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# THOMAS NICASTRO

*Interviewed by: Mark Tauber*
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## INTERVIEW

*Q: Today is March 23, 2023, and we are beginning our interview with Tom Nicastro. Tom, where and when were you born?*

NICASTRO: Good morning! I was born in the Big Apple, New York City, in 1942. I was a war baby. My aunts liked to say I slept through World War Two. I was born in Manhattan and my family moved to Brooklyn when I was in grammar school. I consider myself a product of growing up in an urban environment—five story walk ups, only some apartments with hot water, subways, no family cars, no blades of grass. I of course thought that was a normal lifestyle for almost everyone my age in America.

*Q: How about your family? How large and so on?*

NICASTRO: Growing up I had a stable family lifestyle. My family consisted of my two parents, both born in the United States, my younger sister and I. My dad, the oldest of six, was born in 1910 and passed when he was 90. My mom, the oldest of four, passed when she was 91 in 2018. Funnily enough, both their immigrant parents rented tenement apartments in the same cold water lower East Side building. My dad's family rented on the first floor and my mom's family on the top or fifth floor. My dad's parents died in the 1930's. My mom's dad died when I was 3, so growing up I only knew one grandparent—my grandma on my mom's side.

My dad's family immigrated from Sicily around 1900. He was the oldest survivor of five. An older sister died of diphtheria. They were bakers in Italy, but the family lore was that

they decided that getting up at three in the morning was not what they wanted to do for the rest of their lives, so they became barbers. Barbering was a daylight business.

Another piece of family lore was that a great grandfather served in Garibaldi's army during reunification and was wounded in a battle. Garibaldi visited his hospital ward and spoke to the injured soldiers. Garibaldi asked my great grandfather what he wanted to do after the war was over. He replied, 'well I want to continue to fight in the army' and Garibaldi said 'no, no, we need people like you to reinforce the state, to grow up, to govern'. Garibaldi gave him his ceremonial hat, and the hat stayed on the bakery wall until it disappeared somewhere between Italy and New York City (NYC). So, I guess my public service career was foreseen/suggested by Garibaldi. This summer (2024) my family and I went to Sicily to follow our roots. No trace of Garibaldi, however.

*Q: Do you know the town or the area?*

NICASTRO: Yes, it's the town of Aidone in central Sicily. My grandfather traveled back and forth a couple of times helping other immigrants through the voyage.

My mom's side immigrated from Ukraine, about the same time as did my dad's parents, from Italy. We believe they came from the non-Russian sector. Political unrest in the aughts leading up to the 1917 revolution almost ended all contact with those family members left behind. My grandmother spoke Ukrainian; my mom spoke only Ukrainian for the first five years of her life in Manhattan. She had to learn English to register for the first grade and translate for my grandmother. My parents didn't teach my sister or me Italian or Ukrainian. The attitude was that we were going to become American and speak English. But I also don't recall ever asking for language enrichment.

I remember when I was growing up my grandmother would go to the Eastern Orthodox Church for Little Easter and Little Christmas, which are celebrated on different dates from mainstream Roman Catholic Easter and Christmas. She would have bread blessed and drenched in holy incense. My first real life encounter with the Soviet way of life was helping her stuff small denomination US currency into the pockets of used clothes she sent to relatives. Her hope was that the Ukrainian/Russian Soviet mail service would not rip off either the clothes or currency. And that was my introduction to communism—sending used clothes and $5.00 bills to a people's republic.

*Q: Fascinating. I imagine your father was Roman Catholic.*

NICASTRO: Yes.

*Q: What about brothers and sisters? Do you have any?*

NICASTRO: I have a sister who lives in New Jersey with her husband and two children. Her husband is a retired banker.

*Q: Okay, now what about your schooling? You said Manhattan and Brooklyn, was it all public school, private school?*

NICASTRO: In Manhattan, I attended P.S. 116, a public school. When we moved to Brooklyn my mom and dad decided it was time for me to go to Catholic schools. I went to a Catholic school for high school and then ultimately for college.

*Q: Just one other question, while you were in high school did you do any traveling or extracurricular activities that were important to you?*

NICASTRO: We travelled only if the subway stopped there. I knew very little about the outside world. My family, my relatives, and my friends were my universe. There was not so much of a focus from my parents or even educators on extracurriculars or traveling. It was probably NYC urban parochial. When I reflect on this, I don't think they did it knowingly, it's just that they were so focused on raising hard-working, educated, good, Catholic kids.

*Q: Sure. Was your father in World War II?*

NICASTRO: No, my dad was 4-F, he had very bad eyes. He was certainly part of that age cohort, but he was not going to be recruited into the military. The enemy would have had to have been at a Brighton Beach subway stop for him to be involved in military operations.

*Q: Did you work in high school?*

NICASTRO: I had a job in high school with a construction materials supply company collecting the daily office mail and bringing it to the Post Office. The high school was on 33rd between 1st and 2nd, and we had to walk up 33rd street to Madison Avenue and then up to Park Avenue to get the subway to get home. The company was on 33rd street. When, after a month on the job I unexpectedly was given a frozen Thanksgiving turkey as were all full-time employees my parents were impressed.

*Q: Okay, so when you were in high school, were your parents talking to you about college? Were you thinking about it?*

NICASTRO: They always encouraged college. That was always what I was going to do. How I was to do it, where I was to go, they, and I, hadn't figured that out. But they knew that college was going to be important for me and for my sister.

*Q: Sure. Where did you end up then?*

NICASTRO: I went to St. Francis College in Brooklyn, New York from 1960-1964. In those days it was an all-male school. I was not a diligent student. I was kind of listless, not knowing what I wanted to do, until I took a class with professor Joe Ellis. Joe has since passed. I took his "Introduction to Latin American History" class as an

elective—and a light went on. Through this and other classes and activities, as well as mentoring, he gave me the framework of a social and political philosophy that became my life guide. In 1963, Joe organized an eight-week summer work camp at a Catholic orphanage in Lima, Peru. Upon graduation in 1964 I went with six other St Francis graduates to Lima. We held raffles, collected money at dances to help cover all expenses. That was my first adult-like international experience. It was my first step towards a world that offered a career and professional life I could never have imagined; and explains why I'm sitting here today.

*Q: So college was when you began getting interested in the wider world. It was also the time of the counterculture, anti-Vietnam War and all of that. Did that affect you in college?*

NICASTRO: I was aware, but I think my natural and learned conservatism was a barrier for me to become really that involved in it. I have a more risk-averse way of looking at life and making decisions, although people who know me probably might disagree with that self-perception.

*Q: Yeah. Now, you mentioned going for a summer to Peru. 1964 was within the time that Kennedy had created the Alliance for Progress. Was there any sense of that when you were in Peru?*

NICASTRO: He was Catholic, don't forget—so we did have kind of an affinity for him. Probably less of a Catholic than anybody I know in terms of his lifestyle. I did not have much of a sense of that particular program when I was in Peru in 1964. I did come in contact with Peace Corps Volunteers (PCVs) in Peru. Some of the PCVs would stop by the orphanage and we would talk. And I slowly realized that I had some of the skills and aspirations they had, and so I asked myself - why couldn't I do what they did? But where they came from, and the colleges they attended was definitely a giant step for me, even with the New York City swagger. I went to St. Francis College and they went to Duke or Notre Dame or UCLA (University of California Los Angeles). Could I compete? As it turns out, I could, and I did.

What the orphanage and Joe Ellis gave me that summer was a possible next step—the Peace Corps. However, I finished the summer in Lima and came back to Brooklyn with a horrible case of hepatitis. I was in a Lima hospital for three weeks and taken in by a USAID family for another three weeks of recuperation before I was able to return home. Once I was home, I had to figure out my journey to the Peace Corps (PC) by myself.

*Q: How did you do that?*

NICASTRO: Pure determination. As I mentioned, in 1964 after our work at the orphanage, I contracted hepatitis. I was in very bad shape and was put in the hospital in Lima. Once I returned to Brooklyn, still sick but getting around I filled out the PC applications—including data on my health. PC response—thanks, but no thanks. Your hepatitis is a health consideration that disqualifies you. I decided I could not take a no

from the Peace Corps and that Easter I took a Greyhound bus to Washington and went to Peace Corps Headquarters. I basically went from desk to desk pleading my case and saying to these folks, "Look, just give me an opportunity to demonstrate that I can do the job." Finally, one desk officer offered me a physical at the US Public Health Service in New York City. I procrastinated for weeks setting up the appointment. I took as many iron vitamins and other supplements as I could, so many I was surprised the needle didn't oxidize in my veins! The lab results: the technician said he'd never seen blood that rich. I was over the charts in everything. Next step, a giant step, the lab results triggered an invitation to a PC training group.

PC/Washington wanted me to go to Africa, but I wanted Latin America for obvious reasons. So, we negotiated back and forth, and they finally invited me as a trainee at the University of Missouri-Columbia on July 17, 1965. If I made it through the eight-week Missouri training, I would be sworn in as a Peace Corps volunteer (PCV) and go to Bolivia for a second eight weeks of training and then on to work in community development. And that's how I made it into the Peace Corps.

*Q: What kind of training did you have before you went to Bolivia?*

NICASTRO: Aside from the few weeks in the orphanage in Lima, I had two years of Spanish language training in college and the Latin American history classes taught by Joe Ellis. I took all his classes, so that's how I began to understand the socioeconomic history of Latin America.
At the University, the training was a selection/deselection process. We started off with 60 trainees, 30 went to Bolivia as PCVs, and only 12 of us made it through the full 27 months. Bolivia was a very tough place, and the training was focused on making sure that the folks that needed to be in Bolivia were prepared.

Missouri training started at seven in the morning with breakfast. Eight to noon was Spanish language class. Lunch, then one to three was communism studies (this was mandated by the legislation as Congress wanted to make sure they weren't sending revolutionaries out to the world to bring the hammer and sickle to the unwashed masses). Then from three to five we would run, swim and drown-proof. These activities were followed by dinner. After dinner, we'd read Spanish language lessons and memorize pages of dialogue. We had psychologists watching us all the time, and we all saw them individually two to three times. We took the MMPI (Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory). This was described as a deselection process to weed out the weak. Trainees would vanish during the day, sent home with a one-way ticket. All of us feared the knock at the door.

*Q: That alone is remarkable.*

NICASTRO: We were told that we were the first PC group to go through a completely revamped and shortened PC training process. We were the guinea pigs for change. There was a concern that a shortened eight-week training program was not going to produce the

hardened PCVs as had the 12-15 week gold standard Puerto Rico training which emphasized outdoor activities like repelling, camping and drown-proofing.

*Q: Remind me how it was decided that you would go to Cochabamba?*

NICASTRO: We arrived in Cochabamba in September 1965. And I wanted to do urban development in the city. Although calling my site in Cochabamba urban was a misnomer. I was assigned to a new development close to the local airport runway. There was running water and electricity --- sometimes --- with no paved roads. My assignment ended up being almost impossible because my rented apartment and I became the hub of a hub and spoke system. As the hub, I would service the villages (spokes) around me to work with them on different problems. As it turned out, most of these meetings were at night. Getting to these remote villages from the hub was difficult even in the daytime, but at night it became dangerous and nearly impossible. Getting to the sites a half hour or more away with no streetlights, pedaling my bike through what sounded like herds of unleashed gangs of street dogs and pigs was quite entertaining. Often, I'd arrive at the correct time and find out the meeting was cancelled, or no one showed up. I was spinning my wheels with nothing to show for my efforts. So, I requested a change to a rural site and went from Cochabamba to Aiquile. Aiquile had under a thousand residents with no building over one story high. There I worked with a USAID and government of Bolivia "Rural Community Development" program. Thus began my most rewarding time with the Peace Corps in Bolivia.

*Q: Now, take a moment to explain what Aiquile is, the size of the town, composition, and so on?*

NICASTRO: Aiquile is pretty rural. Then again, most everywhere in Bolivia was pretty rural except for two or three cities. Aiquile is a town about six hours outside of Cochabamba. It's on the road to Santa Cruz, about halfway along that paved road you make a right hand turn onto a dirt road and then about two hours later you arrive in Aiquile. Further on you are in Sucre.

There we operated the "Rural Community Development" program via a hub and spoke system to service local campesinos who had been trained in community development operations: how to organize people, how to obtain program funds; and how to organize small-and-medium sized projects. USAID provided financing for works like the rehabilitation of water systems, schools, commodities, stipends and other community needs.

My role was to be the counterpart of the Bolivian supervisor of the program. We had about fifteen locals scattered throughout a one hundred mile radius chosen by their villages to be the bridge for community improvements. We were responsible for overseeing, and the oversight meant that we visited villages monthly using a vintage Jeep that broke down all the time. Every hour or so the driver pulled out the spark plugs and wiped them clean. We would go out to villages and work with villagers to ensure community buy-in, make sure the works were progressing, and provide moral support as

needed. And I did that for about a year, a year and a half. It was very rewarding. Then Che Guevara arrived.

*Q: Now, with hub and spoke, what were you hearing from the volunteers who went out deep into where the campesinos are?*

NICASTRO: We had no trouble. There were three hundred volunteers in Bolivia at that time. That's a lot of volunteers for about five million Bolivians. I think part of the problem was to make sure we weren't stepping all over each other. Luckily, I didn't have that problem. There was another volunteer who worked with me in Aiquile, Dennis Carr. As an engineer, Dennis (who I am still in contact with) reviewed work specifications, went to work sites, and did QA (quality assurance) and QC (quality control). My focus was counterparting Roberto Ruiz, the regional director of the program.

