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NORMA PARKER

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INTERVIEW

Q: Today is Tuesday, October 31, 2023. This is my first interview with Norma Parker, who I was a colleague with during our Latin America years. Norma, welcome. We look forward to hearing your story.

PARKER: Thank you, Marcy. I would like to begin with the early years when I went to a very interesting Lab School in Urbana-Champaign, Illinois. [The actual name of the school is University Laboratory High School, and it is located on the campus of the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign] There were a lot of international students, which kind of piqued my interest in their background. My father was the head of the Mechanical Engineering Department at the University of Illinois. He brought over many international engineers, right after the war, from Japan, Korea, Germany, and other countries. So during my high school years, I spent a lot of time talking to people from different countries, even a family from Ukraine, Russia. I attended Colorado College in Colorado Spring, Colorado. During my college years, I spent my junior year abroad in Bordeaux, France because I was a French major. As I was perfecting my French, I also spent a lot of time with international students at the University of Bordeaux, traveled to Spain, and spent a lot of time in Spain, where I decided I like Spanish better than French. In college, I developed a second major in Spanish, which I loved. I won best Spanish speaker at Colorado College at graduation, which ticked off the French department. That led me to study Latin America because more people speak Spanish in Latin America than they do in Spain. I started looking into Latin America and actually spent some time in Mexico and bumming around Latin America as many of the USAID [United States Agency for International Development] people did. Of course, I fell in love with it and decided that my career was going to be in Latin America, doing what I wasn't sure.

Q: Can you tell us where you traveled in Latin America?

PARKER: I was mostly in Mexico, but part of the time was spent in Costa Rica and Guatemala.

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PARKER: After graduating in 1965 I was offered a Fulbright Fellowship to study in Costa Rica, but opted for going to Georgetown University in Latin American Studies to get my MA [Master of Arts]. I was afraid if I didn't go then, I would never go back to university. And, of course, Georgetown, being a very international university, had many students from Latin America. I formed lots of friendships there. Particularly around Washington, there were many international students I met through functions at the OAS and various embassies.

Along the way, I found a brochure about USAID [United States Agency for Development]and read about the things that they did overseas. And of course, my big goal was to go back overseas to Latin America. So I applied to USAID and was accepted in August of 1967. I had to take the civil service entrance exam as part of the application process to work at AID. HR [human resources] didn't tell me that if I took the afternoon part of the civil service exam, they would bring me on as a GS-9. I already had my master's, and should have done that, but I didn't know about it. So I just took the morning exam, and started as a GS-7, with a master's. That was sort of unfair of HR, not to have told me about that afternoon exam.

Anyway, I started with AID in August 1967 - USAID was called AID back then— in the Office of Development Programs in the Bureau for Latin America and the Caribbean. Jack Heller was the Deputy in that office and my immediate boss and mentor. I was the program officer for Bolivia. I learned a lot about how AID budgeting worked, how programming worked, and how Washington offices related to the country missions. I was just sort of getting up to speed when I was riffed. It was the guns and butter RIF {reduction in force} of September, 68. President Johnson spent too much money on Vietnam, and he didn't have enough money for us in USAID foreign assistance programs. The RiF only affected the GS side of AID.

So, I left Aid in mid- September. I pulled my civil service retirement, which was very small, but enough to pay for a RT ticket to go to Bogota, Colombia where my boyfriend was living. I went down to Bogota and spent three or four months living with his family and learning more and more about the country when I got a call from AID/ HR saying they had riffed too many people and could I come back? By the way, HR gave me a GS-9 position. So, I said goodbye to my boyfriend, and I went to join the Office of Regional Projects in the Latin America Bureau.

This was an interesting position because Larry Heilman, just in from the Bolivian Mission, headed the office. He was my direct boss and first mentor. From him I learned about project management, particularly management of highly political projects, such as the one with the Overseas Education Fund of the League of Women Voters and AIFLD (American Institute of Free Labor Development). These highly sensitive projects led us directly to the White House to meet President Nixon and Mrs. Nixon, strong supporters of the League of Women Voters. The famous Regional Technical Aids Center (RTAC), located in Mexico and Argentina, published technical textbooks for Latin American universities as part of this portfolio of Regional Projects. John Hannah, who was then the Administrator of AID, asked our Office to submit the first Project Paper- like document called a PROP. It was the first time AID laid out goals and objectives for a project and ways to evaluate project success. We were then asked to present it personally to Hannah. Since I was the project manager for RTAC, Larry took me with him for the presentation. Heady stuff for a GS-9 employee. AID then went on to develop a whole system of Project documents that laid out objectives, implementation timelines, and evaluations. PROPS were dropped in favor of PIDs (Project Identification Documents) and PPs (Project Papers).

