ranks with both of those bosses. I'm sure there was also frustration with me because they felt like I should be able to improve the performance of my boss.

One of my favorite things, this is a non sequitur completely, but one of my favorite memories from Panama is that I actually got listed in the cable that said that someone had written an excellent evaluation for somebody, and it is because the second-tour officer who was in charge of American Citizen Services had to go to the Panama airport to help put an American citizen into mental health care because he was walking around telling people he was drinking other people's blood and that he was a vampire. You can't make this stuff up.

Q: Sometimes, as a team manager you have the difficult responsibility of counseling an employee who is not fulfilling their work requirements. There can be many reasons for this. Did you have experience with this?

MUNTEAN: Yeah, so I did have one who was a first-tour officer, kind of straight out of graduate school. He hadn't really had a professional job before this one. Pretty shortly after he arrived at post, he raised his voice to me in a very public setting about something he was frustrated about, and so I asked him to please join me in my office after he'd had a little bit of time to cool down. I told him, "My husband doesn't speak to me that way, and I'm certainly not going to put up with it in the workplace. I don't know if this was your intent, but this is the impact it had." He never raised his voice again. He definitely heard the feedback and understood. But, he was someone who, not only was I teaching him about the State Department, I was also teaching him about the rules of the road in a professional relationship, if that makes sense.

The first year that I wrote his employee evaluation report, we have to check a box about whether someone is ready for tenure, and he's one of the only ones I've ever checked the box indicating we needed a little more time to assess. It wasn't because I thought he wasn't going to succeed. It was because I wasn't sure yet if he was going to succeed. We had worked really hard together his first year, but I wasn't sure I'd seen enough of the variety of things that he might do as a Foreign Service Officer to determine whether or not he would make it. The second year, I recommended him for tenure, and he emailed me when he didn't get tenure, and said, "I know I have you to thank for this." Then the next year, when he did get tenure, he emailed me and said, "and I know I have you to thank for this, too."

Q: Yeah, that's a sign also that he did finally get the State Department corporate culture. It's not infrequent that people who come right out of college, right out of university, who haven't been in a big hierarchy like this aren't quite prepared for all of it at the same time.

MUNTEAN: It's a lot.

Q: Turning to another aspect of work for consular officers, were you able to use your Spanish language skills in public affairs or public speaking?

MUNTEAN: I was the go-to public speaker on visas. Anytime anybody asked to have an interview about visas, it was with me. I got to do a couple of press conferences when we rolled out some new services. We were one of the first ones to do the Global Services contract, which basically meant that everything was going to change about how we did business, how people got their passports back with their U.S. visas in them, how they paid their fees, where they submitted everything. I was the expert in all of that, and got to do quite a lot of press around that. I also did just some public speaking at local universities about U.S. foreign policy and that sort of thing, just to familiarize people a little more with what the Embassy did and what we were doing in the country.

Q: Other than these questions, have I overlooked something that was important to you?

MUNTEAN: Well, I will say that you asked me last time if I had won awards for something I have done. I won a Superior Honor Award when I was Maura's Staff Assistant, and then I won another one in Panama. The reason I won one in Panama is because I asked Consular Affairs to send a Consular Management Assistance Team (CMAT) to post to do an assessment of how our operations were working. We passed with flying colors. Their report specifically said that the reason that section passed with flying colors was almost solely due to me. It was like this really nice call out for all the hard work I'd done with improving efficiency and training people and getting everyone on the same page.

Q: Although it is seldom mentioned, Foreign Service families do need special support, for example, trying to offer positions for non-working spouses, educational support for children, etc. As you moved up in the Service, were you satisfied with these family accommodations? I ask because recruitment and retention of talent does depend in part on guarantee of benefits.

MUNTEAN: I would say the only thing looking back now, looking at what people get now, and the accommodations people have now, the only thing that I regret is that my husband, and this wasn't just in Panama, but Panama was the first place, we never pushed to have time for our family to adjust to the country before we started our job. For example, I hired my nanny in Panama sight unseen, and she reported to duty the first day that we got there and we left our kids with a stranger. We overlapped with her for half an hour maybe, and that's just how people did things because there was no expectation that you would have time off. There was more of the expectation that you probably had a spouse who was trailing, and that person could stay at home, and so I do regret that. I think people would have been amenable to that request had I made it. I just didn't even know to make it because the culture didn't really exist in the State Department at the time.

Q: As you approach the time to bid on follow-on assignments, often the DCM will offer career advice. Sometimes the Ambassador takes an interest as well. Did this happen to you?

MUNTEAN: Yeah, we had two great DCMs who were very involved in mentorship of both the FAST [first- and second-tour] officers and the mid-level officers, and they really helped me with my bidding strategy. I'll tell you, the person who helped me the most when I was bidding in Panama was actually my successor Staff Assistant in CA, who was in a post where my husband and I wanted to go, and she lobbied her butt off for us, like she would talk to anybody who would listen about how wonderful we were. That's really what it came down to, and still does, often to this day, is who do you know where and who's willing to say a nice thing about you and put a bug in someone's ear.

Q: Absolutely, in a sense, it's like any other relatively large organization. The network you develop is often as vital as the skills that you can demonstrate. Where were you looking? What was your top choice?

MUNTEAN: Our top choice, because we thought it was the most feasible to get, was Moscow, not because we had any desire to learn Russian, but there were two jobs there, one in the Economic Section for my husband, and one in Consular for me. They were at the right grade and they were at the right time, so we would have enough time for Russian training. And we had this friend of mine who was lobbying for us, so that was our stand-away top choice.

I was supposed to be the immigrant visa chief. The vast majority of immigrant visa issuances in Russia at the time were for adoptions. While I was in Russian language training, the Russians turned off all foreign adoptions, and so it became obvious that my job was going to be much smaller than when I had originally applied. The incoming Consul General, who was also in Russian training with us, basically kept picking my brain about like, what do you really want to do when you get to post because I don't think the immigrant visa chief job is going to be big enough for you? What do you really want to do? She restructured the section when she got there, she gave herself a visa chief deputy, which had not existed before, and I became the nonimmigrant visa chief, and another person who was supposed to be the nonimmigrant deputy became the immigrant visa chief. It worked out pretty well for everyone.

Q: Okay, now go back one second, you enter Russian language training in what year?

MUNTEAN: 2012.

Q: How was that?

MUNTEAN: Intense.

Q: I mean, Russian is considered a hard language, a nine month course?

MUNTEAN: Ten months.

Q: For almost a solid year, you're doing nothing but training in Russian. You've already learned Spanish and Portuguese. How would you describe the Russian language training?

MUNTEAN: The first language I learned was Portuguese, and that was easy because I already knew Spanish. The reason I found Russian hard is because I didn't know any language like it, you know what I mean. This was the first time I was learning a language where I didn't really have a frame of reference, and it was like you don't even know the alphabet, you have to start from scratch. Different script, different grammar structures. I made posters, and I had them hung up all over my house with all different colors of how to conjugate this and how to do this. I'm a very dedicated language learner. I work very hard to learn the languages, and I tend to do well as a result, but it was incredibly challenging.

I think we were like, six weeks in, maybe a little less than that, and our teacher gave us headlines in Cyrillic, and he wanted us to translate them. It was my turn, and I was looking at the headline, and I'm like, I cannot figure out what this says for the life of me. My teacher says, "Okay, the other students can give you hints." I'm like, alright. They said, "Well, it's about two famous people." I'm like, "Famous people I would have heard of?" They're like, "Yes, famous people you would have heard of. They're very famous. They're American." It was Brad Pitt and Angelina Jolie. I couldn't, for the life of me, figure out what the heck, and it was just transliterated, it wasn't, they weren't Russian words, they were English words in Cyrillic. It's a good thing I like word games. That's all I'll say.

Q: One nice thing about language learning is that the hours are very regular. I imagine you had time with your kids. By then, were they beginning school?

MUNTEAN: My oldest was in first grade, and my youngest we put in a Russian preschool because, of course, in DC, there's every sort of thing you might look for. We found a Russian preschool and I got to be my daughter's Daisy troop leader. She was a Daisy before Brownie, so Girl Scouts, and that was a lot of fun. I was the cookie mom. It was stressful learning Russian, but definitely a more relaxed schedule than you have when you're in a full-time job overseas and always on call, like most Consular Section jobs are.

Q: Also your husband, in other words, family care, balance, you were satisfied with that?

MUNTEAN: Yeah, we managed to get our schedule such that I think my daughter went to extended care, not in the mornings, but in the afternoons, and we could pick her up.

Q: Did you reach the required level by the end of the training?

MUNTEAN: I did. Yeah, I actually exceeded the required level, which is kind of exciting, not in reading, but in speaking because I'm a blabbermouth.