*Q: Was the language training adequate for you to do your job?*

NICASTRO: Yes, it was very adequate. In fact, when I joined USAID (Agency for International Development) I went to a 3 from a 2+. You had to get to a 3 in the Foreign Service for tenuring. When I retired, I had a 3+/4 in Spanish. I was pretty proficient by then.

*Q: What was the politics like or what was the consciousness of politics like while you were there?*

NICASTRO: Well, Bolivia had had a revolution in 1952 that basically nationalized everything. The people who led that, however, became the worst kind of autocrats. They established concentration camps. Then there was a revolution in 1964 by René Barrientos, an Air Force General. Barrientos was not the typical military leader, not an autocrat. He was interested in development and "let a thousand flowers bloom." Campesinos loved him, and it was a time of relative peace and tranquility in the country up until the time that Che Guevara arrived around 1967. There was a benign military/civilian political machine running the country. It was not the type of government ready for a violent overthrow that "Che" represented. It demonstrated to me, and many, the lack of understanding of what the campesino life is: conservative. They are not revolutionary flame-throwers, these are folks who had to till the land, had to get up in the morning, had kids to bring up, and just as long as they've got their little piece of it, they're going to be happy.

*Q: Did you interact at all with the indigenous populations?*

NICASTRO: I didn't speak Quechua, so if they didn't speak Spanish I couldn't communicate. I did learn enough words at the time to say basic greeting exchanges, but that was all.

*Q: Okay. But were their lives separate then from the Spanish-speakers?*

NICASTRO: No, because it was a mixed population. It was not, from my recollection, as differentiated as Chile, for example, where there is a very definite difference and less social interaction between the two—the Criollo, the local indigenous population, if you will, and the people who had come to live there from different countries.

*Q: Now, while you were in the Peace Corps, as you think back, were there talents and skills and ability for cross-cultural communication that were valuable for you later on?*

NICASTRO: Yes, there were. I think what I learned was that if you wanted to make change happen you needed to have an organization or create one. It's one thing to get on a platform and say 'this change has to happen, that change has to happen,' but change is difficult, even in revolutions. The Marxists needed to set up an army first to control the territory. Once they could do that, then they had to establish other chains of command. So, unless you have a chain of command you can't do anything. You definitely can't secure a revolution.

*Q: Sure. Did you stay healthy?*

NICASTRO: I was very healthy overall. I had diarrhea at times, of course. My biggest problem was fleas. Fleas were just indigenous, so on each bedpost I had DDT (Dichlorodiphenyltrichloroethane) to kill them. There was also a health issue called Chagas disease, have you ever heard of Chagas?

*Q: No, that's new to me.*

NICASTRO: I never had it, luckily. It's a disease that's indigenous, at least in those days, to the Bolivian lowlands. It comes from a bug that's an inch and a half long called the vinchuca, commonly known as the kissing bug. During the daytime it congregates in the rafters of campesinos' straw roofs. At night they crawl down the walls and jump on or fall on the tender exposed parts of your body, suck blood, defecate around the wound and infect you with a parasite called Chagas. Chagas destroys your immune system. At first, the Peace Corps gave us nets to hang from the ceiling and fold under the mattress, but that wasn't enough. Then, they gave us a new generation of mosquito netting, which was an enclosed box. You'd have to zip the side up, but the top was flat. That wasn't good enough either, because the disease as research discovered, didn't come from the blood-sucking, it came from the feces of the vinchuca. So, as the vinchuca would walk across the top of the net, guess what it would do? So, we were told to put newspaper or clear plastic on top of the net. That was the vinchuca challenge, and the vinchuca is now coming north, through the Isthmus of Panama into North America. There's a painting of Darwin with what looks like a vinchuca in his right hand having a light blood lunch. Based on the painting it is thought that Darwin might have died of Chagas or its complications.

*Q: That's incredible. Has there been a vaccine created?*

NICASTRO: No. Control of the transmission routes and vectors are the prevention strategies.

*Q: Looking back, were any of the programs that you worked on sustainable?*

NICASTRO: No program is sustainable unless there's government acquiescence. And in the program that I worked in, USAID and the government of Bolivia along with the PC worked hand-in-hand for almost a decade. Then USAID and the Bolivian government decided they needed to try some other things to continue to be responsive to Bolivia's changing economic needs.

Your question makes me think of something else I would like to bring up. When we got there, coca was not a monocrop. It was grown in the Chapare (Cochabamba region), in the Yungas (LaPaz region), by small farmers with small plots of land. They grew corn, peas, potatoes, and the fourth or fifth row would be coca, which was primarily for local consumption. When I arrived in Bolivia, there was just one road into the Chapare and it was three days a week in and four days a week out. You could have small vehicles like Jeeps go in at their peril, but trucks had to follow the day-in, day-out schedule.

When USAID and the Inter American Development Bank (IADB) decided to finance penetration roads into these areas, the dynamic changed. Economists thought these two-way paved roads would be beneficial to local farmers who would open the jungle with more food production. There was little discussion on coca becoming a mono crop --- which indeed happened.
Almost all the PCVs who worked in the Chapare had villages that wanted help building half court basketball courts. Half court because public access flat space was difficult to find. They/we thought it was because basketball is a world sport and kids like to play it. Well, what we didn't realize was that the locals wanted cement courts to dry the coca leaves. Basketball courts --- even half courts --- had a dual use. So, inadvertently the coca market growth was accelerated,

*Q: Right. The law of unintended consequences.*

NICASTRO: There you go. So anyway, that's part of why I always chuckle when great new plans are launched.

*Q: And of course, it had a use for them. They drank it as tea and for babies for colic and so on.*

NICASTRO: When we arrived in Bolivia in 1978 with USAID, we had a bag of coca leaves in the welcome kit.

*Q: Incredible. And you just chewed the leaves?*

NICASTRO: No, you just put the leaves in hot water as tea. Chewing the leaves for narcotic effect requires potash to act as a catalyst.

*Q: As you approached the end of the tour in Aiquile, were you interested in staying? Did the Peace Corps suggest you stay? What was your thinking at that point?*

NICASTRO: I kind of punted because PC leadership asked if I would stay another three months to assist in the training of a new group coming in, so I did that. I then went back to Brooklyn, and I ultimately realized that after a few minutes of conversation people really don't care what you've done that much. And there's only so many beers you can drink.

I wrote letters to a couple of universities, including the University of Missouri-Columbia. One of the faculty members there had been at USAID in Bolivia. They offered me a fellowship and I figured why not? So off I went to Missouri, starting in January of 1968. An added incentive: at that time there was no out of state tuition fee for graduate students. I graduated in May of 1969 with a Master's Degree in Regional and Community Development.

At this point, I had a second degree and overseas experience in two countries. USAID, however, only wanted me for Vietnam. At the same time USAID was downsizing as Vietnam was ending.

I interviewed in Norwalk, Connecticut with Save the Children Federation/Community Development Foundation (SCF/CDF). They had just received a $250,000 grant to rehabilitate an on-campus building and launch a training facility for local War on Poverty employees, one of President Johnson's initiatives. They hired me to manage this. And I thought, Tom Nicastro? What skill sets do you have for this job? I didn't know a thing about the War on Poverty. And most of the folks who were doing anything involving the War on Poverty in the Connecticut area had been at it for years.

*Q: Interesting.*

NICASTRO: I never understood why they hired me --- but they did. I had a job, and I was getting a salary. I first worked with an architect/engineer to repurpose the building, planning where the TV lines and cameras would go. Not surprisingly, that was the easy part. Getting into the War on Poverty game was a lot harder. And their budgets were being slashed too. Training never has an institutional godfather, but I chugged along meeting leaders, and visiting their offices.
The other part of my new life was filled one evening when I met a woman in August 1969 who was out of my league and engaged to somebody else. We were married February 14, 1970.

Peggy, her parents, and siblings had moved from Missouri to Connecticut. She later told me the only reason she spoke to me in that local store was I was wearing my University of Missouri jacket. She likes to joke that since I had a mop in my grocery cart, I was looking for somebody to push it.

*Q: There are stranger stories of how married couples meet.*

NICASTRO: At this point, I was still with Save the Children trying to find a War of Poverty agency that is looking for an up-to-date training ability. Then in May 1970, there was a tremendous earthquake in the Callejon de Huaylas in Peru, killing at least 70,000 people. The earthquake broke loose a part of a giant ice sheet, and it traveled down the side of the mountain at more than 60 sixty miles an hour, sweeping everything out of its way and burying the town completely. All you saw of this town were the tops of four palm trees --- everything else was under eight to ten feet of mud. The surrounding area was just devastated. People wounded, without homes, water, electricity, roads were demolished. Save the Children received donations of more than $250,000 in response to this crisis.

A Save senior vice president set up a program in Peru. He did not want to stay. Glen Leet, the Save president, called me into his office and said, "Tom, would you be interested in going to Peru to direct the program. I said, "Glenn, thank you, I think I would do a good job, but I have to tell you no." He asked why, "Glenn, I was in the Peace Corps, and we had a couple in my group who everybody thought were the happiest couple on the face of the earth; and within three months of getting to Bolivia they got divorced. As you know I just got married and I don't want their fate to be mine."

That night I told my new bride Peggy what happened. She looked at me and said, "Are you crazy? What do you think we signed up for? You go back tomorrow, and you tell Glen, if the job is still open, you and your wife want it." So, the next morning I went back, and I told Glen what Peggy had said. He looked at me and said, "Tom, I have been doing this work for 40 years and this is the first time that a wife ever said yes after the husband said no. Every other wife has always said no, they didn't want to go overseas."

*Q: So, it was understood that you and your wife would go?*

NICASTRO: Yes. I was looking for a woman who was as interested in international work as I was. We did not know how long we would be in Peru. A month? Six? More? Now it seems so obvious, Peru was the break we were looking for. We emptied the fridge, gave the landlord two months rent, packed a few bags, and flew into the "wild blue yonder".

So, that's a short version of graduating from Missouri, being hired by Save, finding Peggy, directing Save's training and then running a Peru relief program in the summer of 1970.

*Q: Let's go on with Peru.*

NICASTRO: Glenn had developed a program called the Trickle-Down Program, which functioned like a WPA (Works Progress Administration) Program. People who worked on relief/rehabilitation programs would be reimbursed at a set hourly rate. They were given chits for their hourly work and turned them into a cashier for local currency.

The Peru work focused on small projects like rehabilitating cemeteries, rural roads, fishponds, re-linking schools to water/electricity. Or villagers could pool their money into one package and buy a generator. I took over this program and grew it. As far as I knew we never had any problems with funding community projects using their system.

Glenn, a forward thinker, asked me to videotape villager training and their work. I received about ten minutes of training on this video equipment before leaving for Peru. Remember back in 1970 this equipment was bulky and even a small system could fill a room. When Peggy and I got to customs in Lima's Jorge Chavez airport we did not have any admittance documentation. We left the equipment at customs and began a three-month odyssey obtaining the right documentation from the right ministries attesting that Save is an NGO, I would not sell the equipment, and it would not be used for commercial purposes. After a few weeks of this I asked my customs guide what the next step was. He said he didn't know, no one had ever gone that far before. Come back tomorrow, he said, and I'll give you the equipment. So I did, and finally got the equipment.

It turned out that the rewards were not that great. The equipment was heavy and getting it into and out of Lima shanty towns, relying only on battery power was always a challenge. Scripts, being a producer and also a camera person became Mrs. Nicastro's domain. Ultimately, I created a couple of training tapes for Glenn to show donors that Peru was still generating cash for the company. I don't know if he ever showed the tapes to the donors. But we brought the equipment back when we finished in Peru in mid-1971. Glenn's instinct was certainly correct but the logistics of getting it out of customs, little actual training, no scripts, and power issues give us little room for error: and a learning experience too.

*Q: Did you at least also have still cameras to take some photos?*

NICASTRO: Oh yes, we absolutely had cameras.

*Q: How long did you stay?*

NICASTRO: We stayed through mid-1971.

*Q: And how would you rate the success of the project?*

NICASTRO: Oh, the project was a success. The money was distributed and the works were finished. That was an easy program to implement if you could find a credible local interlocutor. And that was the key to all of this. Finding someone who's credible, who's honest, and once you have that person as a local link, you can do anything.

*Q: Now, you're still in Save. Did you go back to Connecticut?*

NICASTRO: What next is what I asked Glenn back at Save HQ. Glenn said, "I'm sorry, we've repurposed the training institute and its building and we don't have an on-going

position for you. Stay with us till the end of 1972 to do some cleanup, but look for a job, and we'll support you. We wish we had a slot for you.

Among others I called the University of Missouri and spoke to the chairperson of the department telling him I was looking for a job. And it just so happened that a faculty member decided to take a one-year sabbatical to finish his PhD. Lee Cary, the chairman, offered me a position for 1972.

I don't think I put the phone down before we were packing. It worked out for us both --- Peggy could restart her undergraduate program, which had been cut short, and see relatives in Missouri. I had a job for a year which gave me time to look for my next job. I became the head of the practicum for the master's program. We were supposed to stay through the end of 1972. Six years later in 1978 when we finally left, I had my PhD, I was tenured, and Peggy had both her undergraduate with honors and master's degrees.