My basic interest was moving from GS to Foreign Service Officer. And so, I took steps that would build my resume that the Foreign Service would be interested in. I already had my three in Spanish because of my undergraduate studies. I moved from LAC Regional Office to the Office of Population, which was a technical office in the LAC bureau. Each bureau at that time had its own technical office, and its own education officers and population officers and so forth. I only spent about a year there, but I learned a lot about health and population. This experience served me well when I was assigned to Peru as a General Development Officer, overseeing, *inter alia,* health and population projects. It became clear to me that the ladder, or the way up, and the way out of GS land into the

Foreign Service was to become a project development officer, then known as a capital development officer. These officers managed the loan and the grant projects that USAID provided to the various countries.

Therefore, I joined LAC/ DR (Latin American Bureau of Development Resources with Buster Brown as the Director. Buster became another mentor in my career. I think I was in the South American Finance Division. I learned a lot from my immediate boss, the Head of the Division Terry Brown, another mentor, about project development, and writing project papers, issues papers, and presenting them. I was there for four years and tried for four years to transfer into the Foreign Service. Somewhere along the way, I met my husband, George Hill, and shortly after our marriage in 1975, he was transferred to Guatemala. I was even more interested in trying to transfer into the Foreign Service. Serendipitously, Secretary Kissinger came out with his Central American Development policy. As part of that policy, he had written in a section about tandem assignments, recognizing that the Foreign Service personnel in the State Department was losing many of their FSOs [Foreign Service Officers] because they were marrying very competent, professional women, and these women would not give up their jobs to go overseas. At that time if you married a Foreign Service officer, you couldn't work if you accompanied him/her to post. He changed that policy and allowed married couples to be assigned overseas to the same country, if possible.

Q: Can I ask for clarification? So what role was Kissinger in then when he took that decision? Oh, he was Secretary of State. Oh, fascinating. Okay, please go ahead.

PARKER: He promulgated the Central American Development Policy and then took on this interesting human resource issue of tandem assignments of FSOs overseas. So, I applied for that, obviously, and—this is where it gets interesting—HR and USAID were not particularly interested in promoting the tandem assignment concept within the personnel system. They told me that I could not transfer from GS to Foreign Service until everyone that was in Vietnam, as an FSO, or an FSL, was placed in a job. And so, I continued working for LAC/DR. I waited for over a year to be transferred, with my husband already in Guatemala. HR was really dragging their heels. Vietnam had fallen and everybody had gotten a job and still I waited. It was agony frankly.

Then the earthquake of February 6, 1976 hit Guatemala, with 20,000 victims, and USAID went direct and needed personnel. The Administrator of AID, Dan Parker, went down to Guatemala and saw what the staff was doing, and that my husband, in particular, a program officer, was working 20 hours a day, sleeping on the ground because of the aftershocks. Parker found out about this issue, that he had been waiting for his wife to come down to join him under the tandem assignment policy and that AID had been dragging their heels. It took about two days after he got back to Washington to order my transfer to USAID Guatemala immediately. And thus began my early FSO years in 1976.

Q: And an appreciation of being with the right people to pull the right strings at the right time, right.

PARKER: It was just surrender. So, that ended my GS career and the start of my FSO career February 1976 to May1999. I loved every minute of it. My first day—okay, I'm going to do this vignette, and then stop: my first day in the Foreign Service was very, very exciting. I was in Guatemala. There had been this terrible earthquake with lots of destruction. So, they put me on a helicopter, a huey flown by hot dog pilots from Vietnam days, and flew me around to the various little towns that had been badly damaged. I was to hop out of that helicopter, meet the town Elders, Chiefs, really, because we're in indigenous areas—and find out who was killed and who needed to be medically evacuated. I did that. It was really very interesting because they didn't speak very good Spanish. And I didn't speak any Quiche, but we somehow communicated, and I was able to get most injured people out and onto that helicopter. Then we flew to Chimaltenango to a mash hospital, just as in the TV series. It looked just like that. And, you know, offloaded this poor woman who was badly injured. The real issue was trying to get her name and write down her name and what village she was from so we could go back and tell her family. I did that on my first day in the Foreign Service.

Q: What an amazing way to join the Foreign Service. That's incredible.

PARKER: That's exactly what I said. If every day is like this, you got me. You know, it was just a really wonderful introduction to how AID operated at the mission level. And the other interesting thing about it was that AID was direct. The whole mission was deployed out into the field with their various skills. We did not hire contractors except one or two personal services contractors. We did everything directly. That just showed me what a wonderful agency this was.