Q: Okay, so then you guys take off in late summer, early fall of 2013. When you arrived, the first question I would ask is, what kind of security briefing did you have in terms of personal security and so on? I don't mean to ask you to give away any confidential information.

MUNTEAN: Yeah, it was definitely a different security environment than we had lived in before, and Angola was probably the most similar, just in the fact that there were a lot of Cubans in Angola and there was a lot of Russian influence in Angola as well. Yeah, the security briefings were pretty much what you would expect.

We lived on the embassy compound, which meant that we were living in a relatively secluded area and we felt very safe on the compound. We had guards who guarded the doors, and we weren't behind the hard line, which is where the Marines are, but the Marine detachment had housing on the same compound with us. It was a very, I would like to say, idyllic, almost setting, because our kids could go out and play on the playground or play in the gym or go to the little shop or go to the pub, and everybody looked out for each other. It was one of my children's favorite places they've ever lived. Actually, if you ask them, they would say Moscow was their top post because they had so much freedom. They could be out riding their bikes or whatever, and everything was safe. Then you went outside those walls, it wasn't quite the same. We spent most of our time inside the walls with other embassy families.

Q: What you're talking about there is crime, is personal security against theft or violent crime and so on.

MUNTEAN: Well, it was also that our kids weren't great at not speaking when we were in public, so we often were easily identified as American, and there was a large amount of anti-American sentiment even among the regular population. Our weekend trips to the grocery store were pretty stressful. Other than that, there was some amazing architecture, amazing culture and art throughout Russia. We went to Saint Petersburg a few times, and I got to visit Yekaterinburg and Vladivostok, and I went to Sochi for the Olympics. I mean, it was a pretty exciting time to be there.

The kids and I took tae kwon do lessons every weekend in the gym from a Russian instructor. We would routinely use the Olympic size pool and then dry off in the sauna afterwards before running across the street to our house.

Q: Sure, then let's go back to the position you took. Since it had to be reorganized, were you comfortable with the reorganization or did you and the consul general have to rebalance a few things regardless?

MUNTEAN: No, it worked out pretty well. The only thing that we definitely rebalanced after the two years I was there was that the NIV [Nonimmigrant Visa] chief really did

need a deputy. The NIV section was huge. There were twelve adjudicators, and I was the only manager doing adjudication reviews, training, and quality checks, and there were probably about twenty local staff that I was responsible for. It was a really large team, and it would have been better to have someone whose full-time job was to be the deputy because instead, what we did is one of the second-tour officers was chosen as the line manager, which basically decreased slightly what their adjudication workload was, and they were an extra set of eyes and ears, first responders, if you will, for our adjudicators on the line.

Q: Sure, it's interesting that in spite of the anti-American sense that you got when you were off of the compound, nevertheless, there was a huge nonimmigrant visa line for applications.

MUNTEAN: Everybody loves Disney World. There were a lot of people, engineers coming to work for folks out in Seattle and computer engineers. There was a lot of professional business that happened between the two countries. Then there were a lot of less professional businesses, like we had very pretty young women who would come in saying they were going to fashion week, which was just a euphemism for they were going to walk the runway on a B-visa, which isn't allowed.

Q: Okay, then in adjudicating visas and so on, did you also often have to kind of go back to Washington because some of these people were sketchy? Maybe they had a little bit of breaking the law of some kind or other uncertainty about their actual intentions?

MUNTEAN: We had a whole position dedicated to liaising with Washington for that reason because we had so many applicants who needed special processing.

Q: Yeah, was there also much concern about giving nonimmigrant visas because they had no intention of coming back?

MUNTEAN: You asked me whether we had a tendency to issue visas in Panama, and the law states that we're supposed to assume that everyone wants to immigrate, so we're supposed to assume that we should refuse them, and then they have to convince us that they qualify. I think our bar was slightly higher in Russia for that, so we did often refuse people for being concerned that they wouldn't come back to the country.

Q: Let's go back, because your job was reorganized and recreated, can you talk about what was for you the most important things?

MUNTEAN: When we did the reorganization?

Q: Yeah. Then, as you get there, how you kind of worked yourself in. What were the most important aspects that you worked on?

MUNTEAN: So when I first got there, because the new CG arrived about eight weeks after me, I actually went into the immigrant visa job, and then the person who was

coming in to be the nonimmigrant visa deputy did that job for about two weeks before the CG arrived, and everyone was told about the change. The first few weeks were a little awkward because we [the deputy and I] already knew that change was coming, but the people at post didn't. So, that was exciting.

Once she made the change, I think the only thing that was a little bit awkward was that the person who was the nonimmigrant visa chief got reworked into this overarching visa chief, deputy CG role. I think all of us were concerned about how he might react to that, but he took it very well. I think he took it in the way it was intended, which was that he became the subject matter expert for the CG because she had never worked in Russia before, and he had quite an extensive experience in Russia. It worked out really well.

Q: Now, you learned Russian and you passed the exam in Washington. When you got there, were you satisfied with the level of training that you got or was it still a bit difficult to break into everyday conversation with people?

MUNTEAN: It was very difficult in large part because at FSI [Foreign Service Institute] at the time, they didn't really teach us useful language. It was all about nuclear non-proliferation and this and that. The first time I went to a café with some of my first- and second-tour officers, it was embarrassing that I couldn't order my own lunch like I couldn't even figure out how to say that. Almost all of the first- and second-tour officers who were there at the time had prior Russian experience. They were either Peace Corps volunteers, or they were Boren fellows, or they'd done something else previously in the former Soviet space, and their Russian was fabulous. It was so embarrassing because their Russian scores, according to FSI, were so much worse than mine, but that was because I had studied it at FSI, I knew how to pass the test. There's always a certain element of familiarity to the test that is helpful.

And so, yeah, it was incredibly embarrassing. I will say my language did not get better while I was there because I lived in the bubble of the compound. I wasn't interviewing or adjudicating very often, so I wasn't interacting in Russian much. It's one of the only places I've lived where I didn't use the local language nearly as much as I thought I would given how much time I dedicated to learning it.

Q: Sure. It is not uncommon, especially for economic and political officers who are trained only for that vocabulary, and then when you need to call the plumber, there's something wrong here. You don't even know how to say faucet or any day-to-day thing, and you have to sort of learn that as you go along. Things also worked out for your husband, at least in general, in terms of working out his job responsibilities, and being able to just work into that huge embassy community, at least at that time, huge.

MUNTEAN: Well, one of the things that we liked best about Moscow was the fact that our commute was so short, my commute was about thirty steps from my front door to my office. I think his was twenty. That's one of the benefits to living right there with your embassy, is even though we worked really long hours, our kids were at school for the vast majority of the day, and we didn't go to work until we had put them on the bus. We got to

put them on the bus every morning, and then we would come home pretty late from work. We had a nanny who would get them off the bus and then stay with them until we were home. It worked out pretty well.

Q: Okay. You arrived in 2013. In 2014 the Russians took over Crimea. There begins to become a lot more friction with Russia. How did that exterior context of relations becoming more strained affect you?

MUNTEAN: Well, it affected us directly because my husband was in the economic section, and he was responsible for figuring out who we should sanction. Of course, the Russians knew that, so we stuck more to the compound after that. I think he felt like the work he was doing was very important. We both were pleasantly surprised that we were able to finish our whole tours. We weren't sure that that was a given as there was always the fear of being declared *persona non grata* by the Russian government.

Q: Because what you're talking about is, when you go off the compound, there was like, official harassment and that. Typically, that kind of situation results in extra pay for danger, hardship, etc. Was that true in Moscow?

MUNTEAN: There was hardship pay. There was a hardship differential of, I think 15 percent maybe 20 percent. I think it went up while we were there. We also got language incentive pay because it was a difficult language. We came back from Moscow with a good amount of money, a nest egg, if you will, which was nice. We also spent a lot of time outside of Moscow. We made sure that every three or four months we got out of the country for vacation. We did spend some of our hard-earned money on good travel in Europe. We also traveled within Russia. I attended the first team skate event at the Olympics in Sochi while I was there to help any American citizens who needed assistance. We also took a tour of the Bolshoy Theatre and I danced on the stage!

Q: It's unfortunate, but a lot of people outside the department don't realize that you are working under a great deal of stress in a country like Russia, and if you don't go out and don't have some vacation, some period outside of the work, you begin to get stress symptoms.

MUNTEAN: Yeah, for sure.

Q: And they're harmful to your effectiveness on the job. Your kids get a good education in their early years. You're more or less satisfied with your job performance. People around you are satisfied. Once again, how are you thinking about the follow on, and what happens with that?