*Q: Let me go back to when you begin as the practicum instructor. What were you teaching? What did the students want out of you?*

NICASTRO: I was not a teacher in the traditional classroom sense. I was responsible for identifying and overseeing practicums, mentoring students through the practicum. The practicum served as a bridge to transition students from an academic classroom experience into the real world.

*Q: And essentially, they were also interested in development of some kind?*

NICASTRO: Yes, they were. Well, that's why they were in the master's program. Think of it as a two semester-long nine credit hour class, but in the field. And some of their practicum work grew into full-time positions.

*Q: So, as you're beginning there, how did you decide on what you were going to do for your PhD and was there field work?*

NICASTRO: My goal at that point was to become tenured. To do this, I needed to have a terminal degree and to teach at the college level. I first approached the law school, but since I was teaching full-time, they would not accept me as a full-time student. I looked at the other colleges at the university, eventually finding my way to the College of Education, which had a PhD program in Higher and Adult Education. The faculty accepted some prior work as electives, and I developed a thesis. By mid 1977 I was granted my PhD. I then applied for and was granted tenure. At the same time, I applied for and was granted a two year leave of absence to work for USAID in Bolivia.

*Q: What was your PhD topic?*

NICASTRO: My PhD topic was focused on responses from two hundred practitioners with community development in their job titles responding to the Strong Campbell Interest Inventory (SCII). I wanted to learn if they had profiles different from existing

professional profiles. I worked with the owners of the test after they agreed to permit access to their comparable personnel data. Along with the survey I presented a literature review.

*Q: Now, Strong Campbell was a personality inventory?*

NICASTRO: Yes, it is a career assessment tool to determine your work personality. It consists of about 150-200 questions that are answered on a scale to assess your interest(s) in different areas. It is used as a part of a battery of guidance tests.

*Q: Okay. Then what kind of person would be successful based on your results?*

NICASTRO: Somebody who was less of a numbers person, more of a hands-on, community-creating person, a feeler rather than a non-feeler. The kind of person you would expect to be, not exactly a social worker, but quite like a social worker. But also, somebody who could be successful working in a bureaucracy and/or understands as an insider how to deal with the bureaucracy to make things happen.

*Q: You complete your PhD, your wife completes her master's and it's 1978, as you say. What did you imagine yourself doing after the PhD?*

NICASTRO: What I wanted to do was go back overseas, and Peggy wanted to do the same thing as we had not been overseas since 1971. We had a couple of faculty members who had worked with USAID, and one of them, Al Lackey, had a friend who was still with USAID. He wrote a letter to a friend still in USAID as an introduction. Some meetings were set up in Washington. However, no one was hiring. Worse, the one person who I really wanted to meet, Howard Lusk, the Education Director for Latin America, was stuck in Panama and asked if I could meet him the next day. So, I stayed back. We had a good interview, but it ended with the same refrain: Sorry, no positions available.

Two days later, Peggy and I are back in Connecticut, and I receive a phone call from Howard's office. There's a job in Paraguay that just became available. Could I return to DC for an interview with the Paraguay mission director Abe Peña? Before Abe had been with USAID, he was a Peace Corps director in Paraguay. Well, we hit it off well. They called me back a couple days later and offered me the job.

The onboarding took almost two years, due to hiring freezes and personnel misplacing documentation. Meanwhile, I was dealing with my school Dean who understandably wanted to fill my position so I could return in two years. Then, it's June of 1978, I'm in USAID's SA-12, a little HR office being sworn in to protect and defend the Constitution. It was not a particularly auspicious USAID career launch. That's how I never got to Paraguay. After almost two years of negotiations, Jimmy Carter decided to cut off aid to countries that had human rights violations, to include Paraguay, among others. So, a change was quickly made, and we were sent to my Peace Corps home in Bolivia, which ended up being the right call for me. I had almost no training on the USAID bureaucracy

and had initial trouble finding a mentor for the USAID engine. Having knowledge of the country helped me as I found my footing career-wise.

*Q: Now, at this point before you go down to Bolivia, did you and Peggy have children?*

NICASTRO: No, we did not. Peggy became pregnant sometime between our arrival in Washington and our arrival in Bolivia. I think if we knew, and if USAID management knew, we probably never would have been sent to Bolivia because it was difficult having babies at that altitude. Our daughter Gabriella was born there in 1979, but it was a rough pregnancy for Peg. Elizabeth, our second child, was born in 1988 when we were based in Washington.

*Q: Wow.*

NICASTRO: Yeah. It was an interesting dynamic where we were too young and too unknowing on a lot of things. Three or four weeks after Gabriella was born, Peggy was taking her for a checkup with the pediatrician in downtown La Paz, and they got caught in the tear gas explosion. So, it was an interesting upbringing, to say the least.

*Q:. But now that you're going down to Bolivia with USAID and you took a year, did they train you at all?*

NICASTRO: My training was four weeks, all of which was language. They wanted me to get up to the 3 level so I would get through tenure, which I did. The Spanish teacher turned out not to be a fan and told me after final testing I would get only a 2+. I responded coolly saying something like: "we are not leaving the testing room until I am tested at the 3 level." I was retested and I received a 3.

*Q: That's chutzpah. Okay.*

NICASTRO: Well, I figured, what did I have to lose? Was she going to report me to somebody?

*Q: Right. Okay. And you kept going until you convinced her.*

NICASTRO: Until I got what I wanted.

*Q: Okay. So, that's your training. In a way you didn't need much because you'd already been to Bolivia, but what was USAID's expectation of what you'd do when you got there?*

NICASTRO: I became the deputy to a very seasoned officer who had served in Latin America and in Vietnam. And I suffered because I did not have any training initially. Understanding that in USAID, once you figure out how one or two things work it's not complex, but it's getting into the machine, those first baby steps, and finding somebody who's willing to mentor you, who doesn't know you, who already has a cohort of friends, is no mean trick.

*Q: It's interesting you mention that. So, in essence, you go down to Bolivia, at least you know a bit of the culture there, but now you have to get acculturated to a bureaucracy as well.*

NICASTRO: And I realized that. I knew that there was a lot I did not know. And I had to find people who were willing to train me and give me copies of things so I would understand what the machine really wanted.

*Q: Right. Sure. Okay, but at some point, you do acclimate, you do learn, but then what is your field work or what is your portfolio?*

NICASTRO: I walked into what probably was the largest loan and grant education portfolio in Latin America at that time, at about $50 million. In those days we still did grants as well as loans. But the portfolio implementation was suffering. It was suffering because it was Bolivia, it was suffering because it was education, it was suffering because corruption was endemic. We had problems with vehicles. We would buy vehicles for the education ministry and every Monday morning when we had our project review, the Mission Director would lambast the education office because our vehicles were seen ferrying around girlfriends, boyfriends, family members, goats on the very few streets that were paved in La Paz in those days. It was terrible. We had experiences with procurement that were truly earth-shaking. We wanted to publish six books for the first six grades of school. Each of the six Bolivian publishing houses bid on just one book. So, one of my first tasks was to write an action memo justifying the procurement.

Then we had a bid to finance the construction of a regional education office center in Oruro. All the bidders' documents were put into the Minister's personal safe to be opened the next day. The next day we opened the safe and there was nothing in there.

So, that's the kind of stuff I had to deal with from day one. And the mission is going crazy saying, 'how can we be doing this? Working with these people who don't want to do anything and steal their own money.' And that was a tough vote. But I believe that part of the problem was due to the tremendous turnover of the government. We had five coup d'états in less than two years, ending up with the "cocaine coup" in 1980. Without jumping ahead of myself, I believe based on initial conversations with the left wing Teacher's Union they could have become a stable partner. I had acceptance of my efforts from the new mission director Abe Peña (Abe became the Bolivia Director after Paraguay closed) and the US Ambassador. However, as the mission was closing government-to-government programs due to the "cocaine coup" so did my efforts sunset.

*Q: They didn't start off the conversation with you're a CIA (Central Intelligence Agency) spy, we don't want you here?*

NICASTRO: No. They may have thought that, but they basically knew that I had what they wanted. I had scholarships to send some of their people overseas, I had money for

schools. It may have been a Faustian bargain, and I was playing a bit of a Faustian bargain myself, but it takes a little bit of maturity to realize that you're not going to get everything you want. I was not able to get that to be fully operational, it was more a construct. And then we went on home leave, and I never got back to Bolivia to work. We got back to Bolivia, but it was just to pack out because of the cocaine coup.

*Q: Oh, so it did ultimately shut the program.*

NICASTRO: Yes, it ended my time there. It was supposed to be a four-year assignment, it was two years.

*Q: Alright, so it shuts down and you're on your way back then to Washington. Were people talking to you at all about what you might do next or what USAID wanted you to do?*

NICASTRO: The "coup" happened the day before we were to return to Bolivia from home leave. Peggy stayed back with her parents in Connecticut with the baby and all of our home leave commodities that were supposed to be shipped back, including items like bird cages we had bought for friends. It was a bloody menagerie. We had rooms filled with personal property of at least three families.

Washington sent me on TDY (Temporary Duty) to see where I might fit. Over 30-35 days I went to Panama, Ecuador, and finally the Dominican Republic, which turned out to be the best fit. I picked Peggy and the baby up from Connecticut and we flew to Bolivia to pack up and distribute other families' commodities. And then we repacked to head off to the Dominican Republic (DR). We were in the DR for five years 1980-1985.

*Q: And now, the first year you arrive there is—I'm trying to keep up with you—1980?*

NICASTRO: Yes, 1980.

*Q: Okay. Now, once again, what were the expectations that USAID had for you there?*

NICASTRO: Well, it was similar to what happened in Bolivia, but not quite as difficult. The mission had a major education program there that was not doing very well. They had a good design, but it just wasn't working, primarily because we/they couldn't agree on construction standards and issues. I was brought in to get that program restarted and to rebuild the program. The Mission Director, Phil Schwab, had been an Education Officer, so he wanted to have a robust program. I worked closely with the Mission Civil Engineer, Betty Facey. We were supposed to build 500 classrooms in rural areas, and construction was languishing. We found Leo Perez, a Dominican who had worked in the States, and we put him in as a kind of project overseer. Leo and Betty reenergized that program. It was renamed the Blue Roofs Project, or *Techos Azules*, in Spanish. All rural classrooms had tin roofs, but all our classrooms had easily identifiable blue roofs. When you went into an area you could see our classrooms and schools in the distance.

As a result of the successful government construction re-launch, I began to work with a private university, the Catholic University Mother and Teacher of the Dominican Republic, to develop a Master's Program in Business and Public Administration. We used a unique USAID contracting mechanism to select a US university partner. And we also developed for the University USAID's first legislator orientation program for newly elected congressmen,

*Q: Before we go too much further, the* Techos Azules *(Blue Roofs), as a program, did you have local buy-in? Were any of the locals part of the work in constructing and so on?*

NICASTRO: It was all local. All the construction was all done by local subcontracting. The ministry would subcontract three or four classrooms, or three or four schools, and local companies would bid on them. We established a QA/QC procedure to make sure earthquake standards were followed. The Dominican Republic is on a major fault line and there are earthquakes there all the time.

*Q: Now, once again with this program, how did you foresee sustainability? Because a lot of times you can build something out in the rural area, but it doesn't get maintained.*

NICASTRO: The program also had teacher training components, helped with the purchase of equipment like microscopes, globes, maps, all the basic things you'd need to make sure classroom teaching at least at the primary level had some things to energize kids. Getting ministry buy-in is tough because ministries change all the time. Being a minister of something may be a two-month, a three-month, a two-day job, but it's certainly not a four-year job for most people. They would either burn out or just get bored. So, getting buy-in for any kind of a program that will exist longer that your time is ephemeral. You'll get the pieces of paper, you get the nodding, but you never know because senior people move on to other things.

*Q: Now, one other thing about the schools, were you able to get students to go given rural poverty, the need for the students to help produce income or something for the families?*

NICASTRO: The question triggers a myriad of issues. School in the DR, urban or rural, was half a day, so teachers were only getting paid for that half day and would have to find a second job. Part of what we tried to do was energize the ministry to go to a full school day, but that was a financial issue with little support. The school budget would have to be doubled, at least. Teachers were making money setting up private schools, many of which were set up with full day programs. Too many rice bowls would be broken. We also introduced equipment, teacher training, and new rural schools into the system in the hope that education reform would garner wider support.

*Q: And then one other question about the program, often you'll need to provide school feeding because the kids may not even have lunches or enough money to have food at the school, was that part of it?*

NICASTRO: That's why they went home after half a day.

*Q: I see.*

NICASTRO: The Dominican government did not provide school lunches; it was not part of what they did.

*Q: Sure. All those things. And even though you did teacher training and you basically covered everything about teaching from cradle to grave, in a sense, but you couldn't give the teachers a salary and you couldn't supplement.*

NICASTRO: Right. Another thing we realized after the fact were the barriers to do even what we considered to be simple things. For example, classroom equipment. We would go into the classrooms and discover that the microscopes and other equipment were still in the wrapping paper. The teachers were afraid that the items would get broken, would be stolen, and that they would be held responsible. It hadn't dawned on us that just getting equipment out of the packaging would be such an impediment. We learned that when introducing these changes, it wasn't just things, it was attitudes and behaviors that had to be addressed as well. We had to be clearer with the schools and teachers that they didn't have to pay for equipment that was broken, among other things.