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Q: Today is Wednesday, November 15, 2023. This is a continuation of the oral history interview with Norma Parker. And today we are going to be covering the beginnings of her career as a Foreign Service officer after having served eight years in the civil service. We will cover from '76 to '79, her time in Guatemala as a project development officer, and then as Director of the LAC South America and Mexico desk from '79 to '83. Norma, welcome. I look forward to continuing your story.

PARKER: Thank you, Marcy. I believe we covered my first day in the Foreign Service, and that should be in the last recording. After that heady first day, I ran into some interesting, I guess, discrimination is the only way to describe it. My boss was the head of the project development officer, his name was Frank Kenefick, and he was very upset that this GS officer was transferred into USAID/ Guatemala at the FS-2 level in the old FS system, and that I was taking a job from a man. As a result, he did not give me any assignments for a hundred and twenty days in country. After sitting there for a hundred and twenty days, but also trying to keep up with what the division was doing, I wrote a memo to the Mission Director and explained what was going on. And that resulted in Frank being given an ultimatum, either he provides me with legitimate assignments, or he leaves the mission.

That's when my career really started. Because then I started to do normal PDO design and project monitoring, I was specifically assigned to the health sector and was working with the famous Dr. Johnny Long, who started the paramedical program in Latin America based on the Barefoot Doctors in China. This was during the time of Reconstruction in Guatemala after the 1976 earthquake. I also learned a lot about infrastructure repair after a disaster; road work specifically. But the big takeaway in Guatemala was when Frank finally left, and my new boss came on board. Tom Stukel was a terrific boss and mentor. I really got the mentoring and opportunities that I needed to be a top notch PDO.

During that time, I worked with the famous Bob Gersony. We, in all honesty it was mostly Bob, put together a model reconstruction program for housing, using local institutions, such as local coops, mostly in the indigenous areas. That was not only my first experience in dealing with Quiche and Kaqchikel speaking cooperative members, but also in learning how you work with local institutions without intermediaries (contractors) that we now use. There were no contractors involved. It was just Bob Gersony, me, and the co-ops. So that was a really telling experience that AID could work locally, very well, and we should never have dropped that as our modus operandi. I understand USAID has gone back to that now. Then the last thing I did, as an important part of my first overseas assignment, was to write my first project paper for a rural electrification loan under the mentoring of Tom Stukel. I learned a lot about cost benefit analysis, and going out to the local communities and asking them how much electricity they used, and if they were to get more how would they use it? Almost everyone said they would use it to increase their ability to earn money, particularly women wanted sewing machines, and men, some sort of mechanized thing for farming. So, that kind of summed up the Guatemala years. During this assignment my husband was the program officer in the USAID Mission, proving the tandem assignment system would work.

Then we transferred back to Washington. They made me Director of the South America and Mexico desk. Very interesting to put Mexico in that mix of countries. I think later, they put it with the Central America desk. But these were the years '79 to '83, when AID was just beginning to address the drug problem in Latin America and trying to figure out what kind of projects could substitute for cocoa production. Of course, everybody knew that nothing would be more lucrative for the farmer than growing coca. But we nevertheless devised the alternative development program in Latin America, whereby we introduced farmers to other legal crops and gave them training and inputs to grow these crops. And then, of course, we had to defend this approach to Congress. I remember testifying several times before the Congress on the status of our alternative development programs. The other thing that we were required to do was to measure success, such as it was. Therefore, we set up a complicated evaluation system for all the alternative development programs operating in Latin America. I asked Larry Heilman, who by now was an expert in evaluations, to go down to Bolivia and Peru, who were the two main growers of coca, to devise the evaluation systems.

Q: So, a couple of questions related to this. The first is when you were working in alternative development, there were already alternative development programs in other South American countries?

PARKER: No. There were not. They were just starting to design them. But nothing operational.

Q: What was the reaction of people in Congress when you went to testify?

PARKER: Of course, the reaction I got everywhere, including Congress, was no crops substitute for the income from cocoa production, in terms of income for the farmers. But they were intrigued with the idea that we were trying to move the farmers out of cocoa production. What we did later was to devise an approach, and I think Wayne Nilsestuen was part of this when he was in Bolivia, whereby you get the communities to sign agreements not to produce coca in exchange for infrastructure, and other amenities that would be given to the communities as a whole. And that seemed to work very well. There's credible data showing the decline of cocoa production, for example, in Bolivia as a result of that approach. The Congress was skeptical, as were most people. By the way, the Latin America region led the way in terms of implementing alternative development projects. I became a sort of spokesperson for alternative development programs to eliminate or reduce coca production in those early years and was asked to testify to Congress on behalf of the agency. Then the State Department took over. The INL Bureau (Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement) was established, and drug reduction and control became a major policy emphasis of AID, as part of the Reagan Administration's War on Drugs. My Office worked closely with the White House Office of National Drug Control Programs.