MUNTEAN: Halfway through our two-year tour there, we started reaching out to people based on projected vacancy lists, and we quickly figured out that our ambassador that we really loved working for in Panama was now in Nicaragua. We already speak Spanish and we think that she probably liked us enough to choose us for the jobs. I emailed her OMS, her Office Management Specialist, who had also worked for her in Panama, and I just

asked, “Are we crazy to be considering Nicaragua after Moscow?”, and she wrote back, “It can’t get worse.”

Q: Wonderful, yeah.

MUNTEAN: We got very lucky in that there was an economic chief position for my husband and a consular chief position for me in Managua, when this Ambassador we had already worked for was there and knew us. She had her deputy chief of mission do an interview with us. Because we were in Moscow, and we had upstairs, downstairs, telephones, my husband and I were both on phones, but in different places in the house for this interview. I started out with my little spiel about why they should choose me or whatever, and the DCM stopped me about like two sentences in, and she said, “Let's get one thing straight, you’re already the ambassador’s top choice, I’m just making sure you’re not assholes.” From there, it was just like a very informal get to know each other conversation. We were 99 percent confident we had sewn that up before bidding even really started.

Q: So through the tour in Russia, you remained an O-2 officer, or were you promoted?

MUNTEAN: I did remain an O-2 officer. My CG worked with me really hard on my second year EER [Employee Evaluation Report]. My first year EER we determined when I didn’t get promoted that I focused too much on O-2 level work and not enough on O-1 level work. My second year she put me in charge of visa reciprocity negotiations with the Russians. I got to write about that in my EER. The next year, when I got to Managua, I was promoted to an O-1 out of that.

Both my husband and I were actually O-2s bidding on those jobs in Managua, but because Managua was such a high differential post, we were considered at grade, even though we weren’t O-1s yet.

Q: Then in terms of promotion, how many years had you been in by the time you reached the O-1 level?

MUNTEAN: I reached the O-1 level in 2015 and I came in in 2001, so fourteen years. I went very fast to an O-2, and then I sat at O-2 for quite a while.

Q: Still that’s faster than average.

MUNTEAN: Although, like we said earlier too, the higher up you get, the harder it is to find jobs together, right? It was sort of a mixed blessing that we stayed at twos and were able to get O-1 jobs, even though we were still twos.

Q: You arrived there in 2015?

MUNTEAN: Yeah.

Q: Before we even get to your job, how would you describe the bilateral relationship at that point? Because by then, as I recall, the Sandinistas were back in power, and things were not going well in our bilateral relationship.

MUNTEAN: That's a very good summary. Yeah. We didn't get very much good cooperation, or any cooperation, from Nicaraguan authorities at any level because the Sandinistas had a chokehold on every level of government. Even visiting prisoners required a diplomatic note signed by our ambassador. Everything was hard, and there was no sense that you could make contacts, useful or otherwise, who worked in anything associated with the government. That included hospitals, that included prisons, all the places where we try to make useful contacts on behalf of Americans, we were essentially shut out.

We spent a lot of time working with other countries' embassies that had a little more of an opening to see if we could liaise with them to be able to check on Americans and that sort of thing. There was a lot of creativity in the embassy in Nicaragua at the time that we joined it, and the ambassador who had hired us actually left shortly after we got there. When the new ambassador came in, she was also consular-coned, and I met her in Washington before we even reported to the embassy. And she said, "Here's what I want you to know about me. I know consular work really well, but you are the CG and I am the ambassador, so I need you to push me back to my side of the line if I'm crossing over it." That set the tone for the, I mean we worked together for three years, so it set the tone for the whole relationship. It was great.

Q: All right. Then let's go into your section, how large and what was the division of responsibilities among Americans and local employees?

MUNTEAN: We had six Americans. It was me, an O-3 deputy, and then four first- and second-tour officers. We had a couple of eligible family member positions, and then we had about fifteen local staff. The team was actually smaller, American wise than the team I had in Moscow, but we were dealing with everything. We did immigrant visas, nonimmigrant visas, American Citizen Services, fraud prevention, budget stuff, all of it happened, and I was in charge of all of it for the embassy. It was a big step up for me in terms of the breadth of responsibility, not necessarily the depth, but definitely the breadth.

Q: Okay, let's start with nonimmigrant visas, given the difficulty we had with the government there. Can you talk a little bit about the nature of the NIV work. In other words, did you have a lot of applicants? Were they more or less suspect of becoming intending immigrants and so on?

MUNTEAN: I think a lot of our applicants were actually kind of upper or middle class, or we had a lot of people who worked in shrimp farms in Mississippi and Louisiana. We had a lot of agricultural workers as well. Then we had cruise ship employees because on the Caribbean coast of Nicaragua, a lot of people speak English. So we would have cruise ship employees as well, not as many as we did in Panama. It was a pretty good variety. We'd have some people who wanted to study there. Lots of people who could never have

afforded a trip to Disney World, who decided they were going to apply anyway, and they didn't get visas, as you might suspect. I would say, like if you're comparing the various posts in which I did visas, Panama had the highest issuance rate and Nicaragua had the lowest. That's very correlated to the socioeconomic situation of the country.

Q: Also, were there people under sanction, or a significant number under sanction who weren't going to get an NIV?

MUNTEAN: There were. Almost everybody in the government.

Q: Did you issue after consulting with Washington, were there any significant issuances?

MUNTEAN: Well, the president, if he ever decided to travel, needed a waiver. He was one of the big ones that we issued, and they never gave us very much time. The foreign minister, I think, did not have any issues. His was easy, but there was a vice foreign minister who was always a bit complicated. The mayor of Managua was a big problem.

Q: Similarly with immigrant visas, was that a major load? Were Nicaraguans able to immigrate in any number?

MUNTEAN: It wasn't a major source of immigrants to the United States, nothing compared to Mexico, Manila, any of the big places. My memory is that we only did immigrant visa interviews, like twice a week and only in the afternoons. So, that means we probably had fifteen or twenty a week, which isn't very many, and most of them were spouses of Americans or children of Americans, or parents of Americans. It was mostly family-related immigration, as opposed to employment-based.

Q: Given that it's a relatively small country, what kept you busy?

MUNTEAN: What kept us busy was, well, almost all of it. American Citizen Services was really, really, really challenging in Nicaragua, and so anytime that an American found themselves in any level of problem, it was just really almost impossible to help extricate them from whatever the problem was. We had a few prisoners. There were not as many as we did in Panama, but the conditions were much more dire in Nicaragua for prisoners, and so those prison visits were often very challenging.

One of the things that our team really focused on was crisis preparedness because Nicaragua has several active volcanoes. The political situation was somewhat unstable and we spent a lot of time getting training from Washington and others on how to respond in a crisis. We did victims assistance training for our wardens. (Wardens are volunteer Americans who live privately. They're private citizens, but they volunteer to be a liaison between the embassy and Americans in trouble.) They all said that was one of their most rewarding parts of being a warden was getting that training about how to assist victims of crime and victims of other situations. It was good. We did so much emergency preparedness and then we had to put it into action in my final year when the whole place went to hell in a hand basket, and we had to evacuate our EFMs [Eligible Family

Members]. The only reason that we knew what was going on in other parts of the country was that we had these wardens in place who were messaging me on WhatsApp saying, "Yeah, there's fires here." There's fires there, there's protests here. It was crazy.

Q: Then talk about what happened in that last year, what caused all of this?

MUNTEAN: They were proposing a reform to the social security bill that would have resulted in elderly Nicaraguans getting even less benefits than they already got. Students took to the streets. The elderly took to the streets first, and then they were violently held down by government forces, and then students took to the streets, and then lots of middle class folks took to the streets, and there was an immense amount of repression and response. They ended up arresting hundreds, if not thousands of people, including lots of the student leaders, including anybody who might possibly be a political opposition figure was arrested. A couple of the people who were arrested were dual nationals, so we had Americans in jail as political prisoners.

In the city of Managua, there were actually shots exchanged between the university students and the militia. In some of the touristy areas, they set fires to the public market, a very popular hotel, and it was crazy times. We decided pretty early on that we needed to send home family members and anyone who wasn't essential. That was very challenging because obviously there we had a lot of American citizens living in the country, many of them dual nationals, many of them wondering whether they should get out of town or should they stay? Because if someone knows you're a dual national, then you have a target on your back because you're associated with America.

The Consular Section had to stay open for almost all types of services because you would have people who hadn't documented their children yet as Americans, so they would need an emergency passport issued. Anyway, we trained a bunch of other people in the embassy to help handle duty calls. You mentioned being a duty officer. We basically gave up the duty officer function from the Consular Section because we were working so hard on the actual casework. We trained our DOD [Department of Defense] colleagues to do the triage on the duty and they were amazing at it. We just gave them a script and said, "Here's what you say," and they did an amazing job. They keep their cool under pressure, as we know. It was a really good collaboration.