*Q: This is not an uncommon story. I ran into this in other countries where computers were a new device. The teacher was terrified to even open it because what if it's stolen or the kids just don't know how to use it and it gets destroyed.*

NICASTRO: Exactly. Jumping ahead a little bit to when I was with Louis Berger Group, they had a project in Mindanao involving classrooms in the hot zone. They were giving laptops to teachers with Wi-Fi hookups, However, they had to convince the ministry that the teachers were not going to listen to Abu Sayyaf at night or join the Comintern. And in reality you never knew as a s\donor if that was going to happen either. You didn't know if your equipment was going to be part of the linkage with Abu Sayyaf. So, it's a double-edged sword.

*Q: To get kids to school did you also build baseball fields?*

NICASTRO: No, in the DR they did that themselves --- they were very resourceful. It wasn't just the field, if you look at the balls, they were just pieces of paper all kind of crunched together. Again, this was in the early 1980s when the poverty in many areas was widespread, but baseball was becoming one of the principal paths out of poverty.

*Q: So, you couldn't get USAID to supply basic sports equipment?*

NICASTRO: The DR historically had "winter league" teams throughout the island most linked with US teams. In the 1950s the Giants allegedly had a deal with Trujillo that they had first refusal rights to all, not just the best players. That broke down after Trujillo's

assassination. Now many of the clubs, including the Nationals have year-round facilities to scout and train even younger aspiring players.

*Q: Right. Even the State Department in the public affairs section used to call it baseball cap diplomacy or baseball diplomacy because we would get small grants to give schools athletic equipment, and this was one of the best things an ambassador could do. It even got into the local papers.*

NICASTRO: Bob Yost, who was the ambassador at the time, noted Dominican baseball players as a unique group of people who may need assistance with transiting/visiting family members. He identified one of his younger officers as the baseball point of responsibility for baseball linked visas.

*Q: Were you satisfied in terms of evaluating the program? How did it come out?*

NICASTRO: Yes, I think that the *Techos Azules* project, certainly compared with where we started and what were final results, was money well-spent. I don't think we ever had an evaluation that said there was a misuse of government funds. There were not untypical problems here and there, but nothing of such a level that the work would be stopped or the USAID Inspector General (IG) notified --- like Bolivia. These were two different worlds and two different countries.

*Q: Did your program work on literacy?*

NICASTRO: We didn't look at literacy, we looked at a more basic and easily collectible marker --- attendance. Either you're there or you're not. The Ministry did not have the capacity to develop a reputable system to gather initial baseline data, gather it again six months later, and do a comparative longitudinal analysis. And to ask them to do that would have been additive to the basic things they were trying to get done. For the Ministry, showing that more children were showing up to class when they weren't able to previously, was a step in the right direction.

*Q: Understood. Especially in places where there weren't even classrooms and kids weren't even aware that you must go to that classroom every day, that is a step ahead. Was the education program your only project?*

NICASTRO: No, it was not. The Santo Domingo-based Universidad Católica Madre y Maestra, Mother and Teacher (UCMMA) leadership visited my office and told me they were interested in starting a master's Program in Business and Public Administration as a reasonable next step to a successful undergraduate program. When I talked to mission director Phil Schwab about it, he agreed that I should explore this opportunity. The university and I came up with a plan, which I worked out with my contracts officer to not follow traditional USAID contracting, but rather to follow a little-used Request for an Expression of Interest approach. Basically, you present the problem, and ask respondents for a detailed multiyear solution. And in this instance, the problem was: we want to start a Master's Program. Here is the university: what faculty, what training, what instruments,

what commodities do you think they would need to launch a school in a three-to-five-year joint venture period. We brought in some people who knew US business/public administration universities. We selected three US universities based on their written responses; the Vice Rector, Radhames Mejia and I visited them. We interviewed Deans, faculty, and administrators to gauge school interest (not just the proposal respondents) in carrying out the program. The University of South Carolina was selected.

*Q: What was it about the University of South Carolina that was particularly successful or how did they express themselves in terms of doing the job?*

NICASTRO: The on-the-ground USC faculty teaching short or semester courses in Santo Domingo were the backbone of the project. Visits by senior USC leadership to Santo Domingo and senior UCMMA leadership to USC also helped. UCMMA really wanted the relationship and program. They looked upon this as a leap that would identify them in a national and regional academically leadership role. It also allowed them to be accepted as a part of the greater South Carolina family. In addition, we identified UCMMA faculty for US training, including Mejia who did a post doc at the JFK school. We are still in contact after 38 years.

*Q: That was my next question. Did they remain in their jobs? Because once they get higher education or something where they can earn a higher salary, they leave the teaching profession and go to a UN (United Nations) office or who knows what.*

NICASTRO: Well, what you describe are not the only pulls on faculty retention. Not all UCMMA faculty were thirty years old when the project began. Full time tenure as we understand it in the US did not exist. Teaching faculty came from local government and business leadership. In 1985 Dominican university educators were not a sought after group outside Hispaniola. Today with many more Dominicans in the NYC area, local community colleges and other NYC higher educational institutions may now be faculty magnets.

A second project in the Dominican Republic with UCMMA provided orientation to newly elected Dominican Congress members. In 1982 as UCMMA and I were developing the university project the DR was going through a peaceful election of more than 95% of its upper and lower house delegates. Almost none had legislative experience and the only contact they had with the opposition was during the hotly contested and just completed election process. Coincidently, *The Economist* had just published an article about the Kennedy School orientation for new Republican and Democratic members of Congress.

Why not have a similar orientation for Dominican legislators? And to add some luster to the challenge USAID had just initiated an Administration of Justice (AOJ) program, and I volunteered to be the mission AOJ point of contact. The legislator program was later used as a model of USAID AOJ programming.

Would the embassy and mission support this new type of program? What about UCMMA, would they be interested? What about the political parties? Who would design the program, where would the money come from for this unplanned activity, and could this be designed and implemented in 90 days?

I spoke to Phil Schwab, the mission director. He and I spoke to the ambassador. UCMMA's Mejia spoke to the political parties. All I had was the Kennedy School orientation model and a promised budget of less than $100,000. My "ask" was for USAID to finance something it had never done before and for which there was no road map (other than the Kennedy School model).

With support from the embassy/mission side, I asked USAID Washington to call the Kennedy School and have them send someone to design the project. The response from the Kennedy School: "No we don't do those things. That's imperialism."

So, my clever USAID Washington backstop then went to the Hill and identified a former Latino senior aide to Congressman Ed Roybal D/CA. Over a two-week period, he interviewed Dominican political party leaders and the University leadership, and put together a three-day program, which included a member of the US House of Representatives as a keynote speaker. The program was a success as measured by collegial member relationships across party lines.

*Q: Wow. Now, you're training legislators, but at some point, they also must rely on a staff, I mean they can't do everything by themselves. Did the training go all the way down to that?*

NICASTRO: The project was only for elected members. If the members saw the need to train staff, they could work directly with UCMMA and easily appropriate funds. One of Congress's line items was an annual clothing allowance for members-in-need.

*Q: Did this program have visible effects on how the legislature operated?*

NICASTRO: This was a pilot project with high potential for political blowback. I was one of the few foreign nationals permitted on the lower house floor (I only used it once). Three years later in 1985 my departure party was attended by leaders of both houses. I take that as a positive visible sign of support for a long forgotten $100,000 project.

We left right in 1985, but we were told later that legislators were much more civil to each other because they trained together. Not only was there classroom training, but the program organizers coordinated the curriculum so that the social events, which were very important in the United States, were also an integral part of the actual training so that the legislators would learn how to productively interact with each other.

*Q: Did they maintain contact with USAID? What I'm driving at here is, after USAID does training, essentially the trainees are alumni of US programs. Did they maintain a*

*contact with South Carolina University or with other networks that sort of helped them over time?*

NICASTRO: I departed the DR in 1985, almost 40 years ago. The first graduates were in 1983. I could not find a project evaluation in the USAID library. And if there was an evaluation it would be at least 30 years out of date.

However, this statement from the UCMMA's web is most gratifying: "The School of Business also is the highest-ranking school of business in the Dominican Republic".

*Q: And the other thing is, sometimes USAID may end the project and you've completed the training, but the embassy maintains these people as part of the embassy network.*

NICASTRO: I can't comment on an embassy's network but think that maintaining a network is something it should do.

*Q: Of course. This is one of the great things about USAID, at least before the reduction in force of the 1990s, that often, because the USAID people had money, and they were doing projects, they drew more attention than embassy officers. Let's move on to what was next for you.*

NICASTRO: Before we leave the Dominican Republic, I want to mention a few other activities.

The mission wanted to start a program that would give a private sector educational organization company, with political ties to Washington, funding to provide market rate loans to secondary school students seeking technical degrees. I tried but failed to convince mission management that the project was wrong and would strap secondary school students with market rate loans for blue collar positions. I was also told to incorporate a role for the Ministry of Education into the project. The day of the signing the ministry representatives did not show up. Nevertheless, the project went ahead. Mission management later admitted I was correct in my initial observations but agreed I did all I could to make the project implementable.

In 1983, I was asked to TDY in Honduras to participate in the Kissinger Commission follow-up. USAID was tasked with designing a development policy in response to Central America's outbreak of civil unrest. From Tegucigalpa I flew into San Pedro Sula to assess local universities.
Getting back to the capital was eventful, as the commercial flight to Tegucigalpa never arrived. After hours of waiting, a few others decided to rent a car and drive to Tegucigalpa. The trip was hours in time and went though heavy jungle. I did not join them. After more waiting, a Honduran Air Force DC 3 landed to drop off a few things. An announcement came out asking if anyone wanted to take the DC 3 back to Tegucigalpa. I boarded. Only after we were at 10,000 feet or so in the 45-minute flight did I realize if the plane went down in the jungle there would be no record of me having been on the flight. Never again.

*Q: Now, was there anything else with the Kissinger Commission that you were involved in?*

NICASTRO: No, my work was focused on the program I developed to strengthen universities: additional funding for commodities, local scholarships and short term off-shore teacher training. It was a relatively straightforward program to improve universities.

*Q: Interesting. In terms of the Kissinger Commission Report—I assume it went to Congress—was any of it funded? Other than the funding for your university program?*

NICASTRO: Because I went to Honduras on a TDY, I returned to my full-time position in the DR. My ability to follow up on it was limited.

*Q: So, your entire tour ends in '85?*

NICASTRO: Yes, early 1985. Years later, in 2013, I was awarded the University of Missouri's College of Education; Outstanding Achievement Award, for my work in education in the DR.

*Q: Okay. Where do you go next?*

NICASTRO: I was posted to India and arrived in mid 1985. I knew nothing about India except it was geographically half the size of the US with at least 100% more people. My position was to organize a non-existent Office of Technology Development and Business. My first action: change the name of the office to: Technology Development and Enterprise (TDE). A small change, but the office was now mine.

I was told by mission management that my highest priority was to begin implementation of a $10 million dollar venture capital fund to finance the pre-production costs of new Indo-American products, processes or services; and develop, when I had the time, similar programs for health and agriculture. One challenge --- I had to read up on what venture capital was. Don't forget I was an education officer not a private sector officer.

A Washington/HR person Jerry Jordan (now deceased) knew of my work and thought I would be a good fit with the India mission director Owen Cylke and championed my placement. There I was in New Delhi, learning as I went along. Today, 40 years later, Owen and I still maintain a close relationship.

What I knew about India and Indians was almost comical: Mahatma Gandhi, they were ambivalent about or didn't like the British, they played cricket really well and they didn't like Pakistan. I came to appreciate that the country with about 50% of the world's poor, and with about 10% of the remainder with a Visa or Mastercard or both; and with many of their children in elite American, and British schools.

So, here I was, a guy with a PhD in Education who had so far only managed education programs. The race was on. Sometimes I felt I was living an updated version of the Who's on First comedy sketch.

*Q: You went to Delhi, at least initially?*

NICASTRO: Yes, we moved to Delhi. And when we got to India it was like no place we could have ever imagined. The Mission was on these lovely grounds of an almost pre-colonial India era. Embassy Row, which included the next door, the Soviets, was charming. Our USAID offices were sumptuous. Housing was not.

Owen Cylke, the Mission Director, saw my office as being the key to a new vision he had of what USAID could do in a country like India that was not focused on the poor. Why not focus on India's competitive science and technology base, aiding its move into a private sector-led growth? The Program for the Commercialization of Technology (PACT) was to be our first project. I suggested PACER as the next project to design.

Peter Thormann (now deceased), theUSAID/India economist, designed PACT to be implemented by the second largest bank in India, the Industrial Credit and Investment Corporation of India (ICICI) in Bombay. USAID donated ten million dollars to co-finance the pre-production costs of new products or processes developed under Indo-US joint business ventures with Indian scientists who were not part of the government. No fewer than 30 days after I arrived, the president of ICICI was promoted to the presidency of India's largest bank and a new president was assigned, someone who nobody in the mission knew and who nobody had spoken to about this project. My first out of Delhi experience was to fly to Bombay where I had never been and explain PACT, a program I barely understood, to the new bank president --- who was a banker. I prepared my five-minute elevator speech, sat down, and started talking to him. After what felt like an eternity but was just three to four minutes he said "OK, I'm convinced this is something we need to do." I returned to Delhi with the prize in hand.

*Q: What was the size of the grant?*

NICASTRO: Ten million dollars was the total grant to the bank which could make sub grants up to $500,000 or more. The notion was that entrepreneurs, scientists, and businesspeople would come to PACT and make presentations on how up to $500,000 would get them closer to marketing a product/process or service that might be marketable but could not find a line of credit in an Indian bank.