But alternative development programs were one of those experiments that in the end had some success in Latin America. Although, it was very hard to maintain the momentum in those programs because the farmers would lapse and go back to producing coca if there was a drop in their income. These issues colored the years that I was head of the South America and Mexico desk.

In Mexico, they were beginning the transition to a democratic government. The Mission began to work with local institutions, particularly in the election arena. This topic I will cover during the years that I was Director of the Office of Democracy and Administration of Justice. I would like to stop there unless you have any questions.

Q: No, just interested to see where this all began. Since I follow that parallel fashion, I'm interested to get your perspectives at some point about how this is all progressed. Thank you Norma.

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Q: Today is Friday, December 8, 2023. We are now interviewing Norma Parker for her third interview. Norma, you will be focusing on your time from 1983 to 1987 in Peru, a very interesting time, indeed. Looking forward to it.

PARKER: Thank you, Marcy. I actually arrived in Peru on Christmas Day, 1983, with my one year old, as the Chief of the Heath, Nutrition, and Education Division in USAID/Peru. I immediately dove into reading the Project Papers for the projects that I was going to be responsible for: two health projects totaling fifty million dollars, a pre-school education project, and the Mission's participant training program. I was assigned to Peru as a General Development Officer. The Mission was quite large. I reported directly to the Mission Director, John Sanbrailo, whose Deputy was George Hill, my husband. John became another terrific mentor for me during my tour.

We landed in Peru at a very interesting time. It was President Belaúnde's return to power, and Peru's return to democracy after the coup of 1968 when the military had deposed him. Belaúnde proved to be a wonderful partner to work with. He loved USAID [United States Agency for International Development] and wanted to meet every new officer assigned to Peru as soon as they arrived in country. So, I found myself in the National Palace meeting almost one- on- one with the President of Peru within the first five days I was in Lima. Incredible.

Q: That's amazing.

PARKER: Yes. One-on-one with the president of the country. But he had a vision for Peru which we shared. It was very exciting to talk to him. We were also in an interesting time, and the Sendero Luminoso—Shining Path—was just starting to heat up. And lo and behold, they chose my projects—the pre-school education projects in the Altiplano—to demonstrate their disfavor and unhappiness with the current regime. They famously hung dogs from lampposts and harassed villagers in these small villages scattered around the Andes. So that was very exciting. And we ended up—my division, and particularly Eliane Karp Toledo, who later became the first lady of Peru and spoke Quechua and Amara–reporting all of the harassments and threats going on in these villages within our education project to the Embassy's Political Section. Eliane was well qualified to be my adviser on this project with her language skills and a degree in anthropology.

Q: What kind of harassment was done at the pre-schools?

PARKER: The Sendero was harassing the parents, telling them not to send their children to pre- school. We were trying to set up parent-teacher associations, which apparently was threatening to the Sendero. They were just harassing and yelling their propaganda at the villagers.

Q: Were they intimidating the teachers too?

PARKER: Oh, they were trying to, yes.

Q: Okay, thanks.

PARKER: There are several things that made my tour in Peru stand out, besides the return to democracy, the Sendero Luminoso, and having an absolutely wonderful staff.

Belaunde's cabinet was very technically qualified to lead the country. Half of them had been through the USAID participant training program, notably the Minister of Agriculture and the Minister of Education. It was really impressive. My direct Peruvian counterpart, the Minister of Health, was the former Deputy Director of WHO [World Health Organization], so we had a hugely qualified cabinet to work with.

The day-to-day contact I had was with the Director General of Health in the Ministry. We became very close *compadres* (close friends) working together, trying to make our two bureaucracies mesh because we shared the same goals and objectives of delivering health care to the underserved. One of the projects was focused exclusively on water. We were one of the few missions in the hemisphere that had a water engineer on staff. We were building water systems in small villages in the Altiplano. But we also extended the health care delivery system throughout the country. It was very comfortable to work with that government. We really missed Belaúnde when his term was up. I was in Peru for almost five and a half years, so I witnessed the transition to the Alan Garcia administration, who was a protégé of the founder of the APRA Party, Victor Raul Haya de la Torre.

The other thing that makes Peru stand out for me, besides these close working relationships, and the transition to democracy, was the threat of the Sendero. I was under death threat for about a hundred and twenty months by the Sendero for my work on oral rehydration therapy. I had twenty-four-hour guards for the house, and everybody in the mission was in armored cars. We had a carpool situation. Later in the tour I had my own armored car, even when the kids went to the pediatrician they were accompanied by armored guards. This took some getting used to. It was the beginning of my working in these very violent and dangerous countries.