My husband had to pack up our kids and bring them back to the States, and we left them with some really good friends, and then he came back. For three months, our kids were in the United States with friends or family, and we were in Nicaragua. That was the end of our tour. It's kind of rough.

Q: In other words, they were there for the last few months toward the end of your tour in Nicaragua, and they could more or less expect that. It was a temporary thing, and you'd be back. In this difficult period, how do you and your husband plan your future because so much is going on?

MUNTEAN: Luckily, we had already bid, because the assignment cycle was like the year before the protest broke out. We had decided that it was time for us to come back to Washington because we had done three tours back to back overseas with the one break of a year of Russian. We already knew that we'd be coming back to Washington, and we knew approximately when we'd be starting our jobs. I was starting my dream job, which was the director of 1CA, which is the team that is in charge of leadership and management tenets that we talked about earlier. I was super excited to be in charge of that team. But before we move on to that tour, I just want to end in Nicaragua with some last thoughts.

I was there from 2015–2018. 2018 was a very interesting year in Nicaragua. In the spring of that year, the government passed a law that would have reduced pensions for older people in Nicaragua, which resulted in a massive outpouring of public unrest. At the time, Nicaragua was led by Daniel Ortega and his wife, and they violently suppressed the civil unrest. We were seeing buildings set on fire, including in some of the more popular tourist areas of town, so my team sprang into action to be available for Americans who were calling with concerns.

We had one woman calling, telling us she and her daughter were trapped in a hotel that was on fire and did not know how to get out. We used all of the contacts we had built through our crisis management preparations to help us get to the people who needed the help.

As the protests continued, we relied heavily on private American citizens that we call wardens—volunteers who liaise between the community and the embassy. They were an amazing source of information about where unrest was happening and what sort of damage they were seeing, because it was very hard to get any real news at that time, because things were in such an uproar.

Pretty soon after the public unrest started and the violent repression began, we decided that we needed to send our eligible family members home. At that time, my daughter was twelve, and my son was nine. We made the difficult decision that they would return to the United States to live with friends. Because they were twelve and nine, they could not travel by themselves, so my husband ended up being the one to take them, while I stayed in Nicaragua. He got them settled in the U.S., and we were separated from them for the final three months of our assignment—from May until July—which was hard. That was probably one of the hardest things for our family as a unit throughout our Foreign Service career—being separated.

Luckily, we had friends who were amazing and were able to take them in and give them a normal-seeming life. My daughter still talks about how scared she was that we might not call one night, or that something might have happened to us. It definitely was not a normal time for the kids at all, and it was very difficult for us when we left Nicaragua because things were still so unsettled, and it felt like we were leaving colleagues in a lurch. I know that happens a lot when there are crises around the world, but it seems like you have a little bit of survivor's guilt when you are the one who gets to go home. That

definitely happened to Bill and I in this particular situation. We came back to the United States in July, picked up our kids from my mom's house, and had a month together before we had to go back to work.

Q: I just wanted to mention, because I think a lot of people outside of the Department don't realize the stresses that sometimes affect families out of the blue.

MUNTEAN: Well, that's what was interesting. I think when we were doing all our crisis preparedness in Nicaragua, we were focused mostly on natural quakes. They've had hurricanes; we were focused on something like that. Now you use the same skill set and the same preparation for a civil unrest-related crisis, but it really came as a huge shock to everyone who was there—that the population just went up in flames. And it was really unprecedented in Nicaragua's history.

Q: You talked about the warden system. In most countries, the embassy does have contact with a warden system to pass on urgent news for Americans living there. But it's a relatively minor tool to maintain contact with American citizens since social media and embassy alerts are typically faster and more effective. But it sounds like in Nicaragua, this contact system was much more important.

MUNTEAN: Yeah, so we actually did something that no other embassy had done before, and the Office of Inspector General (OIG), when they came to visit, used it as a spotlight of success for other embassies. We brought all of our wardens into the capital from their various far-flung locales, and had somebody from Washington give them—and our team—training on victim assistance, because one of the hardest things about being in Nicaragua was that it wasn't the kind of place where you could just call up the local police chief and get the police's help. Everything went through the president and his wife, no matter how small. Your request could be as piddly as, "I just need a new ID card because I lost mine." And because we were American and diplomats, I had to go through the very top channels, from our ambassador to the president and/or his wife.

The reason we brought the wardens in was that they lived in the communities, and they were connected to local officials. They could effectively have those conversations that we, from the capital, were essentially not prohibited from doing, but we would reach a brick wall pretty quickly if we tried. They had amazing contacts that they had developed with local hospitals and local police, and they really did come to the aid of Americans. There was one part of Nicaragua that's pretty remote on the Caribbean coast. It's very popular with surfers and tourists, but it's very far away from the capital, so we would have had to fly to get there to help people. So we relied on our warden out there extensively to basically act as a pseudo-U.S. Embassy representative at trials and all sorts of things involving American citizens.

Q: An unusually well integrated warden system.

MUNTEAN: We worked really hard at that. We knew how important it was.

Q: You briefly mentioned where you go next, but let's now pick up on how that assignment came about.

MUNTEAN: This was before any of the civil unrest happened. About a year before the end of our assignment, we started lobbying for other jobs. We had decided that we were probably ready to come back to Washington for our kids' sake, in part because neither of them—our son had never been in a U.S. school, and our daughter had only spent one year in a U.S. school. We thought the United States was probably where we should go.

I was in the Bureau of Consular Affairs (CA)—that's my home Bureau—and I was looking specifically for jobs in that bureau. My husband wanted to work in the economic bureau. He got a job on the Antarctica desk as the senior Antarctica officer, and he stayed in that job. He extended and extended [laughter]—he stayed in that job for five years—

Q: Wow.

MUNTEAN: —which probably breaks some sort of rule, but nobody seemed to know what the rule was, so they let him stay. I went back, and I was the director of 1CA. 1CA is the Bureau of Consular Affairs' (CA) office that focuses on leadership and management development. It provides training and resources for consular professionals around the world—local staff, eligible family members, officers, civil servants, and the passport agencies. They were in charge of Consular Leadership Day, which is a big themed event that happens every year. It was a really great, feel-good office to land in after the trials and tribulations of Nicaragua, because nothing in 1CA was ever a crisis, which was nice. I was not getting phone calls after hours—ever [laughter]. It was a very nice, what we would call a soft landing. The only pressure on me in that job was the pressure I put on myself.

While I was in that assignment, the PDAS (Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary) told me I had won runner-up for the Department-wide Barbara Watson Award for Consular Excellence based on my work as CG in Managua.

Q: Just take a moment to talk about how the training changed over the time you were there. In other words, what were the new things consular officers were responsible for, and how was that changing while you were in leadership?

MUNTEAN: Well, the biggest change that happened while I was there was COVID, and so all of the teams around the world were trying to figure out what work they could do remotely when they were not allowed to go into the embassies. A lot of local staff, officers, and eligible family members found our resources to be very useful during that time, because they could count them as training if they completed some of our online courses and that sort of thing.

We also worked very closely with our assistant secretary, who was a political appointee at the time, to get messaging out in his name around flexibility—how to manage in a crisis,

how to build a team remotely. We did an awful lot of pivoting of our resources from an in-person focus to the hybrid workplace that was becoming the new reality.

It was a really interesting time to be on that team, because I do not know if we would have had the same access to the assistant secretary—if that team would have been his voice—in any other circumstance. I think because it was COVID and nobody knew what to expect or what was going on, they pulled resources together.

Our office actually inherited three people who were evacuated from overseas during COVID, and they became part of our team, helping advise us about what people in the field were feeling, thinking, and wanting to see from us. So it worked out pretty well.

Q: Also, during that time—COVID—it was difficult to be physically present. But did you go out to posts in some way to show the flag or be encouraging?

MUNTEAN: I did—before the pandemic, I went to one of the Consular Leadership Development conferences that was held in Malaysia. Those are amazing opportunities for mid-level officers to come together and hear from folks in Washington about priorities, available resources, and policy changes. That was really fun, because my role was talking about the pivot from being a manager to being a leader, and how they could transform themselves from being the doer or the supervisor of doers to the visionary leader who shapes the mission and gives the inspiration. It was a very fun presentation to give to a group of highly talented officers.

I was able to go see our own course, Consular Management Tools and Techniques, which we offered abroad as well. I got to go to Bucharest, Romania, for one offering. Then the Office of Inspector General (OIG) was inspecting a particular post and asked me to go down to help them with team building because they were very concerned about what they saw there. So I got a couple of good trips in before COVID hit.