Finding a nontraditional USAID consultancy group to assist ICICI staff in organizing proposal analysis was a challenge. We received many Beltway responses, and ultimately went with a midwest research institute. However, it became apparent they did not have the same venture capitalist orientation as we did so the relationship was terminated. ICICI learned by doing.

*Q: What were the basic criteria you used to give a grant to a startup?*

NICASTRO: The basic criteria for grant consideration: it had to be an Indo-US joint business venture; had to attract Indian scientists from government labs; had to focus on a new product/process/service opportunity with no possible India line of credit; and, its final market was world-wide. In Washington, Administrator Peter McPherson, and Ed Harrell/PRE supported PACT.

*Q: Was any US venture capital involved?*

NICASTRO: No. US venture capital was not involved. However, the Board of Directors had a distinct US flavor. They brought experience with models from Silicon Valley and Route 28 in Massachusetts which at that juncture were the focus of US technology driven economic growth.

*Q: You didn't mention the research triangle in North Carolina or any of the private sector incubators that might have been growing up in the US?*

NICASTRO: At that time, Silicon Valley and Route 28 had the sizzle. Other lesser-known hubs like the Research Triangle became known to us as we were developing our work. We had to keep it simple to maintain focus and not go in too many different directions at once.

For the design of the PACER project, I sought a regional focus based on Research Triangle/Rt 128/Silicon Valley. Remember, this was 1985/86 and there's nothing in India that even considered the concept of private sector-led regional economic development. I went to four cities: Pune, Bangalore, Bombay, and Calcutta. I spoke to university leadership, banking leadership, and to city and regional political leadership, about these out of India phenomena to see what their interests were. I needed to justify the US government making an investment of many millions of dollars to energize that process that was already starting in India. Of all my visits, I found Bangalore leadership most closely resembling that of the early stage US models.

*Q: What were your criteria for Bangalore?*

NICASTRO: My criteria was finding a leadership cadre that saw their region as a potential growth hub but did not have a center or operating philosophy pulling them in one direction. Would they be interested in PACER funding, (for which they would have to provide counterpart resources), to access world known thought leaders, visits to existing growth hubs and funding for this innovative growth? Finally, Bangalore had a nascent leadership base that was not government focused.

*Q: What about the Serum Institute of India (SII) in Pune?*

This was a tremendous opportunity lost as USAID was not able to enter into a relationship with Serum Institute, which ultimately has become a world leader in vaccine production.

Before I arrived in India the Embassy's Science Officer, Rogers Beasley the USAID Health Officer, and Owen sought to identify different private and public groups in India's interested in moving vaccine production to the private sector and focus government role on vaccine QA/QC. Rogers found The Serum Institute of India (SII) in Pune, a modest operation that produced serums for the local market and purchased measles and other vaccines on the world market for sale on the local India markets. Based on early discussions with SII leadership, they began discussions with the US company owner of the seed measles vaccine and technology to produce the vaccine. I was put in charge to assist in negotiations and make it happen. SII did purchase measles seed and begin production, but not as we envisioned.

Up until that time India, again with 60 or 70% of the world's poor, purchased their vaccine annually from the WHO (World Health Organization). USAID wanted to provide a $5 million loan guarantee, not a loan, to assist in the deal. The stumbling block - the government of India didn't want SII to take on the guarantee since it would increase its sovereign foreign debt. At the same time the US company would not lower its seed price and required SII to annual price negotiations.

After months of on again/off again negotiations SII told us they had ended talks with the US provider. SII then announced a deal with the government of Yugoslavia for the Zagreb strain of measles vaccine. In the mid 1980s Yugoslavia still existed. Zagreb was a center of tremendous technical development and one of its centers had developed the Zagreb strain. This strain was considered to be gentler to children than the US strain. And the rumored price: numerous round-trip air tickets to Zagreb-Pune for the Yugoslav scientists. So SII negotiated a deal that launched them into a private sector space no other Indian company had attained, something the USG supported --- but without the US flag.

Today, Cyrus Poonawalla, the Parsi SII owner is a billionaire and recognized philanthropist. He was knighted by Queen Elizabeth II for his good work growing vaccines. His family bought the former US consulate in Bombay and has other properties in London. I am not aware of any role USAID or Cyrus would attribute to SII's meteoric rise from small time to billion dollar status in 40 years- the magic of compound interest perhaps.

*Q: Was this done for the local population, or for export?*

NICASTRO: No, all domestic. SII was producing the measles vaccine for the domestic market.

*Q: Where did you go after India? So, you began your career as an education and educational development officer and over time now you've transitioned to private sector market development, small business development and so on. Is that accurate?*

NICASTRO: Yes. We stayed in India until mid-1987 and returned to Washington. Between 1987 and 1993 I held a series of positions with different bureaus in Washington:

Private Enterprise (PRE); Asia Near East (ANE); and Europe & Newly Independent States (ENI). Most of the work I did was day-to-day bureau management: helping missions get the technical assistance needed for evaluations or product design; mediating conflict between one bureau and another: typical kinds of things that a Foreign Service officer in Washington does on a daily basis. In short, I moved from a purely technical role as an education officer to private sector, general management, and project development roles. Technical officers can seek wider responsibilities or stay within the confines of their original technical skills. I chose the former route.

I went from a free-wheeling operation in the Dominican Republic, Bolivia, and India, to going to work in a carpool every day. But I do want to highlight a few unusual USAID activities: the Contras; a TDY to Pakistan/Afghanistan; and the USAEP, that I believe were unique and descriptive of some of the things I liked best about being in Washington.

*Q: Describe those USAID/W activities.*

NICASTRO: At the PRE bureau I received a phone call from USAID/HR. Congratulations, I was going to be assigned to Central America shortly to work on the Contra Task Force in Honduras. USAID had an operation there providing non-lethal aid to the Contras: food, medication, etc.

USAID: "You will provide management oversight".
ME: "Look, I just got back to DC, my wife is pregnant, I'd like to be here for the birth"
USAID: "Don't worry, we can send you back for the birth."
ME: "That's not how marriages work."
USAID, 'That's how USAID marriages work."

*Q: What about the Contras?.*

NICASTRO: I was in negotiations with HR trying to figure out a solution, when on Saturday, January 23, 1988, a DC-6 cargo plane crashed on the border of Honduras. A major political scandal ensued. There were Democrats on the Hill who had never liked Contra aid and the accident happened just about a week before a Congressional hearing was to take place to secure additional funding for this Contra program. The Democratic majority basically slashed and cut funding to the Contra task force.

A month before I was to leave, I was told, 'You're not going to go, we're closing down the whole operation." So ended my Contra tour.

A year later some USAID officers (direct hires) working on the field task force were indicted for allegedly fixing commodity pricing and kickbacks. They were found guilty. I knew one or two. While the crash was a tragedy, I was directly impacted by not having to be a part of the task force and not potentially getting caught up in on-going malpractices.

*Q: Tell me about USAID Afghanistan/Pakistan.*

NICASTRO: In 1990 I was with Asia Near East (ANE) and sent to Pakistan to assess the capacity of the democratic forces of Afghanistan to be part of a government that was going to be formed as the Soviets were leaving. This was part of the Democratic Pluralism Initiative. ANE started Open Markets/Open Societies programming premised on the assumption that governments needed open markets as well as open societies to have successful economic and political development. For ten days, between Quetta and Peshawar, a State Desk Officer, a St. Louis University professor and I interviewed mullahs, NGO leadership, private sector and public sector people to try to identify what was needed in this new Afghanistan as the Soviets were leaving.

*Q: Oh, the beginning of transition to open markets.*

NICASTRO: Open Markets/Open Societies was a packaging concept for USAID as we moved into Eastern Europe and parts of the former Soviet Union. The Berlin Wall had just fallen in November of 1989. We came up with a 47-page post-Soviet Afghanistan document that was historical as well as prescriptive. I was looking at it the other day as I prepared for this interview and saw that in 1990 one of the people we interviewed was Hamid Karzai. He later became as. Many know the president of Afghanistan when the United States invaded in 2001. But at that time, he was the representative of the Afghan interim government and participated in some of the interviews that we had.

One meeting with Shia mullahs should have given us a better view of what was to happen to Afghanistan. Shia mullahs told us that Sunni leadership did not believe that democracy as we knew it was going to be successful in Afghanistan. They gave us a pamphlet that allegedly had come from some Sunni group that said that democracy in Afghanistan would never work for three reasons. The first reason was that in elections people who were mentally unstable could vote. The second reason was that in elections women could vote. The third reason was that in elections Shias could vote.
*Q: Okay. So, you're still in Pakistan, you're looking to create this program, the Taliban essentially are blocking this, and you're having these talks with potential leaders of Afghanistan who could go in I guess after the Taliban have been defeated? Was that the understanding?*

NICASTRO: Well, at that juncture the Taliban were not an organized group. The Afghan Cross Border Mission in Quetta began to fund some of the open society activities that we recommended. They wanted to give money to the Asia Foundation who would sub grant to Afghan NGOs looking at issues of voice, choice, and governance. That program never really took root due to civil unrest. During our stay the assassinations of western-oriented NGO leaders were becoming commonplace in the streets of Quetta. As the Soviets pulled out, the anti-Soviet alliance of about eleven groups fell apart and civil war broke out. The Taliban emerged from Kandahar as the one force that controlled all but northern Shia Afghanistan, effectively ending the civil war until 2001.

*Q: What about the USAEP?*

NICASTRO:  In 1992, I was the head of technical resources for a new bureau, Asia/PRE, led by a new political appointee Henrietta Fore. Henrietta was interested in launching an Asia region environmental program with USAID leading a USG-wide program. This was quite an undertaking as we had to get 16 USG agencies, like EPA, to sign off as part of an interagency process to have President Bush announce the program, as part of his Administration's environmental efforts in Asia. I was operational leader while Molly Kux (deceased) was the environmental leader.

Although USAID did not have a seat on the National Security Council at the time, Henrietta was able to access senior USG agency leadership, pitch the idea in their offices, saying that USAID had a new program the president wanted to announce when he was in Asia the following January. Let's all pull together!

In early 1992, I was at State putting the final touches on the paragraphs the President would use to launch the USAEP during his tour of Asia. I called Henrietta to alert her. The next morning, the news focused on the President's launch of his lunch into the lap of the Japanese Prime Minister, not the launch of the USAEP. That was the news out of Japan that day. The USAEP never did get a second bite at a high-profile launch.

As preparation for the President's launch, we had had 500 pamphlets printed extolling the virtues of the USAEP with a front-page quote from the president's speech --- a speech he never gave. Henrietta directed me to a White House lawyer who apparently was responsible for adjudicating what the president would have said --- if he had said it. I read him the quote and his response was: go ahead, it sounds like something he would say.

Just like that I became a presidential speech writer.

*Q: Okay, on to Chile.*

NICASTRO: By 1993, we were ready for an overseas assignment. I knew that Chile was on the bid list, and I spoke to Latin America and Caribbean (LAC) senior management and others about my interest. At some juncture in the appointment process, I was told my nomination had been sent to the ambassador for his approval. He approved, and we were assigned to Chile as USAID Representative. I was extremely happy because our eldest daughter Gabriella would be schooled at an excellent Chile/American high school in Santiago, *Nido de Aguilas* (Eagles Nest) and our youngest would be in its elementary school.

At this time, USAID was going through a process of reducing overseas posts as part of cost cutting. Chile was one of about a dozen to be closed possibly as early as 1996. I had met the longstanding AID Rep Paul Fritz years before. In 1988, he had financed a TDY for me to complete an assessment of Chile's higher education system, school, its banking system, and its government interest to see if it was ready for the takeoff I had seen in India. I thought it was a possibility. The problem was that Paul didn't have the money or the time to pull together a team to develop the program to the level it had to be developed. So it never went anywhere. But I developed a friendship with Paul and had

the opportunity to get to know the Chilean economy as a result of that experience. When I arrived in Chile in 1993, I knew what I could do if we had enough funding for 3 or 4 years, but that was not to be.

*Q: Okay. So, in essence, you're going there as USAID is sunsetting. What were the goals in terms of being sure about sustainability, evaluation and so on?*

NICASTRO: I had four goals: 1) I wanted a smooth landing for our democracy and environmental projects; 2) I wanted to make sure my twelve FSNs departed in an orderly fashion; 3) I wanted to open a new small grant program to support regional university workshops and open the dialogue on potential local impacts of the upcoming NAFTA Free Trade Agreement; and 4) I wanted to successfully launch the Chile/Americas fund.

I became the US representative to the Chile/Americas Fund at the Ambassador's request. The Brady Debt Reduction Plan identified about $20 million of Chile's sovereign interest debt to invest in community environmental projects. A new Board had to hire a director and put into place a project proposal evaluation system and ad campaign. In short, I was to organize a mini bureaucracy that would pass an IG evaluation and sunset. Setting up the mechanism took months. The ambassador, reasonably, urged that the process move quickly and begin awarding grants. I was guided by the results of other LAC Board's that had moved too fast and had to close and restart or worse had critical IG reports issued. When we finally launched, the Board had a transparent process in place and had no complaints from the non-funded or funded proposers. The ambassador was pleased.