Another factor that stands out in my tour in Peru was the testing of oral rehydration salts in the poor pueblos jovenes in Lima. We had both CDC [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention] and Johns Hopkins personnel on the ground, studying diarrheal diseases and local recipes for oral rehydration. Meanwhile, until we had these local recipes my division had imported the oral rehydration salts from the U.S. from the lowest bidder—really, the worst thing the U.S. government does—Four babies died in the best university hospital in Lima due to a batch of salts that had too much potassium in them. This was caused by a contractor in New York state who used child labor to manufacture the salts. The children never cleaned the vats out, and so the potassium accumulated in specific batches. Potassium is a silent killer. Fortunately, these babies were admitted to the best university hospital in Lima, and we were able to track the salts through their lot numbers and the specific packages given to these babies. Of course, we knew the contractor.

We were able to trace the contaminated lots and establish a chain of custody by bringing down inspectors from the FDA [Food and Drug Administration]. They wanted to prosecute the contractor. We were all deposed. (I had never been deposed before). Even the Minister of Health and all hospital staff were deposed in Spanish. The case went to the Southern District of New York for trial. The DA [District Attorney] decided that she would not try the case because it involved too many people who spoke only Spanish, and

the translations might have been too difficult for a jury to understand. Therefore, they plea bargained the contractor, and he only served seven years in prison for the death of the four babies.

This case caused quite a stir in Washington, putting in jeopardy one of the most effective ways to reduce diarrhea in the developing world. That was why it was so important to get the facts of the case and the prosecution outcome in the public domain. Many Missions were using the salts in their health programs. This experience made me understand a little bit more about how the U.S. justice system worked and maybe led me into my next job in Washington as Director of Democracy and Administration of Justice. But I remain to this day furious that the contractor got off with only seven years after killing four babies. Those children did not have to die.

Q: Norma, what was the reaction on the part of the Peruvian government and to what extent was this situation made available more broadly to the populace? What was their reaction to it?

PARKER: The Peruvian government was furious. I don't know to what degree this got out into the broader population. But it really upset USAID Washington because we were pinning all our hopes in the health care area on these oral rehydration salts to cut diarrhea rates. There was a lot of backstopping done by Washington to help me bring this contractor to justice and prove oral rehydration salts were safe and viable. It was just a fluke that these three lots were contaminated yet could be traced to the best hospital in Peru. What I was told is that USAID does not pay compensation for its mistakes. So, we designed a new twenty million dollar health project and signed with the government shortly after this all occurred. We felt somewhat vindicated. I've always vowed that if I ever won the lottery, I would look up those families and reimburse them for the children they lost.

The other interesting thing about my tour in Peru, which was almost five years, was the returned participants that served in the cabinet. As a result of that, we decided to set up a returned participant directory, the first in the hemisphere. We hired a former Peruvian national who had worked on participant training twenty years ago. She put together a wonderful, directory of all return participants in Peru. We recommended that other missions do that.

We had fantastic success in extending the health care delivery system in Peru. When we introduced family planning, we ran up against the Catholic Church. I learned quickly to use the natural method as a way to introduce couples to family planning, because when it failed, they were already doing family planning and wanted something that was more effective. We had success there. And then in the nutrition field, we had great interest with our two CDC and John Hopkins' researchers looking at native foods, like grain amaranth, which is a kiwicha and quinoa, that are very high in protein. The Peruvian government had established a Nutrition Institute. It was headed by the famous John Hopkins Doctor, George Graham. They made a lot of discoveries with different native plants that have

high levels of protein that could be used by indigenous populations at very low cost. Those were some of the outstanding accomplishments in Peru.

In addition, day-to-day living was fantastic. It was easy to make friends with Peruvian nationals, as you know. But later when I was in the head of AOJ and Democracy Development in the LAC Bureau in Washington, I ran into numerous human rights groups from Peru and got very well acquainted with them. But that's for another time.

Peru was just a joy to work in if you could overlook the Sendero Luminoso, which was becoming more and more problematic. By the time we left, we had blackouts three or four times a week as the SL blew up electrical substations. There were certain areas of the town you couldn't go to. It was my first experience with violent, extremist elements in society. Other than that, go to Peru. It's a wonderful country. It's full of interesting archaeological sites. What a dream to serve there under a democratic regime. I felt like we had accomplished a lot. We had a large agriculture division, a very large economic division. And I guess I should say, if I had a mentor in those years, it was John Sanbrailo, one of the hardest working and most dedicated Mission Directors I've ever met. We got along beautifully. I learned a lot from him. So those are the highlights from my stay in Peru.