Q: Now, during this whole time—pre-COVID and while COVID was going on—you were also in the first Trump administration, and obviously, all kinds of immigration issues were in play. Do you want to talk a little bit about how policy changes were affecting you?

MUNTEAN: Policy changes—I mean, I was in a very idyllic situation in that I did not really have to touch policy very much in 1CA, because we were focused more on the professional development piece, which stays the same regardless of what the policies are around us.

That said, there was a lot of stress around policy changes at the time, and because I was the director of that office, I got to sit in on leadership conversations. Our assistant secretary, though a political appointee, was highly experienced and very concerned about visa policy in particular, and he ended up being a very rational actor in that space, which was very nice for us to see. I think, all in all, he and his leadership team did as much as they could to make things rational.

Q: Was the office itself changed in marked ways even into the Biden administration?

MUNTEAN: Well, during the transition from the first Trump administration to the Biden administration, I had moved on to a different job by then. But I will say that because the COVID restrictions lasted a very long time at some of our overseas posts, a lot of the work we did in the early days of the pandemic to make our resources more hybrid and more virtual-friendly had a lasting impact. It was available for people on demand, which was useful because you had people working shifts and weird hours from home. And so I think that made a big difference in the longer term.

Q: And then, since part of your decision-making to go to Washington was for your kids' education?

MUNTEAN: It did. My son did amazingly in U.S. schools. My daughter had a whole host of issues, and we were glad we were in the United States to get her the resources she needed, but we did not know she had any of those issues when we made the decision to come back to Washington. It all worked out pretty well.

You mentioned PTSD, and my daughter did suffer from PTSD after Nicaragua. We were glad to be back home, where the doctor spoke English, and it was easier to get the help we needed.

Q: Okay, then the last thing about being in this office—you are, as you mentioned, very visible to the assistant secretary, and I imagine the other top officials in the Consular Bureau. Did that help you in terms of where you wanted to go next?

MUNTEAN: It would have, but I made a very interesting decision about where to go next, and I'm laughing at myself, because I remember at the time asking the person I was going to work for if I was crazy to even be considering it. And she said, "Yeah, a little bit crazy" [laughter] because my boss, my deputy chief of mission from my first couple of years in Managua, had moved to the Office of Central American Affairs in the Bureau of Western Hemisphere Affairs, and she was the director. She was looking for a new deputy director, and I knew that I would be really good at that. The deputy director role is like—you're the traffic cop. You make sure all the paper comes in on time, you make sure we have clearances, you're running the office, which is something I'm very good at doing after many years as a consular officer.

So I had my interview with her for this job, and she said, "Well, the only other thing you need to do is talk to the DAS, the deputy assistant secretary, because this is a very important office and they're very concerned about who I choose." So I was very nervous about that. She said, "Don't be nervous. You're already his top choice. The only advice I have for you is, if you really don't want this job, now's the time to say no." [laughter]—

I went from a very relaxed, no-crisis job to a very intense, visible-to-the-White-House, National Security Council-meetings-all-the-time position for the next two years, and I arrived there under the first Trump administration. Migration was obviously a huge

concern during that administration, and then with the shift to the Biden administration. This happens during every transition—the new team comes in with their own priorities and needs. But there's this definite push when you're in an office like that, that's so in focus, to do everything as fast as possible, because they only have four years and want to show that they've had an impact. In fact, if they're worried about Congressional relations, they really only have a year and a half or two to get anything done.

So there's this real push from Washington—from the White House in particular, and the National Security Council—for new ideas. Especially during that transition from Trump to Biden: what can we do to stop the flow of irregular migrants coming to the border? Of course, as soon as Trump lost, people were like, "Oh, okay, it's safe to go to America again," whether legally or not. We did lots of official, formal messaging about how to do it legally—here are the legal pathways. But the fact of the matter is, everybody knew the enforcement mechanism would look a lot different, and it wouldn't be quite so horrible an experience if you tried to come to the United States unlawfully under Biden.

We were under a lot of pressure from the Biden-Harris administration to come up with new ideas and programs to keep people rooted in their home countries. We did campaigns about travel safely, travel responsibly, and all of that. But really, what our office was focused on was: what could we do in partnership with Guatemala, Honduras, and to a lesser extent, El Salvador, to improve the conditions in their countries to the point that people would stop coming north? That was a huge pressure point on us.

There was a lot of pressure on Panama at that time, because it was seen as a funnel for all the irregular migrants coming from South America. They all had to go through the Darién jungle, and Panama just put them on buses and let them go. Costa Rica did the same. So there was a lot of pressure for us to try to get our partners in the region to change their approach to migration, which was a heavy lift.

Q: Then the other thing in transitioning is also changes in procedure, or changes in making things more efficient—you had done that in other posts. Is that also something you were looking at?

MUNTEAN: In the Central American office, when I first arrived, the director, Marta, gave me a top ten list of things she wanted me to work on. The very top one was figuring out a better way for our office to give clearance on documents, because things were falling through the cracks, and we were being listed as information only for a lot of things that really needed our substantive input. One of the very first things I did was create a shared mailbox for our clearance requests, and we set up a shift pattern where everybody had a four- or five-hour stretch once a week to be in charge of that mailbox. And we created all sorts of standard operating procedures (SOPs) about what needed to go up to the deputy director, what needed to go to the director, and what could be cleared by desk officers without consultation. We tweaked that—It was a living document. We tweaked it as we launched the new clearances mailbox and continued to tweak it as we went.

Then we decided to implement a duty officer program, which most people in Washington do not have. That's usually an overseas program. We did that because we were getting so many after-hours requests from the National Security Council (NSC) and from the White House that were being missed—people would email just the one person they knew, and that person might turn their phone off at seven o'clock that night, because maybe they needed to go to a concert or something— and so we implemented a duty officer program so that we would have one person who, for the whole week, was basically the point of contact after hours, checking emails and making sure we were all looped in. The rest of us would put an auto-reply on our mailboxes starting at six o'clock, or whenever we finished for the day. That [auto-reply] said, "If you need anything before eight a.m. tomorrow, please contact our duty officer." That worked pretty well, because when you weren't the duty officer, you could put your phone away and ignore it. This relates to what you were talking about regarding changes in technology. I mean, the fact that we now carry around a mini computer in our hands all the time means you're always connected, which can be good, but it can also be very stressful and lead to burnout. You need to protect some space for yourself, your family, and your free time and activities. The duty officer program really helped us do that.

Q: Okay, then, once again, the other thing changing overseas for consular officers is the opening and closing of posts, and you're in a position where you're undoubtedly in touch with all of these changes. How did that affect everything you were doing?

MUNTEAN: Of course COVID was a major issue, but this was also a time when we opened a lot of new embassies out in the Pacific island nations.

We opened a bunch that didn't affect Central America very much. [Laughter] But that didn't impact us. Our seven countries were pretty much stable, and they all had embassies. None of them was big enough to need a consulate. So the footprint for them stayed pretty much the same throughout the time I was there. I will say one of the most interesting parts of my job—which I'm glad you asked me that question, because it sparked this answer—was being involved with the bidding from the Washington side, meaning helping to rank-order candidates for jobs and then going into these massive bureau-wide discussions about, okay, well, Mark applied for Buenos Aires and Recife, and this other office, "who wants him the most," which one is he coming to? That was fascinating to be part of from the Washington side, because you really get to see how those decisions are made, and how it can all come down to whether you have a very effective advocate in the room or not.

Q: But also, since prior to being in this position in the Central American office, you were in the leadership office, that must have given you a little more understanding of the talents and skills of the people who had been recommended or requested for various posts, and who would be the best fit.

MUNTEAN: The interesting thing about the job I had before was that we ran something called the Consular Leadership Indicator survey, which we did once a year. It was basically a way for supervisors to get 180-degree feedback from their direct

reports—anonymized feedback about how they were doing as leaders. One of the things I loved when I was in CA was helping sort through the bidders for jobs in my little office, because we could ask them for things like their Consular Leadership Indicator or any other 360 evaluations they had done.

The bidding process in general in the State Department is a little broken. We ask people for references as part of the application process for onward assignments. We try to find people who will say nice things about us, so all the references say nice things. It becomes very hard to distinguish between the very, very best and the very, very best—everybody is the very, very best.

Q: Right, that also reminds me that, as a deputy director, you also play a role in who gets positions in the Office of Central American Affairs. Do you want to talk a little about that?

MUNTEAN: Sure! I can talk about that. And don't let me forget—I also want to talk about how I actually got to help interview and select ambassador and Deputy Chief of Mission (DCM) candidates, which was also fascinating! Each one is different. For the one for our own office, what I did was include the incumbent of the position on the interview panel, and I asked that person to help me come up with the interview questions as well, to try to make it as tailored as possible to what they viewed as being key for success in their position.