*Q: Alright. Now, of course, this is the moment when Chile transitions to democratic government. Was that environment accommodating to the plans that you were having?*

NICASTRO: Indeed, they had been. The democratic transition had begun a year or two before I arrived. Pinochet lost in a plebiscite, and they had the first democratically elected government since Pinochet took over. Interestingly enough, I met Pinochet at the ambassador's residence at a 1994 reception for a visiting US three star general. It was the first time since the 1973 coup he had visited. When he walked in there was a low-level collective gasp. It was fall and he walked into the reception area wearing a big cape that enveloped him and almost touched the floor - Darth Vader in person.

*Q: How did you carry out the program?*

NICASTRO: Within months of arriving in 1993, I got a call from the Ambassador's secretary inviting Peggy and me to his residence the next week in honor of Supreme Court Justice Sandra Day O'Connor. I had been to many Embassy receptions in my career and knew the drill: get there early, say hello, look for future contacts, schmooze around a little bit and don't drink until all guests have left. Well, we showed up to the residence and only ten of us were there: the ambassador and his wife, the DCM (Deputy Chief of Mission) and his wife, Justice O'Connor, her husband, her friend, and his Chilean wife. The O'Connors were visiting Chile because a law school friend of hers was married to a Chilean. I was seated next to the Justice. And we talked about one thing I

knew most about, my Judicial Reform Program, which was moving Chile away from the accusatorial system to the prosecutorial system. She seemed interested in the project. I told her I was bringing some of Chile's justices to Washington as part of the project and wondered if we could include a visit to her offices. She happily agreed.

*Q: Wow. Yeah.*

NICASTRO: A couple of months later, one cool spring morning, four Chilean justices, Chile's ambassador to the US, and I are sitting in one of the reception rooms in the Supreme Court. The room has high vaulted ceilings and floor to ceiling windows. Ms. O'Connor walked into the room and she sat down with us. She had a brown bag in her hand. She said, "usually for these breakfast meetings I try to bake some cookies the night before, but I didn't have time, so I had my staff buy some store cookies. I'm sorry. Now, who wants coffee and who wants tea?" She begins taking orders and pouring.

She then engaged in small talk: have you been to DC before, this building? What are some of the challenges you have? Yes, we have those same challenges. Chile's justices could not believe the attention we are getting, and neither can I. Back in Chile, the few times we had any push back on the project I would invoke her name suggesting it was the right thing to do.

*Q: Yeah. That's good representational work.*

NICASTRO: Yeah. Well, again, not the kind of contact with USG officials that are typical for USAID officers. But Justice O'Connor and I stayed in touch, and when I retired in '01, I went to say goodbye. She asked me if I had ever had a tour in her building. No, I replied. "Let's take a walk." The Justice then walked out her office's front door with her security a step behind. Tourists began taking photos; they can't believe they're seeing a Justice. A wonderful lady.

*Q: Back to Chile.*

NICASTRO: We worked through a local university group to carry the reform efforts. We provided technical assistance, electronic commodities, and short-term out-of-Chile seminars/workshops. Chile's program was considered to be one of the most successful judicial reforms in Latin America. And indeed, the Justice Minister Soledad Alvear almost became president of Chile. She decided at the last minute to pull her nomination because of family issues. She is a fantastic woman. She saw the future and it was reform.

The other development issue I covered was the Free Trade Agreement. Chile was in the process of negotiating a Free Trade Agreement with the US, which was never signed. Before it failed, I wanted to take the agreement outside Santiago and move the dialogue to regions that would be more directly impacted. The premise was to open the dialogue and make it not just a Washington to Santiago negotiation but to get folks who were directly impacted to understand better what was going to happen to their particular—not

company—but their particular region. [Note: After years of discussion and further negotiation, the US-Chile Free Trade Agreement entered into force in 2004.]

I gave one grant to a regional university association which then sub-granted funds to universities in the south and the north so that they would become familiar with the intricacies of the Free Trade Agreement and its possible impact on the local economies. Chile was just beginning export of grapes, strawberries, and other food items like shrimp, tilapia, sea bass and wine.

*Q: Over time were you able to measure public sentiment, or at least business sector sentiment about the development of the free trade agreement?*

NICASTRO: Everybody wanted it. They saw NAFTA as the last step of acceptance back into the democratic world. It was the sign that Pinochet was officially gone.

*Q: But you said it was never signed, and yet as far as I know, we do have the agreement?*

NICASTRO: We do. It was bilateral rather than a trilateral with Mexico and Canada. It was supposed to be multilateral, and they signed a series of bilaterals to get it done.

*Q: What other projects were there?*

We also had a USAID/Washington funded Pollution Prevention Program, which performed factory pollution reduction assessments. The assumption was that the assessments could then be used to seek bank loans for commodity purchases. The program was not a success: banks did not have windows for pollution reduction commodities; the assessments were often six or more months late, and the government was not enforcing pollution reduction efforts.

I attempted to involve Chile's development arm, AGCI (Chilean International Cooperation Agency) the *Agencia Chilena de Cooperación Internacional* with USAID. Chile was providing technical assistance to Colombia, Uruguay, and Paraguay. I saw an opportunity to maintain a USAID presence in Chile by joining ventures to support a world of mutual interest. The Chileans were interested; however, AID Washington was not receptive as they were in close-out mode.

*Q: How was retention?*

I held meetings, one-on-one and in groups, to gauge FSN needs to stay with me. The requests were minor. They liked their jobs. Nonetheless, I offered each a month's extra salary if they stayed until a certain date. They all stayed with me to the end.

*Q: This was also the period of the reduction in force.*

NICASTRO: Yes, it was the reduction in force, the closing down of the Mission. I also closed out Uruguay and Argentina. We had an USAID Representative for both countries,

he left earlier than planned, and I closed both about six months after he left. At that juncture I might have overseen the greatest number of close-outs of any USAID officer, but since then others may have claimed that dubious title.

*Q: So, this period of Chile and then the sunsetting in Uruguay and Argentina, this ends at what point?*

NICASTRO: I was there in Chile for three years (1993-1996) continuing and then sunsetting the programs already in place supporting democracy, specifically judicial reform. And I added an economic focus to help Chileans in regional areas understand and accept NAFTA (North American Free Trade Agreement), which was a key underpinning in the Clinton administration. Due to my work in both of those areas and expanding resources to non-traditional USAID recipients, I was asked if I could accept an award from the government, the *Grand Order of Bernardo O'Higgins*. O'Higgins was their George Washington. With LAC/W concurrence Chile had a nice little ceremony for my staff, and my family. The O'Higgins award is the highest recognition a non-citizen could receive and it was the first awarded to a US citizen in 15 years.

My assignment in Chile ended in the summer of 1996. A mentor, Barbara Turner, recruited me to be the Director of Democracy, Governance, and Social Reform for the Europe and Independent States Bureau. Before I started in that role, I was on a "threshold" promotion panel for about two months. A panel of three Senior Foreign Service Officers priority-listed over 100 FS-1s for promotion into the Senior Service based on up to 10 years of performance files. Since less than 10 percent of the Foreign Service are promoted to the Senior Service, competition is fierce. We listed fifteen for promotion and fewer than five or six made it.

*Q: Just a question about the panel, obviously without mentioning names, what did you learn about USAID and promotion and who was moving up?*

NICASTRO: I recall the security surrounding our files. Our room was locked overnight. All our daily notes were put in a burn bag. It was pretty tedious after a while, but careers were determined.

*Q: Okay. But in the end, you found five or six to promote?*

NICASTRO: There were many more than five or six. However, the USAID HR personnel budget only permitted so many staff at different levels. So, HR had to balance retirement and other departures with our promotion recommendations.

*Q: I see. So, you complete this assignment and then you move into the office of Democratic—*

NICASTRO: The Office of Democracy, Governance, and Social Reform in the Bureau for Europe and Newly Independent States (ENI). A 40-person operation with everything

from judicial reform to setting up health systems. I managed people, I did field work. I traveled a lot - our portfolio was mainly in former Warsaw Pact countries.

*Q: So then, this is the period 1996 to 2001 that you worked in this office? Which countries were part of your remit and how successful were the programs?*

NICASTRO: The interesting thing about this particular assignment was it was not just working with other missions. We also had close contact with other donors: primarily the Rockefeller Brother Fund and Soros's Open Society Institute. This took advantage of their varied ongoing field operations and on-the-ground contacts. Our missions also worked with local NGOs. My office had central contracts which all missions bought into. One example was the Central Eastern European Law Institute (CEELI), a part of the American Bar Association (ABA) which placed young lawyers in counties. And Justice Sandra O'Connor was on the CEELI Board—so our paths crossed again!

The Rockefeller Brothers Fund (RBF) worked closely with my predecessor, Gerry Donnelly, who has since passed on, unfortunately. She was a dynamic officer who developed a strong working collegial relationship with the RBF. One result was joint operational meetings in Tarrytown, NY and Salzburg, Austria. At one meeting we decided to do a joint small NGO grants project. Unfortunately, the DC-based consultant I assigned to the joint design team pushed the team in a direction RBF leadership did not support. I didn't realize the damage that was being done and as a result RBF pulled out. This was a great loss.

In 1999, ENI Bureau leadership changed and wanted to bring in new office leadership. A colleague from the Latin America and Caribbean (LAC) Bureau and I ran into each other at the Smithsonian. He said my name had come up as a leading candidate to manage $500 million of 632 (a) and 632 (b) transfers to five USG agencies in a "whole of government" response to Hurricane Mitch reconstruction in Central America. Hardly any funds had been spent and deobligation of funds was on the horizon. Was I interested in coming back to LAC? I told him my only requirement was an office with a door. If it also doubled as the coffee room that was fine. So, in 2000 I was back in LAC—in an office with a door—back where I had started my career in 1978 with an interesting mandate.

*Q: Now, take one second to explain what 632a and b money is.*

NICASTRO: The 632 (a) and 632 (b) are transfers of money from one US government agency to another. The "b" means that the recipient agency cannot expense any part of the funds without USAID approval. The "a" means that the recipient agency can expense without USAID approval. 632s were utilized by the Clinton Administration because it sought a "whole of government" approach to Hurricane Mitch reconstruction. This made sense on paper as more USG technical experts could be inserted into mission planning and implementation. In reality, three years after the crisis, the 632 funds were largely untapped. The primary problem was that all USG agency personnel already had a full-time job, and after one or two trips to Central America to gather information, they needed to show loyalty to their agency, not USAID.

I organized monthly show-and-tells with all agencies, trips to the Central American missions, and scheduled cut off dates by which any 632 funding would be de-obligated and returned to the US Treasury.

*Q: So what's next after Hurricane Mitch?*

A few months into the 632 assignment, LAC leadership offered me the position of Acting Deputy Assistant Administrator A/DAA/LAC. I accepted but alerted them that I was seeking to depart USAID in 2001 if I could find a suitable career next step. During this ENI/LAC period, I began to consider life after USAID. Starting in 1964, I had served: in Peru with Save; in Bolivia with Peace Corps and then USAID; in the Dominican Republic, India, Chile and Washington DC with USAID. I did not see that any additional USAID assignment overseas or in DC could offer the professional challenges I sought. I was 58, healthy, and had a family to support. Staying within my comfort zone I saw three options: back to academia; consulting, or both. The thought of going back to academia—a life from which I left in Missouri for USAID—was appealing to me.

I began with the Chronicle of Higher Education's help wanted section and sent my resume to programs around the United States that were starting up or reinvigorating their international programs. Three universities invited me for interviews. Of the three, two offered me the position. One I turned down immediately, and the other was in a midwestern state I was quite interested in. My wife indicated she did not want to leave the DC area so I withdrew my application. In response, the university changed the position to be based in DC and offered me the position. However, in the end I turned down the offer realizing that annual financial support from college Deans required on the ground personal relationships to be effective—not long distance trips to/from Washington DC.

Around this time Gabriella, my daughter, was in her summer junior year Booz Allen internship for her William & Mary undergraduate business degree. She told me Booz was recruiting individuals with my background, and asking if I would mind if she submitted my resume? If I was hired, she would get a finders fee!

*Q: A finder's fee.*

NICASTRO: The first time she ever saw any economic value in Dad.

*Q: Lovely.*

NICASTRO: Well, Booz Allen never called me up, but a company I'd never heard of did call, The Louis Berger Group (LBG). They were in a relationship with Booz Allen and told me they didn't know exactly who I was as they only received the last page of my resume. Apparently, what they saw on page three was interesting enough to call me for an interview.

*Q: Very serendipitous. Go ahead.*

NICASTRO: I interviewed with them, and we had a good conversation. They were interested in adding my name to proposals as Chief of Party, and if they won, I'd be assigned overseas. Well, if I wanted to go overseas, I'd just stay with USAID. So, I said thank you but no thank you, I'm looking for a corporate job.

A few months later Berger called to invite me for lunch at the Willard Hotel with three members of their leadership. The next week I had the written contract ready for my signature.

After 25 years of USAID service on the last Friday of March 2001 I retired as the A/DAA/LAC. The first work Monday of April 2001, I began my LBG career as a vice-president.

*Q: Wow. Do you know what changed their mind over those three months, maybe just the departure of someone?*

NICASTRO: When I arrived in April 2001 there were two other new hires at the vice president level, both domestic. I think what leadership decided was they needed more senior people who could begin to generate additional contacts and contracts in the domestic and international markets.