Q: I have a variety of things. That's my second home for many reasons. Let me go back to a couple of things. Participant training continues to be a theme Based on your experience with participant training, and specifically with having several ministers who were participants, what was the impact of this on programs and development in countries?

PARKER: Participant Training programs orient recipients to our way of thinking, if you will, our way of thinking especially in terms of development, and also to U.S. cultural and political life. And of course, their English becomes really excellent. They relate on a one-to-one basis, but USAID officers, or others they meet during the training and family stays, is a way to gain the confidence and trust of host country nationals. Not to mention the fact that they learn wonderful technical and management skills that are then used in their home countries. The ex-becarios serving in Belaunde's cabinet were an excellent example of this.

Q: That is excellent, Norma. A really, really good description.I hope we can pull that out for others to learn from below. At what point did Fujimori come in, was this after you left or while you were there?

PARKER: I had known Fujimori when he was head of the Potato Institute based in La Molina. He did not come onto the political scene till after I had left. But at the time that I dealt with him, he was a well- known professor at the Potato Institute. A very normal fellow, technical, and just a delight as a counterpart or a partner. I frankly think his first two or three years as President were very good, but I'm getting beyond my time. He later was corrupted by some of the advisors around him. I saw recently that he got out of prison. But we knew him as a gentle, apolitical professor.

Q: How interesting. Well, there is Vladimiro Montesinos of course, who played a major role in corrupting him. Norma, you skipped ten years later, and my husband Eric, who you worked with many years later, became the mission director. USAID was a strong supporter of the Human Rights Committee. They were active for many years and played a very important role. I think that's changed now. You mentioned the human rights community, Eric commented that among the human rights community and others, that they were some of the most competent NGOs [Non-governmental organizations] that he had ever worked with. What was your experience with the Human Rights Committee? Were they fairly well developed at that point, when you were there?

PARKER: They were incredibly well developed, very intelligently led, wonderful leadership, very well organized, and very committed. They stood out. They were well known hemisphere- wide. They did a lot of advocating and educating the public on the issues of human rights. Of course, we had the help of the famous author, Mario Vargas Llosa, who published the story of the murder of some indigenous leaders in the Altiplano. He published a lot on human rights issues, as well. We had this incredible array of people who were well known when I was there.

For example, Hernando De Soto— known for his two books on The Sendero and capitalism. In fact, the Peru mission, and especially the Deputy Director of the mission, George Hill, actually helped Hernando to write his first book. He was sort of his Max Perkins. We've remained close to Hernando ever since. Many people have. When you look at the way his books characterize Peru at that time, you kind of wonder what happened, why did it fail? Why is it sinking into a failed state status right now? Hard to say because at the time we were there, people were working hard to support democracy, establishing the Institute of Liberty and Democracy, for example. The human rights groups were very well respected. That's a mystery. That's something I'd like to explore sometime. A mix of greed, corruption, and authoritarian tendencies I am sure.

Q: Yes, absolutely. And of course, you're looking at what's happening to our own country. In 1998 I did an in-depth case study of the Peruvian Institute for Education, Human Rights and Peace (IPEDEPH). Rosa Maria Mujica, the Director of IPEDEPH, had been the head of the Coordinadora. This is one good case where I shared worldwide the findings, and the U.S. human right groups, community education, and others learned tremendously from their experience. Well, great. Do you want to stop here?

PARKER: What time is it?

Q: It's twenty to three. We have time, if you want to continue.

PARKER: I guess I can do a little bit more. We can jump into the experience of heading the Office of Administration of Justice and Democracy Development. After Peru, I was assigned in mid- 1987 to this new office in the Latin America and Caribbean Bureau that was little known but becoming respected called Administration Justice and Democracy Development. It was first headed by Bill Schoux who tried his best to put it on the map.

Just by fluke, I came on the scene. It was the time when in Latin America, many of the authoritarian regimes were starting to swing back toward democracy.

During my tenure we had something like ten elections within a two- year period, all of which we supported through technical assistance in election administration and observation through Capel, a technical organization based in Costa Rica established to assist Latin countries in their election administration. CAPEL was part of the Inter-American Institute for Human Rights. We also enlisted NGOs, like NDI, National Democratic Institute, and NRI, National Republican Institute, and the OAS for election observation, especially the counting of ballads of these elections. This was when election observation activities began in earnest. In Latin America it began with the referendum on Pinochet in Chile who lost and had to stand for election against a strong democratic opponent, Patricio Alwyn. A new and very effective NGO was formed to support the opposition to Pinochet's election. This NGO, Participacion Ciudadana, was led by a wonderful Chilean woman, Monica Jimenez. This was USAID's first experience with election observation and election support of a local organization committed to a democratic transition. Many people in the Bureau, including myself, thought someone would be killed if we openly provided support to this organization because for the first time in this era we really were down there in the middle of an election, advising a foreign government on how to carry out a free and fair re-election. The US Ambassador, Harry Barnes, was very supportive of our efforts.