Why that really helped was because we had created in Central American Affairs a really closely knit team that was very collegial, worked really well together, and had pretty high morale despite the very up-tempo pace we had. We wanted to replicate that to the extent possible with the next generation of people coming in. My thought was that the best way to do that was to have the great people we have now help select the next round. That worked out very well.

It was interesting because the people who were helping me select had not selected candidates before, so this was their first time seeing people's 360 evaluations and understanding how wonderful everyone is. Then we decided on our own decision criteria for who stood out the best. Those were really fruitful conversations, because it really boils down to what you think is going to make someone successful in this position. And that is very dependent on the post, the office, the responsibilities, and what prior experience we were hoping they might bring.

Q: Okay, now you also said, "Don't let me forget the ambassador and DCM."

MUNTEAN: [Laughter] Yeah, so the DCMs—I was responsible for interviewing all the candidates who applied for DCM positions in Central America for three years in a row. And I was only in the job for two years, but I just got lucky enough that I hit the cycle three times. So I got to interview for every single one of our posts at some point.

The Bureau of Western Hemisphere Affairs (WHA) had the requirement that you interview every single candidate, whether there were people who were O-2s [officers at the O-2 pay grade] bidding on O-1s [positions at the O-1 pay grade]—they might get promoted, so you had to interview everyone. (In the Foreign Service mid-level grades, an O-2 officer is roughly equivalent to a lieutenant colonel. An O-1 officer is roughly equivalent to a colonel. As you move up the ranks in the Foreign Service the numbered rank becomes smaller. A promotion after O-1 is equivalent to Brigadier General and places you in the Senior Foreign Service.) There were a lot of interviews. Every once in a while, I would see someone's name and think, "Do I know them only because I interviewed them?" I think that might be how I know them. I interviewed a whole generation of people, basically. [Laughter]

The most challenging part for me was that I made recommendations, but the final decision wasn't mine, and that's obvious, because they were going to be deputy chiefs of mission. The list goes to the DCM/ Principal Officer (PO) committee, and then that committee can make a recommendation about changing the list. Most of my lists went through our deputy assistant secretary relatively fine, but then they would get up to the assistant secretary or the Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary (PDAS), and those people would know someone and want them moved around. There wasn't a lot of transparency coming back down to me about how things had turned out, which was a little frustrating, because I felt so much ownership over this process and had spent so much time getting to know all these people. At the same time, we know that's how business works—just about everywhere, who you know does make a difference.

It can't all just be about your interview or your 360 evaluation, but the DCM process was fascinating. The ambassadorial process was even crazier. One of my bosses was doing the selection for Chief of Mission Ecuador, and we had thirty-five candidates to interview—everyone just as impressive as the next one. That was so hard—rank-ordering thirty-five people for a huge, important job. We all took it very seriously, but that was a lot of time to interview all those people, and then we rank-ordered them. I was told, well, that person's not quite ready yet. It was kind of frustrating, because it seemed a little like there was a foregone conclusion about who the top five were. So why are we doing all this? I don't like doing busy work. Let's just leave it at that. If my work isn't going to matter, I don't really want to do it.

Q: And in that—you're mentioning Ecuador—but did political appointment considerations also play into it?

MUNTEAN: They did when we were selecting for DCMs, because we knew that three of the Central America posts—Panama, Costa Rica, and Belize—pretty much always have a political appointee. So when you select for those DCMs, you're really hoping to find someone who's worked with political appointees before, because managing up in that environment is substantially different from managing up with a career ambassador.

Q: As a leader in the office, did you try to schedule time for an incoming officer to overlap briefly with the predecessor so that there could be a smooth handover? The experienced officer could brief and get the new one settled in.

MUNTEAN: Yeah, overlap is definitely not typical, especially in Washington. Washington almost always gets the short end of the stick because posts have smaller staffs, so they get top priority. But what we did do is, everybody who was leaving that first year—I had already been there one year when the first summer happened—I gave everyone a template for how to do a handover memo, and I cleared all of them before the person's last day, so we'd make sure we had a handover memo with sample documents attached.

Then we also created a whole new onboarding and training format for that new group of people, because it was so important to us that they come on board as seamlessly as possible with their predecessors. Our training basically had every single person in the office assigned one or two topics to brief the new person. That way, the new person was meeting everyone—even though we were still hybrid, they would meet everyone virtually or in person—and they would know that all these people are my resources. I'm not just going to Carrie every time because she's Deputy Director, but I can also ask the Belize desk officer, because we know each other.

Q: Since, as Deputy Director, you had so many other personnel issues, were there instances where resolving personnel conflicts was necessary to keep your team motivated, reduce friction, and avoid losing productivity?

MUNTEAN: We were really lucky in the way that our office was staffed. There really wasn't anyone who would have a reason to be in conflict with anyone else. Everybody kind of had their own country that they covered, and they were the expert on that country. When they were going to be out of the office, they would brief their backup about what was pending, and we had an amazingly strong camaraderie and a group of individual team members who were extremely talented.

We did have a couple of people who I would say were underperformers—not conduct issues, but they had a hard time keeping up. The nice thing was that the portfolios were relatively fungible, so if someone was struggling, we could take some of their tasks and give them to someone else for a little while. That wasn't a long-term solution, but it helped, at least, in the short term.

We worked very closely with two folks who just weren't quite as quick on the uptake as everyone else and needed more time for their documents. To give context, we would get a tasker from our front office—the Assistant Secretary's office—on a Friday at like three o'clock, saying it was due at nine a.m. on Monday. This product needed to be drafted and cleared throughout the building and other agencies before we sent it at nine a.m., and people handle that amount of pressure in different ways.

We did a lot of behind-the-scenes coaching, hand-holding, and explicit delegation so that everyone felt as supported as possible. A couple of people were always volunteering to help others, which was very helpful—but one of them got a little burnt out, so we pulled back from having that person do quite so much.

It was really just a matter of having one-on-ones with everyone on the team at least once a month. I tried really hard to keep my finger on the pulse of how each individual was doing, because it was a really high-stress environment.

Q: And how many reported directly to you?

MUNTEAN: Ten.

Q: In a Washington, D.C., situation, that's quite a bit. At this point in your career, where are you in terms of your seniority grade and so on?

MUNTEAN: I was an O-1 (equivalent to colonel).

Q: Okay, so at this point, you're trying to cross the threshold into the Senior Foreign Service?

MUNTEAN: Exactly. So my husband and I were a tandem, and for a long time, I didn't open my window, which is the step before competing for the Senior Foreign Service. The higher we both moved up, the fewer places we could serve together. We knew we wanted to go overseas at least one more time, and to make that work, it made sense for me to bid as an O-1 instead of a Senior Foreign Service officer. We bid in the summer of 2021, and then I opened my window the next go-round.

Q: When you use the expression "open your window," that means you commit to five more years of evaluation, and if by the end of those five years, in your final evaluation, you are not promoted to Senior Foreign Service, you must retire.

MUNTEAN: Exactly.

Q: I wanted to clarify that, because it's the final career decision all Foreign Service officers have to make. There's also a bit of strategy about when to do it, because once you do, that's it—you only have those five years left.

MUNTEAN: Yeah, we bid in the summer of 2021 and decided we wanted to go back overseas. I had taken that job in Central American Affairs in part to learn how the DCM and PO selection process worked, because I thought that's what I wanted to do next. So that's what I focused on—getting a DCM or Principal Officer job for the following summer. My husband was unable to find any jobs that would let him DETO (work remotely from overseas) at the O-1 level, because almost all O-1 positions are supervisory in nature, and he had a very hard time finding anything. He decided to retire

when I got my Principal Officer position. So we went together to Brazil, and he retired the month after we arrived.

Q: So was Brazil essentially one of the top posts you were looking for?

MUNTEAN: Brazil was my top choice, in large part because it didn't start the same summer I ended in Central American Affairs. I had a year between when I finished that job, which had been very stressful, and when I had to go to Brazil, so I was very lucky. I got four or five months of Portuguese training, then moved to a short-term job in the Office of Leadership and Management at the Foreign Service Institute. I also got training to be a leadership coach and got to do some of that work. It was a really amazing year of consultations and fruitful professional development before I went to the post.

Q: Okay, and were you still an O-1, or had you been promoted?

MUNTEAN: I got promoted in 2022.

Q: Okay, so you went into the principal officer job in Porto Alegre in your first year in the Senior Foreign Service?

MUNTEAN: Yes.

Q: Okay, let's go to Porto Alegre. What did you find when you arrived? What kind of post was it? How large, and so on?