Between April and September 2001, I looked at USAID, I looked at the World Bank, I looked at the Inter-American Development Foundation; and whenever I found an interesting possibility for a contract, LBG already had the Request for Proposal (RFP) in hand. It was the first time since joining Save that I did not have a job description. I felt I was on a slippery slope as the two domestic new hires disappeared. Luckily two LBG leaders—the son of the founder and a senior engineer - befriended and mentored me, assuring me that I was on the right track.

*Q: And here I just want to ask a quick question, is Berger a company that will supply capital equipment? Does it supply more along the lines of small projects? What are its main areas of interest?*

NICASTRO: LBG was primarily a civil engineering company. What differentiated it from a Bechtel or a Fluor is that both have their own construction capability. LBG's focus was on design/bid/build civil engineering planning for contracts to be let for the actual construction.

LBG also had a vibrant, although small, USAID consultancy capacity, and that is where I initially put my time. LBG had won a series of USAID contracts to work in Mindanao in the Philippines. The primary focus was to work with Muslim communities on small condition projects, education improvement reform, and export promotion. Working on small community-based infrastructure projects and activities to breach long-standing Muslims.

LBG's home office, based in East Orange, New Jersey, managed a very decentralized worldwide regional office operations (profit centers), which served ownership well. Its Paris Office worked with the European Union for Eastern Europe, the Asian Development Bank, and the World Bank. They had a major Manila office for USAID and other donor consultancies. LBG's success through 2010 masked the inherent weakness of this approach and its lack of financial controls ultimately led to LBG's almost total collapse and later sale to a Canadian civil engineering company.

*Q: Just one question about all the activities Berger does in auditing or governing the loans , is it always private banks or does it include IFIs (International Financial Institutions) as well?*

NICASTRO: It was both private banks and IFIs.

*Q: And the reason I ask is because the loan is going to be in euros or Swiss francs or maybe dollars, but I imagine it gets converted into local currency when the work gets done?*

NICASTRO: It would depend on what currency the contract was denominated in. The stronger the currency there, the lower the risk.

*Q: Okay, thanks for clarifying a few of the details of how it operated. Okay, please go on.*

On 9/11, I had been with LBG for six months. That morning as a member of the American Foreign Service Association (AFSA), I was on the Hill with people from AFSA, lobbying the Republican congressional staffers to build, not reduce, the international affairs budget. Around 9 or so they began the presentation telling us that the Bush administration was not going to have an international focus for his first couple of years in office. Two or three sentences into their presentation, we were instructed to exit Capitol Hill because the US was under attack and the Hill was thought to be the next target. We were told to go to the Metro. By accident I ran into a USAID colleague also exiting the Hill. We decided that if we were going to die that day it would not be in a Metro car or station. We found an open café behind the Hill and for about three hours drank coffee and watched the day's events unfold on television. (As we were running off Capitol Hill, we passed a police guard station who had a landline on his desk. Local cell towers were jammed due to the mass usage, and I asked him if I could use it to call my wife. Yes, was the response and I immediately got through to my wife. Since that day, we have kept our home landline.)

By November 2001, Berger—true to its aggressive can-do philosophy, which clients liked—sent one of its senior engineers, Jim Myers, into Kabul. At this juncture there was still fighting going on and getting into Kabul was difficult. The UN had a daily DC-9 flight and Jim talked his way onto a seat. His charge was to perform a high-level needs assessment of Afghan infrastructure including primary roads, schools, clinics, and power stations. When Jim returned to Washington in early 2002, LBG was the only and I mean

the only, source of any semi-comprehensive Afghan infrastructure needs. So, we organized briefings in Washington with USAID, the Asian Development Bank, Army Corps of Engineers, and other groups who were potential donors. And of course we left copies of Jim's report. We knew there would be big programs, but we didn't know exactly how or where. At the same time Fred Berger, the founder's son, went to Afghanistan, and established a housing accommodation relationship that permitted LBG to quickly billet any staff. Fred also had a large sign painted and hung identifying a local residence as LBG's Afghan HQ. Again, this was all done on spec.

About a month later, I got a phone call from the Mission Director in Kabul, who asked if LBG would be interested in expanding on its 2001 civil infrastructure needs assessment. At that point, there was no US legislation on post-Taliban Afghanistan; USAID has five or six billets in the retaken US Embassy in Kabul; and LBG is still the only US engineering company with any Afghan footprint. We signed a contract and four more engineers, including Jim, and a sociologist went to Afghanistan. When they came back, as LBG was completing the report, I fed USAID/Washington salient points which became the infrastructure basis of the Afghan Freedom Support Act of 2002.

*Q: Wow.*

NICASTRO: Infrastructure was going to be a big deal. USAID decided to issue an RFP (Request for Proposal) for a Rehabilitation of Economic Facilities and Services (REFS) project with a three-week response turnaround. USAID made LBG's Assessment document available to any company that was going to respond to the RFP. And it held a pre-award Q&A session in Vienna. LBG won the initial $250 million REFS contact. We beat Bechtel, we beat Fluor, we beat everybody. With that LBG was launched into the major leagues.

The next step was initially believed to be a misstep as we had to replace our initial Chief of Party. His replacement, Jim Meyers, however, proved to be exactly the experienced leader the project needed as REFS and USAID became a White House focus. The original REFS contract called for 50 kilometers of the 250-kilometer Kabul to Kandahar highway to be replaced in year one. President Bush, in a moment of exuberance, promised President Karzai that the *whole* road, all 250 kilometers, would be repaved by December 2003 or in less than one year.

LBG had just relieved our Chief of Party, we were just getting other staff into country, there was hardly any road building equipment in country; everything, including nails, had to be imported through Pakistan or Iran (we needed to get OFAC licenses for Iran). Land mines were an increasing problem as were Taliban attacks. So, we came up with a plan to jumpstart local road contracting in one Sunday night meeting with USAID lawyers, contracts officers, and engineers. We divided the road into five sections of 50 kilometers, giving each sector to one of five Turkish or Indian construction companies already in Afghanistan. If one company had a problem, another company could fulfill that portion of the contract.

The New York Times wrote a long article on Jim Myers. Jim was the kind of guy who didn't suffer fools gladly. He wore cowboy boots, and a cowboy hat, got into fist fights, and shot tigers in Africa. He was proud of the killing until he went through a metamorphosis and decided he was going to protect all animals. He was not your typical USAID consultant. He was a character and a half, and we loved to have him around. After his death in 2010, two LBG staff and I began drafting a screen adaptation of his life.

One lift of asphalt covered the whole road by the December 2003 inauguration. I was in a group who flew in for the inauguration. The USAID Director, Andrew Natsios, was there representing the USG. It was an exciting period of time for us. When we got off the helicopters, we were given yellow arm bands and instructed that if the Taliban attacked, we were to duck and cover in nearby trenches that had been dug for security purposes. I still think - wouldn't the Taliban first shoot the people with the yellow arm bands? But luckily there was no issue and we did not have to find out. I still have my yellow arm band, which is in a box that pops up every so often. I always get a chuckle out of that.

A month or two before the inauguration a USAID colleague called and asked me to price leasing a 727 or a 737 to fly from Dubai to Kabul and then to a couple of the local Afghan cities and back to Dubai for press. President Bush was going to be in Afghanistan for the inauguration of the road. As I began calling around for quotes, Saddam Hussein was captured, and the world's focus was on Iraq and the upcoming trial. As a result, Bush never arrived in Kabul.

*Q: But the opening did go off without a hitch?*

NICASTRO: The opening went off well. Karzai said it was the happiest day of his life, but I have no idea how often he said that. That night we hosted a party for over 100 at an Iranian restaurant that had the best kebabs in Kabul. Karzai then hosted us at his house, and it was quite an affair. Jim Myers gave him his Stetson, so, there's pictures of Hamid Karzai with Myers' black Stetson on. The inauguration was definitely a highlight.

I can't imagine what the road looks like now. It probably looks like what it looked like when we arrived there.

*Q: Yeah. Was there a concern even after you finished it about maintenance?*

NICASTRO: Yes, and that was a part of the lessons learned: you can't have maintenance on these roads. The roads were being mined for later detonation or the maintenance crews were being attacked or threatened.

*Q: Yeah, certainly, I understand. Well, many lessons learned.*

NICASTRO: In early 2003, when Washington-based LBG colleagues and I started going to Kabul, on Fridays (the day of rest) we would go shopping for rugs on Chicken Street by ourselves and just a driver—no security. We would sit in these stores and be served

tea. Owners would show rugs, a cultural tradition that went back hundreds of years. But as time went on, these stores became soft targets. They were bombed, and people were killed. Those early Fridays of being able to get around Kabul became more and more restrictive. You couldn't go anywhere safely because everybody was a target. Or, you may not have been, but you thought you were because you were taller than everybody else and you didn't wear local garb. Kabul's atmosphere changed and we all realized that.

But I want to transition us to another Afghanistan project we did not yet discuss.

LBG won a USAID RFP called Currency Conversion before REFS. At the time the 2001 invasion occurred, there were at least seven currencies in use in Afghanistan. There was the old Afghan currency, as well as European Union, Iranian, Pakistani, Indian, and US dollars. Karzai believed—and he was probably right—that one way you bring a nation together is using one currency. The European Union agreed to print the currency in Europe, and the US government agreed to get it distributed in Afghanistan. LBG identified a subject matter expert to work with the government in Kabul, won the contract, and I became the backstop.

We wanted to have a 20–30-minute exchange table pass-through for every Afghan from entry with old currency to leaving with new currency. The goal was to have someone start at one end of a long table and leave at the other end of the table following an open and transparent procedure with the old currency destroyed. We purchased and had flown in from the US and Europe counters, computers, everything you need to set up an exchange. I also had to lease fixed-wing and rotary aircraft to distribute the currency from Kabul throughout Afghanistan. Over forty temporary exchange sites were established. The conversion had to be accomplished before a date after which only new currency would be accepted.

For more currency background:
https://edition.cnn.com/2002/WORLD/asiapcf/central/10/06/afghan.currency/

*Q: Did this also help develop a banking system, even a small banking system that would exist outside Kabul?*

NICASTRO: Currency conversion was a "one and done" activity. It was thought of as providing lubricant for a "to be" or developing banking system. USAID and other donors had other projects that dealt with developing banking systems. Unfortunately, there were many major banking system failures, which undermined over time public support for Karzai.

*Q: Was the new currency printed with counterfoils against counterfeiting?*

NICASTRO: Oh yes, it was based upon European standards—it had the ribbons and all those other ornamental details. Most of the currency that made its way around was very low denominated currencies.

*Q: Fascinating. How long did it take to complete the conversion?*

NICASTRO: It went a little longer than planned. It was supposed to have taken 90 days and I think we took 120.

*Q: And the only other technical question I have about this is, aside from the banking system, were there any other benefits to the economy that you could see immediately or shortly after due to the conversion?*

NICASTRO: Oh, absolutely. They didn't have to sit and convert it themselves and argue about what that day's exchange rate was. It lessened the costs of doing business, and that's good for business. And USAID was ecstatic. *The Economist* called the Afghan currency project a success and said it was the way international assistance should be managed. Today no one remembers one of USAID's most successful projects.

*Q: Okay, did this particular contract then lead to others for you?*

NICASTRO: Iraq was going through a similar currency conversation challenge. Because of LBG's experience in Afghanistan, USAID asked us to present our way of doing business to the British, who had been given the responsibility for currency conversion in Iraq. The Brits did not believe our methods would work in Iraq, so they contracted an international accounting firm. Then pallets of money began to disappear, and locals were locked up. All activities were halted for a security revamping. The conversion was restarted but "seepage" continued to be high. Lesson learned: the contracts you are not awarded are sometimes more important than the ones you win.

As for the road project I was telling you about, REFS began at $250 million and went to almost $1 billion (yes, billion!). LBG, in partnership with another international engineering firm, won the REFS follow on. I had moved on to other LBG activities by that time.

*Q: So, we're now into 2004?*

NICASTRO: As I mentioned previously, REFS was an omnibus infrastructure contract, so we had schools, clinics, water, and power systems to work or on. This high-value long-term contract created some interesting dynamics with the NGO and press communities when it came to costs and time needed to complete activities. LBG was interviewed by *The Washington Post* and *New York Times* reporters following up on alleged cost overruns and construction delays, which were becoming front page news.

One day I called my mother and told her my name was on a front page, above the fold of the *Times*. I had to assure her I had not been indicted. But both papers wanted to expose the international contractors for being rapacious and not doing what they were contracted to deliver. As the LBG point person I gave them the facts. And they were right, we were behind, but we were behind because there just weren't enough craftsmen to complete the

work, materials were scarce, and we were having trouble with security. However, the most significant conflict was on construction standards. USAID and LBG wanted to use higher-cost seismic California standards while the NGOs favored lower-cost local standards in the same highly seismic area. That conflict plus the local cultural issues wanting two doors in each clinic and a requirement that doors open in - not out pushed LBG costs higher and construction times longer.

For NY Times article see:
https://www.nytimes.com/2005/11/07/world/asia/delays-hurting-us-rebuilding-in-afghanistan.html?smid=nytcore-ios-share&referringSource=articleShare

*Q: That's what I wanted to ask you, were you doing it to code for earthquake protection?*

NICASTRO: Yes, LBG was constructing to code. Then, when we said that, the NGOs would demur. We would share our designs; they wouldn't show their designs. Then there was Greg Mortenson, remember him? He caused a lot of damage until he was found to be a fraud. He claimed he would walk into a village, talk to the elders over three cups of tea, and schools would begin to be constructed. He was a 90 second rockstar. But he did a lot of damage to groups, even NGOs, who couldn't meet his prices because he was quoting fictitious prices. And he ultimately paid a million-dollar fine because the Attorney General of Montana found that he had mismanaged all the money that people were sending him and using it for his own benefit. So, it was really quite a time for me and for the company because then the next week *The Washington Post* had its LGB "exposé."