After a great outcome in Chile, the idea of USAID assisting countries with their transition to democracy through holding free and fair elections had begun. In my office, I had a lawyer, but not a USAID lawyer, a State Department lawyer because USAID would not provide me with a lawyer. I think they thought it was too high risk. I also had staff like Roma Knee, Marilyn Zach, and Sharon Isralow who had been working on human rights and democracy issues under the radar for a very long time. And all of a sudden, their day had come, and we got a decent budget for the first time. We were able to assist in the establishment of new NGOs throughout the hemisphere who supported both human rights and election assistance. I remember traveling all over the hemisphere, meeting with these groups and encouraging them. They actually didn't need too much encouragement, because as I said, the pendulum has started to swing back toward democracy. The opening was there for USAID to step in with its support.

Q: Was USAID in any way involved in the establishment of the Asociación Civil Transparencia (Transparency Civil Association)*?*

PARKER: *Transparencia*, no. *Transparencia* was formed by, I think, George Soros, but I may be wrong. They had branch offices throughout the hemisphere.

Q: No this is different. This is Peruvian, not the broader Transparencia. It is a Peruvian organization.

PARKER: I know but they had local organizations.

Q: They weren't affiliated with abroad. Okay.

PARKER: I do not know. That was a group you found, I think, on your own.

Q: I did an evaluation of their observation of the 2000 election when Fujimori tried to take over for the third time. It was a fascinating experience. But yeah, so that's interesting for me to see, I think for a reader that you began with a heavy focus on elections in the very beginning and then began to branch out further over time.

PARKER: Right. Because a lot of the fraud was related to human rights abuses.

Q: Was Tom Geiger with you at that time?

PARKER: I can't remember Tom. I think he came after me.

PARKER: It was not a popular area in the early years, as you know. It took off really when Jim Michael became the Assistant Administrator of LAC. Jim was another great mentor I had while working in this area. The AOJ part, the Administration of Justice, was most interesting. It began in1983 with the murder of the four nuns in San Salvador and the assassination of Archbishop Romero. The State Department and human rights groups clamored for the perpetrators of those murders to be prosecuted.

It was Michael's idea that they should be prosecuted using their own justice system in El Salvador. We got two congressional earmarks of $3 million and $6 million dollars over two years to assist the Salvadoran Government in its efforts to prosecute the intellectual authors of the murders, as well as the murderers themselves.

Based on this experience we started assessing justice systems in other Latin American countries, and how our foreign assistance programs could strengthen them. I had a great staff of Carl Cira and Luis Salas to carry out the justice sector assessments. They worked initially with the UN's Institute for Latin America for the Prevention of Crime and Treatment of Offenders (ILANUD) that had been working in the justice sector for a few years on a low-key basis. From that international organization we branched out to doing bilateral assessments in LAC countries that requested them.

Soon we had AOJ projects, or as central USAID labeled it, Rule of Law, projects in most LAC countries. It became a major focus for USAID. Starting as a high- risk initiative in the LAC Bureau with the State Department political and legal officers taking a keen interest (after all it was their turf), it grew into a major Office of Democratic Governance including the Rule of Law in the newly established Global Bureau in central USAID. This was just in time for the fall of the Soviet Union and the new democratic transitions taking place across Eastern Europe. Exciting to be on the cutting edge of this initiative.

The justice system programs included not only the prosecutors and the court system with judicial training for the judges, but also investigative police and other law enforcement entities. Therefore, USAID got back into police development, including community

policing. (In the early 70s USAID was involved in police training. The experience ended badly when the news of Tiger Cages being used by us in police training in Vietnam was revealed. USAID dropped out of police training at that time.)

ICITAP (International Criminal Investigative Assistance Program), which was a part of the Department of Justice, was formed and supported by USAID to help us with strengthening investigative police in Latin America. Prosecutors in the Department of Justice were hired to help us with developing prosecutorial expertise in the justice systems in the hemisphere. It was all very heady stuff. And culminated in the Justice Study Center, based in Chile, established during one of the Summit of the Americas in the late 90s. To this day, the Center is still a viable institution, mostly supported by the Government of Chile. It does mostly judicial training. We also did a lot of the training of human rights groups in Costa Rica. The Inter- American Institute for Human Rights, which we supported, was very prominent in this area.