MUNTEAN: So it's not a very big post. They have about twelve officers in the Consular Section, which is by far the biggest part of the consulate. Then we had a management officer, a General Services Officer (GSO), a Regional Security Officer (RSO), an Assistant Regional Security Officer Investigator (ARSO-I) in the Consular Section, a Public Affairs Officer (PAO), and a first-tour political-economic officer (Polecon). There are a lot, and almost every single section head was a first-time section head. So it was a very junior team as far as experience, and I had just come from a really high-functioning, relatively senior team in Washington. That was a big shift for me, right? Like your expectations need to be drastically altered [laughter]—and the consulate had only been open for six years, so even the local staff—most of them had, at most, five years of experience.

Q: So, take a moment then and describe Porto Alegre. Why did we open it, and what were the important things we intended to accomplish from that point?

MUNTEAN: Sure! So we opened it largely because it was a schlep for people in southern Brazil to go to São Paulo to get a visa. The primary purpose was that there was enough demand in the south to handle visas locally. Second, it's a really huge innovation hub in Brazil, so a lot of the information technology (IT) sector is very popular there. And it also has a ton of agriculture, with many U.S. companies, like John Deere and others, selling

their awesome products to farmers in southern Brazil. Those were the main things we focused on.

Also, since we did not have a dedicated Foreign Commercial Officer, I got to do all the hobnobbing with the American Chamber of Commerce and all the business people, and I got to go to all the agricultural fairs. And, yup, that was me. [Laughter]

Q: Alright, let's start with the Consular Section, since that was one of the top reasons we opened the post. How would you describe it?

MUNTEAN: Sure. They were very well organized. When I first got to post, the wait time for an appointment for a visa interview was a bit long, but that was a mission-wide issue across Brazil, and our post was actually doing better than some of the others. They made amazing strides while I was there, and there was a lot of interesting sharing of resources across the mission. If São Paulo's wait time got too short, they would send some of their officers down to us, and vice versa. The officers, I think, got a well-rounded experience because they were part of this larger mission approach. Several of them got to work in other cities in Brazil, or at least partner on projects with people in the other consular sections.

Q: Sure. How was the relationship with the embassy? Since this is a relatively new consulate, were you constantly reviewed by the embassy, or was it more hands-off?

MUNTEAN: Each of the separate sections had someone in Brasília they could bounce ideas off of and get guidance from. I reported directly to the DCM, and she and I had weekly one-on-ones just to touch base about how things were going. Each of the management officers also had one-on-ones with people in Brasília and the Management Section. Most of my officers were included in section-wide meetings as well. So if the Economic Section in Brasília had a meeting, they would invite our local staff and our polecon officer.

I think that the relationship with Brasília depended slightly on which position in the consulate you were talking about and which position in Brasília. There was a lot of interpersonal stuff that was difficult when you were so far away. I would attend the country team virtually every week, and we were not the top priority—São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro are much bigger, and the ambassador visited them frequently. There were always big things going on in those two consulates, and Recife, us, and Belo Horizonte were kind of afterthoughts. We were the smaller ones and mostly only did visas.

Q: Now, although the major part of the work was visas, since you were the Commercial Officer, were you looking for new opportunities, possibilities for U.S. companies to do business there?

MUNTEAN: Yeah, so we were looking for more contacts in sustainable agriculture. Sustainable and renewable energy was also a big deal in southern Brazil—they were starting to develop offshore wind farms, and those were the types of new opportunities

that were coming up. There were also a couple of hubs for startups in southern Brazil that we kept closely in contact with.

Another big theme we worked on was Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Accessibility [DEIA]. This was under the Biden administration, so DEIA was part of what we promoted in southern Brazil. For example, the American Chamber of Commerce had me come as a guest speaker, and I talked about the power of diversity on a team and why that can be helpful to a business. The local American school, called the Pan American School, also invited me to give speeches to parents about DEIA and why it might be important to the school. That was definitely something I also had a focus on.

Q: Now, as the principal officer, you mentioned you went out a lot. How did you manage the public affairs aspects?

MUNTEAN: Well, we had a public affairs officer, and she was very good. She had two local staff who were very overworked—they could have used a third, but we never could convince Brasília to give us the money for one [laughter]. They did a lot of amazing work.

When I first arrived, they set up a kind of lunchtime briefing with five or six of the top journalists in town, which went really well. It was basically a chance for me to tell them my priorities as the new principal officer. I would say I probably did an interview or press availability once every couple of months. It wasn't as frequent as I thought it would be, because there wasn't a lot of demand from the local journalists [laughter]. So it really had to be something newsworthy that I wanted to talk about.

Q: Did you use a lot of social media? As a principal officer, you're not just in the city—you have a whole consular district, and you want to make the American presence as visible as possible with the resources you have.

MUNTEAN: You said the exact right thing there, Mark—with your resources. We were not resourced correctly to run our own social media. We would submit things to Brasília to post on our behalf, but we didn't run our own social media for Porto Alegre.

Q: As you settled in, and took account of the city, did you begin to set new priorities and identify new opportunities for the consulate to pursue?

MUNTEAN: Sure. Shortly after I arrived, we had an off-site in my apartment where we had snacks and drinks and a big whiteboard, and we started writing down what our goals were going to be and how we were going to achieve them. That was a very productive brainstorming exercise. We included local staff from several sections, so it was both my American officers and the local staff. From that, we built out our Integrated Country Strategy information—what our top objectives were and what would support those objectives.

Another thing we did pretty early on, to get us all on the same page, was that I took a survey of people about their professional values—meaning what matters to them in the workplace. We came up with a set of ten everyday values, including things like having a sense of humor, laughing at yourself, and having a little bit of fun sometimes. It included all sorts of stuff, like being respectful. Every month at our big town halls for the consulate, we would choose someone who best represented one of those values and talk about them and the value. It was a really nice through line for that first year, just getting us all on the same page about what mattered and how we were going to work together.

We tried to make it so personified by having these monthly—not contests—but [opportunities where] people could nominate others. Then there was a committee that decided who wins, and the prize was either a dedicated parking spot for the month, which was a big deal, or lunch out with me, which was not a big deal from my perspective, but it's the one everybody chose—

Q: [Laughter]

MUNTEAN: —or I would buy baked goods to share with their section. And nobody ever chose the parking space. I thought that for sure that was going to be the winner! Nobody ever chose it!

Q: [Laughter] Okay, and then the other thing—as you mentioned—so many of your personnel were relatively new. How did you handle mentoring?

MUNTEAN: So I had weekly one-on-ones with all the section heads and basically just tried to get a feel for where each of them was at. I would explicitly ask, "Is there anything that you need from me? Is there any way I could be supporting you better? Is there anything you need me to stop doing?" Because sometimes it's irritating if the boss is pushing you too much, right? I tried to have that conversation at least every couple of weeks during the one-on-ones.

Each officer used the one-on-one differently. Some brought their own agenda and updated me on their priorities. Others just came for a conversation. I found it very useful to also pick their brains about what some of the other people were doing, because—even though the consulate was so small—you would think it would be really well integrated. In fact, the Consular Section is kind of a Goliath in and of itself, and they didn't really interact with the rest of the consulate. They were on the first floor; everybody else was on the second floor. They just didn't interact as much as I would have liked.

Once a month, I had mentoring sessions with the first- and second-floor officers. They got to decide what topic they wanted me to talk about or if they wanted me to invite a guest to address them. I was also the mentor for the Mid-Level Development Program, which was across the mission, and I helped them set up professional development for mid-level officers.

Q: Turning to the Consular Section, since you had the ARSO-I, was there a big issue with fraud? And how did you manage it?

MUNTEAN: There was not a big issue of fraud, but there was a big issue of criminality. He did a lot related to fugitives and criminal elements in the general region. Southern Brazil has the highest number of neo-Nazi registered groups outside of Germany. It just makes no sense—why would that be? But there's a whole bunch of German and Italian immigrants, and I don't know—that's what has transpired. He did a lot of reporting around that, and he also did a lot of training for local law enforcement contacts on U.S. identity documents, currency, and that sort of thing.

Q: Crime is certainly local, but I'm sure the embassy was also involved with preventing transnational crime such as human trafficking as well as drugs, terrorist financing, etc. Did that play a role in what you were doing in Porto Alegre?

MUNTEAN: It did, in that there was a tri-border region where Brazil, Paraguay, and Uruguay all kind of came together. Down in that region, there was a lot of lawlessness, where the border police were not as well resourced as they needed to be to intercept, and maybe some of them were getting paid off—it's hard to know, right? But it was relatively lawless on all sides of the border. That was a big point of regional collaboration, where our ARSO-I and the RSO shops in Uruguay and Paraguay all got together to discuss those issues.

Q: Personal security, then—because you had both a Regional Security Officer and the ARSO-I—how was personal security?