*Q: Right. Of course, this becomes—as you say—a trope. They're always looking for company fraud or individual fraud, embezzlement and so on.*

NICASTRO: I really enjoyed Berger in Afghanistan; it was a good experience. In Afghanistan, we were going against the tide of history, but hubris was too powerful. By 2006, I was out of any day-to-day Washington Afghan oversight. By 2008, I became LBG's Chief Compliance and Ethics Officer. In 2015, I retired from LBG.

*Q: Yeah. No question. But you stay with Berger and do they basically since you had these successes, are they looking to have you do more in different or just more of the same? What was that?*

NICASTRO: When REFS ended, I assisted our Mindanao project and became familiar with our Paris operations. It was not until August 2007, when the FBI raided LBG's home office in East Orange, New Jersey, that my professional life took a path I could never have imagined.

First, some institutional context. The Louis Berger office in Washington that I operated out of primarily competed for and managed USAID contacts. It also had limited small

World Bank and Asia Development Bank contracts. However, all financial accounting, preparation, and reporting was done by our East Orange Office.

East Orange also managed and financially reported on domestic contracts with the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey; road groups in Pennsylvania and New Jersey; rebuilding the World Trade Center complex; and the NYC Metro subway system.

One morning in August 2007, our East Orange office was raided by the FBI and other law enforcement agencies with guns drawn. While paper files, and electronics were being taken, some staff were interviewed.

By way of background to the raid an East Orange accountant had been advising the LBG senior staff president that we were improperly overbilling our US government contractors, specifically USAID, on overhead. After a few years of no change, he went to his lawyer. Together, they decided that there was enough evidence to seek Department of Justice assistance under the False Claims Act. Once Justice assumes the case and wins, the individual who brought the action receives a percentage of the company fine. In this instance, Justice determined there was enough evidence to pursue the case.

The False Claims Act was made law in the Civil War when contractors were making illegal profits, swindling the US government by producing low quality weapons and food. Not every administration has supported False Claims enforcement - but the Bushes did, and so did the Democrats.

The LBG Washington office was told that there had been a misunderstanding, the raid was no big deal. As days and months went on, more and more people at the Vice President level became aware of the danger to the company. The Department of Justice began meetings with staff focusing on how LBG determined costs, how it purchased materials, and if funds were commingled from contract to contract. At this point I was not involved in accounting issues and was receiving information second and third hand.

LBG had intense negotiations with Justice on ways forward. To maintain confidentiality for this report I will discuss only one—LBG appointing me its first Chief Compliance and Ethics Officer (CECO). One afternoon in 2008, the new LBG President, who I had previously worked with, asked me: “Tom, how would you like to be our Chief Compliance and Ethics Officer?” He told me that my name had been positively vetted with USAID and Justice. I responded that I would accept the acting and then permanent position if I was also given the title of Senior Vice President; I could go to a compliance academy; and have outside compliance and ethics specialists as personal consultants. LBG management backed me on all these requests and others that came along over the years. After passing a test in a compliance academy, I became a Certified Compliance and Ethics Officer.

The Justice/LBG agreement listed one specific reporting responsibility for the CECO: he (she) reported only to new LBG Audit Committee members on the LBG Board of Directors—and maintained only a dotted line communication with LBG managers. In

year one, I had to: develop and issue a new LBG Code of Business Conduct; establish a worldwide independent HELPLINE for staff allegations; establish an investigative protocol to follow-up on allegations; and, train 4,000 employees (in four years) in all these reforms.

My responsibilities included work on: 1) two USG deferred prosecution agreements, one for false claims and one for violations of the Foreign Corrupt Practices Act (FCPA); 2) an administrative agreement with USAID that laid out all the internal changes that LBG had to make; 3) integrity agreements with the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey, the New York City Department of Investigations, the New York Metropolitan Transit Authority; and 4) reporting to the World Bank, Japanese International Cooperation Agency, Asian Development Bank on LBG internal reform issues.

In one step, I went from the role of a technical manager working on international development contracts to working with Federal, state, city, and international agreements that absent additional noncompliance could trigger corporate debarment. And debarment with any one of the IFIs: the Inter-American Development Bank; the Asian Development Bank, the Africa Development Bank or the World Bank, triggered debarment by all. I relied on professional compliance consultants and legal counsel. All told LBG paid the USG $18.7 million in criminal fines and an additional $50.6 million to resolve allegations that it violated the False Claims Act by significantly overbilling USAID. Internal LBG upgrades of procurement procedures and other USG requirements were also in the millions

By the time I left the company in 2015, I had participated in over 170 investigations. One of them was triggered by a letter and resulted in two people being arrested, tried, found guilty of attempted fraud. They served time in the Atlanta Federal Penitentiary.

*Q: I just want to go back one second for a little clarification. You talked about debarment. Debarment means you will not ever be able to get a contract, subcontracts, or anything else from the US government. That, in turn, causes the IFIs to start looking at what the US government is doing and saying, we don't want to take a chance on you, we're not going to give you any contracts either.*

NICASTRO: US debarments are usually no more than three years. The USG maintains a list of debarred companies and individuals as do states, universities, and other government entities. However, the tarnish never goes away.

*Q: Certainly nothing so concentrates the mind as the thought of an imminent hanging. Nothing so concentrates the mind of a contractor than looking on the debarment list and wondering oh, have we subcontracted to this character?*

NICASTRO: Indeed. When we were doing any kind of contracting or subcontracting, our new internal procedures required that our technical officers review the list and attest that the company was not on the list.

*Q: This is some tricky navigation to do.*

NICASTRO: It was. I had three very good people we hired to be my advisors. So, I was learning by doing with experienced professionals: lawyers and investigators. They were my mentors, on-call 24 hours a day.

*Q: How did these contracts come out? In the end were they at least satisfactory from the point of view of evaluation?*

NICASTRO: LBG had regular monthly and/or quarterly in-person meetings with all the groups listed above. By the time I retired from LBG we had satisfied all written internal reform requirements to be considered a good USG partner and LBG was still an independent company. I had been aggressive in that work. I had to be, I had to establish that role and make sure that when I told people that they had to do something—that they would do it. When people saw me going into somebody's office, they knew it was not to be wishing them a happy birthday. But it was an interesting new career for me.

However, for many reasons, within 24 months LBG was purchased by a Canadian engineering company.

After I retired from LBG, I did some consulting work with Aerojet Rocketdyne, and became an arbitrator with the Financial Industry Regulatory Authority (FINRA).

*Q: Ah, but before you got on, you remained with Berger for quite a long time. Were there other examples of contracts or activities that you did that really stand out in your mind?*

NICASTRO: My USAID career began in July 1978 and 23 years later I retired in March 2001.
My LBG work began in April 2001 and 14 years later I retired in October 2015.

The two LBG time events I spoke about are the ones I consider to have changed my professional life: 9/11 and the 2007 FBI raid on LBG.

For 9/11, the USAID-funded currency conversion project was modestly funded, had little Kabul mission interest as it was funded by USAID/W, and was implemented in part by private sector Russian and Ukrainian aircraft leasing companies. Yet currency conversion positively impacted, may I modestly say, every Afghan alive at that time, and those Afghans still today in the local economy. The REFS project at $1 billion was a microcosm of the long-term USG effort to put in place minimal infrastructure to stabilize, link and grow the economy and support for a benevolent government. In retrospect, local partners did not have the same vision.

For the 2007 FBI raid, sadly, every LBG employee was touched. I became the Chief Compliance and Ethics Officer, one of five or so LBG senior staff ultimately responsible for demonstrating to the USG that the company was on the right reform track. It was surprisingly an easy role for me. It was a continuation of the government to implement

roles that began with my time with the Peace Corps. Yet, the corporate fragility that the raid exposed, even with all the reforms firmly in place mandated by the USG, were not enough to save an independent LBG.

*Q: So, then we'll move on from Berger, but there is one last question that I wanted to ask you. You mentioned that unlike USAID and other government agencies there's no required scope of work initially, but were there other skills—as you look back on Berger—skills you acquired in USAID over the years that were valuable to you?*

NICASTRO: When I retired from USAID, I received some overly generous "attaboy" emails from colleagues at posts around the world. My colleagues almost all talked about my mentoring, a positive-focused management style, and getting on with what we had control over—and did not.

*Q: Did you follow a particular management style or was it just eclectic? There are so many books out now about great managers and their theory of management, did you have something like that?*

NICASTRO: Every management style from the "three cups of tea" guru to GE's Jack Welch has its 90 days, 90 minutes, 90 seconds of glory in this world. Look at the "three cups" guru today and the shambles that Jack Welch left GE in. "Disruptors" are now the rage. Yet, my work and the work of my colleagues, is defined by the imperiousness of rules and regulations. When civil servants pen books they do not focus on how existing rules led them to success. Their book usually is about how they found ways around the rules or had the rules re-written. My management style is one that seeks mentorship, researches the rules/regulations, and if they are not working for me, finds a way around them.

*Q: As you approach the end of your time with Louis Berger, what's going through your mind? Did you want to retire? Did you want to continue working?*

NICASTRO: I did not seek LBG retirement. LBG retirement sought me. I was successful yet it was time to move on. I did some local consultancy and became a FINRA arbitrator in Washington, DC. However, the coronavirus effectively ended those roles. So, I do volunteer work with the USAID alumni association.

*Q: What is FINRA?.*

NICASTRO: I first read about FINRA in *The Economist* a couple years ago. When I looked it up further, I thought: I can do that. So I sent for their materials, which are procedures on how to manage a hearing, what's allowed, what's not allowed, and reporting standards. Once you pass their test, you are given your FINRA arbitration number and wait to be called for an arbitration panel. I was on one panel and decided against participating in additional panels that would have included travel to Puerto Rico due to the coronavirus.

*Q: There have been periodic claims that corporations, credit cards, financial organizations, banks and so on, have a list of arbitrators who are in their pocket.*

NICASTRO: Nobody's called me yet. FINRA sends your background and other materials to both parties who both must approve your selection.

*Q: Are there particularly interesting aspects to arbitrating, because it's pretty much a black box to the public?*

NICASTRO: Well, it would not be particularly surprising. You're given time to present your case, questions are asked, both parties are in the room so that if the person who's listening feels that the person who's speaking is not making the right presentation, they get their time to try to convince the arbitrators that they're right and the other person is wrong. There's a series of back-and-forth conversations that are permitted under the FINRA rules. I don't think that FINRA is the largest arbitrator association, I believe there's an association of national/international arbitrators.

*Q: Alright, so you do these on an intermittent basis, the arbitration—*

NICASTRO: On call.

*Q: But was that satisfactory or did you continue to look for other work?*

NICASTRO: Well, my work right now is being a volunteer with the USAID Alumni Association. I was talked into being on the membership committee, then I was talked into being co-leader of the committee, and I'm in the process of putting together a report that I shouldn't have volunteered to do. Just typical if you belong to a voluntary association. And I don't know what will happen after that.

*Q: Now, the report that you're going to complete, what is its goal?*

NICASTRO: I'm looking at a few things: what members like about the Association; what additional actions members would like the Association to undertake; and, the relationship the Association should have with affinity groups. There are 14 questions in three categories, each with a five-point Likert scale response. I've done the analysis and am now devising the narrative around the results.

*Q: Now, does USAID consult the UAA on things?*

NICASTRO: Yes, it does. We are unique in that we have an MOU (Memorandum of Understanding) with USAID that allows us to have quarterly meetings with senior UAA leadership. One result of this relationship was the re-launch of the annual retirement ceremony which had been ended under the last administration. In our initial ceremony two years ago, we had a Senior Foreign Service and Senior Executive Service event for almost 100. Last year we (USAID and the UAA) invited all retirees. The retirement ceremony is one example of the UAA working jointly with USAID.

*Q: Interesting. Well, then at this point I would say I would just like to ask as you look back on your career both with USAID and then in the private sector, are there recommendations that you would make the USAID that at this point would improve how it works as an organization or the goals and objectives that it has now?*

NICASTRO: The USAID I retired from in 2001 is not the USAID of 2024. It has gone through a number of changes—not all welcome. I did not become a mentor because I felt more recent retirees understood with greater clarity the management challenges post-2024 than I could offer.

*Q: Since you're on the topic related to mentoring. How would you advise someone who's thinking of applying to USAID now?*

NICASTRO: I'd recommend that someone thinking about USAID get some experience as a contractor. Get NGO experience. You must first, however, have a place in your soul for helping people to do better.

Also, from my perspective the most important element of a USAID life is the spouse. The spouse must be on board for the not-so-glamorous, and sometimes dangerous, lifestyle. If you are lucky enough to be selected for USAID or a USAID-type organization and your significant other has bought in, then you at the end of your career will be like Lou Gehrig who after 2,100 consecutive games and knew he was dying said: he was the luckiest man on earth to be a Yankee.

*Q: Yeah. Well, then my final question is: did I miss anything? Are there any other recollections or anecdotes that you want to share in your experience?*

NICASTRO: I don't think so.

*Q: Alright Tom, I want to thank you for taking the time and giving us a really fabulous oral history. We'll end the interview now.*

*End of interview*