MUNTEAN: It was fine. It was like any other big city—there are some pockets where you probably shouldn't spend too much time, and you just need to be aware of what's going on around you. I don't recall anyone from the consulate being pickpocketed while I was there, although there had been an incident before I arrived.

Q: So what have I forgotten to ask you that was important for you in this first tour as a principal officer?

MUNTEAN: So the biggest thing that happened during my first year there was a massive flood. It was like Hurricane Katrina-level devastation. There was no running water in the city, the electricity was out, and our consulate didn't even have running water, so we were using buckets to flush the toilets. People weren't coming into work, obviously, but some of us had to. For about four days, we all lived in those conditions before we were able to evacuate most people out to São Paulo, because the airport itself in Porto Alegre had been flooded. The only way to leave town was by road, and the mayor of Porto Alegre was basically begging people to leave the city because there was not enough infrastructure to support everyone. It was pretty hairy.

During that crisis, Brasília didn't come through for us the way I thought they should have, which resulted in a relatively large disagreement between me and the DCM that resulted in me leaving Porto Alegre.

Q: Okay, I see on your list of tours that it was essentially one year there. I don't want to ask you to go into sensitive information, but did the premature end of the tour have any lasting impact on you?

MUNTEAN: It did. I would say that when I first came back, I took advantage of the Employee Consultation Services (ECS), and they told me they thought I was suffering from PTSD and recommended I get professional assistance. It definitely had an impact on me. I thought I had handled the crisis as well as I possibly could. The caravan leaving Porto Alegre to go north was all smiles and waves at like five-thirty in the morning, which to me meant we were doing a good job keeping our people safe—they appreciate it. But two days later, I was told by the DCM that they didn't need my services anymore.

I don't think we need to put anything more about this in the documentation. But I will say my team was incredibly well prepared for the crisis—they did an amazing job. There were local staff who lost everything, and everybody else from the consulate rallied and gave them donations. It was really lovely to see how everyone pulled together.

Q: Did your husband work while you were in Porto Alegre?

MUNTEAN: So he started a consulting company focused on Antarctica. Remember, I said he had been the Antarctica guy for five years? So he started this consulting company. You won't be shocked to hear that there aren't very many people paying for someone to do something in Antarctica.

But we're lucky—we get a pretty generous pension, and since we were overseas, we weren't worried about paying rent or anything like that. When I came back from Porto Alegre earlier than expected, our oldest had been at a boarding school here, because the Pan American School in Porto Alegre was too small to fully meet her needs. So when we came back, we got special permission from the State Department to pay for her senior year of boarding school as well, even though I was in DC, because I had already made that commitment before I was removed from post.

Q: You returned to Washington after this tour, what were your career plans at this point?

MUNTEAN: When I was told I was leaving, I was told I needed to report back to WHA, which is where I had been working prior to the principal officer job. I asked if I could instead go to Consular Affairs, because my impression was that the DCM had removed me with the approval of Washington, which would have been the WHA bureau. I didn't really want to go back there—it felt a little too "smack in the face." So I went to Consular Affairs instead; they agreed to take me, and I did. I worked with them on training new managers about their responsibilities, which put my prior experience to good use. I did that for a few months before starting a Y tour. A Y tour is basically a one-year

assignment, and that was in the Office of Management, Strategy, and Solutions (M/SS). That was a fascinating place, and I got an onward assignment there as a DAS-equivalent. But once the "fork in the road" emails started coming out, I decided to retire instead of taking that DAS-level position.

But there is one interesting outcome that just happened last week. Even though I've already retired, I won the American Foreign Service Association's (AFSA) Constructive Dissent Award last week, which I was very excited about. That was for the work that I did during my Y tour. I basically got a whole bunch of people together to write a white paper on how to improve leadership in the State Department. Unfortunately, my timing was not great—given that it was right during the transition—so it didn't go as far as I would have liked. But it's in the hands of those who hopefully can make use of it at some point.

Q: Okay, since it's now public, can you describe what the proposals were?

MUNTEAN: Yeah, it was things like setting up an Employee Support Unit. There was a Manager Support Unit, which was recently eliminated, but an Employee Support Unit would be like a one-stop shop where people could go to find out all sorts of information. It seems like every time something happens, it's the first time—like someone's parent dying and they need compassionate curtailment. Nobody ever acts like this has happened before, even though we know it has. So having a central resource that could help direct people to all the relevant offices was one proposal.

I also proposed that people should have mandatory 360 evaluations at least once a year for professional development, not for bidding—actual, honest 360 evaluations. I suggested that everybody at a certain level, if they supervise at least five people, should be required to have a leadership coach. That's a program through FSI that's really quite popular, but it would have required a lot of staffing if coaching were required for all those people. So those were some of the suggestions.

Q: As a retired Foreign Service officer myself, who wished he'd had more leadership training, those are wonderful ideas.

MUNTEAN: Yeah, it all comes down to resources.

Q: Of course, because even if they're not perfect, once established, people begin to understand more and more of how to do it.

MUNTEAN: Exactly.

Q: Maybe even hire outside consultants periodically to watch and make recommendations, because leadership training changes so quickly these days.

MUNTEAN: It does, yeah. I will say, one of the things I loved about my Y tour was working with the Center for Analytics, which is the team on integrating artificial

intelligence (AI) into the State Department's operations. They were part of the same office I was in during the Y tour, and they were doing so much—I would call it, cutting edge. It probably wasn't cutting-edge, but for the State Department, it was certainly cutting-edge. They were working on new tools that could help us write briefing papers better, new tools that could go through twenty years of cables and show trends in a place. And, you know from experience, that would have taken us like three months to do that project ourselves, right?

Q: Easily, yeah.

MUNTEAN: So, I'm very excited about the prospects for AI, for sure.

Q: That is a fascinating thing, because it allows new officers to profit from the experience of thousands of others who came before them. I know that as a retired public affairs officer, it would have been fantastic to see what kinds of public diplomacy were successful and others not so much.

MUNTEAN: Well, you know how time-consuming media clips were to summarize. Now that's all done by AI.

Q: Okay, since we're now coming to the end of your career in the Foreign Service, the usual questions I ask have to do with 20/20 hindsight. Looking back, what advice would you give the Department on how to improve its processes, training, etc.?

MUNTEAN: Having spent almost a full year being trained—that was such a luxury. And I feel like it shouldn't be a luxury. It should be something we could actually expect. Every time you bid, it's like this huge scramble to get to the next place as quickly as possible, and then you don't get enough time to learn a language correctly, or to bone up on some of the new AI tools, for example. Almost all of those are being taught via webinar, because nobody ever has time to go to actual training in a classroom.

Q: And that is an endemic problem in the Department, because of float.

MUNTEAN: Yeah, because we never have had one [laughter].

Q: Yes, exactly. Whoever the decision makers are have simply never made the argument to Congress, and then to the Office of Management and Budget (OMB), and I guess the President, to actually have a few more officers to allow for float than we've ever allowed.

MUNTEAN: And the recent RIFs [reductions in force] have certainly not helped with that either.

Q: Then the second look-back question I always ask is: if someone were asking you, "How should I prepare to get into the Foreign Service?" or "What would you recommend about considering a Foreign Service career?" What would you tell them now?

MUNTEAN: I would tell them the same thing I was told in A-100. My husband and I joined the same A-100 class. We were already married, and we were the first married couple to join the same A-100 in quite a while. They didn't really know what to do with us, other than to tell us that we had to be flexible—we had to be flexible! We heard it from everyone. Anytime anybody got the two of us together, they said the most important thing to remember throughout your career is to be flexible.

For us, that was because we needed to find two jobs in the same place every time. So we probably weren't going to be able to go to Paris every other tour, right? There are only so many jobs available. That said, it's really important, if you join the Foreign Service, to know what your clear red lines are. That can be for your family—for my husband and I, it was that we needed to be assigned together. If we couldn't be assigned together, it wasn't going to work. So we never did an unaccompanied tour, for example. The three months that our kids were separated from us in Nicaragua were the only time we had a significant family separation.

But it's not just those red lines. With recent developments and changes in the new administration, you also need to know if there are policy or practical red lines that, once crossed, you need to make a different decision.

Q: Then the last question I always ask is: what did I forget to ask you that was important to you, regardless of any other practical or policy considerations?

MUNTEAN: I think I'd say—you didn't forget to ask me this. I just want to end on a super positive note. I loved being a Foreign Service Officer. It was the most fun career. There were hard times, obviously, and there were hard years, but looking back upon reflection, six months into retirement, it was just an amazing opportunity—to see the world, meet people from all different walks of life, represent America, and try to influence foreign audiences. I'm really glad I got the chance to do it.

Q: Okay, that's a great place to end. Thanks for recording your legacy of service with us.

End of interview