Q: You were able to tap into existing human rights organizations in Latin America?

PARKER: There were many as we moved forward with the program. There were many citizen groups too that were started, like in the Dominican Republic. Books were written about these experiences with citizen engagement.

Q: I think one question I'd like to ask is, given that you were working with a variety of these groups, at least what I saw in Peru was that USAID was supporting these organizations and what they were doing, not telling them what to do, but taking advantage of their expertise, rather than having a contractor come in. What was the approach in those days? Obviously, you had some agendas and things you wanted to impact, but you were basically building on their existing skills and letting them take the lead.

PARKER: Absolutely. There was the UN [United Nations] group, based in Costa Rica that had started this a long time ago, as I said. The lead was always from the local institutions, and the assistance was to help them where they needed it. We didn't try to dictate anything. Perfectly neutral, just as we were neutral during the elections we were assisting.

Q: Absolutely. Let me ask you, in that period, so the Latin America Bureau was beginning to get into human rights, administration of justice, what was happening in the other regional bureaus?

PARKER: Good question. We were leaders clearly in this area. But with the fall of the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, this became a very hot topic, as you can imagine, transitioning these authoritarian governments into some sort of democratic governance. In Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union, not so much administration of justice, but certainly democratic development took off. It had already spread to the rest of Latin America, particularly the Caribbean. Mexico, for example, with its own money set up its election administration system pouring a billion dollars into the Election Administration

Institute. Other countries, with our assistance, were doing the same. I don't really know what was going on in Asia, in those years, because I was so busy with the LAC countries. Who knows about the Middle East, that was its own thing. Africa had some beginnings of democratic development. It was all very rudimentary though, to tell you the truth.

Q: And as you pursued your time, as we'll discuss in the future, becoming a Deputy Assistant Administrator for the Latin American Bureau, you were able to oversee and I suspect influence the continuing strength and burgeoning of the Democracy Program in Latin America, right?

PARKER: Right. It did become a personal love. I also had another wonderful mentor, and you know him very well. At that time, the Bureau was led by Mark Schneider who was a very strong proponent of human rights and democratic governance. With his leadership and support, it was very easy to continue this work at the DAA level.

Q: That's true. Excellent. Shall we stop here?

PARKER: Yes, that's a good place to stop because now we can move into my time as a DAA in the Front Office of LAC Bureau.

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Q. Today is Thursday, December 14, 2023, and I believe, Norma, you will be focusing on your time as Deputy Assistant Administrator (DAA) in the LAC Bureau.

PARKER: One of the more interesting things I did as DAA was to participate in the planning of a possible US invasion of Haiti after the democratically elected leader was overthrown.
The planning for the civil military intervention in Haiti followed the failure of the US intervention in Somalia, where some of our soldiers were shot down in a helicopter. A movie was made about this incident. In Haiti, the current Ambassador, Vicki Huddleston, was roughed up at the tail end of the Papa Doc Duvalier Administration. The point here is this was one of the first planning and implementation exercises with USAID joined at the hip with the military. Civ/Mil planning it was called. A peaceful transition was brokered by Robert Pastor, who was the NSC representative, and Ambassador Huddleston. I believe General Powell was involved as well. Beforehand, we had done a great deal of civil military planning in the East Wing of the White House, and we were hoping that we could go in and broker the transition from Baby Doc to Jean Bertrand Aristide. Baby Doc would leave peacefully, and free and fair elections could then be held. As it turned out, the NSC rep, Robert Pastor, and the military reps, General Wes Clark and General Colin Powell, and the U.S Ambassador, were able to convince Baby Doc to step down.

We moved then to set up the administrative apparatus within the Haitian government to hold free fair elections. I was part of that discussion. The elections were to be observed by international and national observers. In my case, during election day, they assigned me Danny Glover to go with me around to the various election sites. He had no idea how to

do election observation, being a movie star and all that, he just didn't know. I spent half my time training him and the other half observing the various election sites. The end result was a clean and fair election with Aristide being democratically elected. Then we were able to mount a major assistance program, which you're familiar with. Larry Crandall came in as Mission Director and managed a large assistance program.

Also, in the AA's office almost every major issue facing the Bureau, as you know, eventually ended up there. One of those issues was human rights, with Mark making sure that one of his DAAs, either Eric Zallman or myself, met with every human rights group in Washington or, if traveling, meeting them in Latin America. We also spent a lot of time with the Inter-American Institute for Human Rights that we were supporting.

The collaboration with the Europe Union through its European Commission (EC) was also a new effort on the part of Brian Atwood's Administration and proved to be very fruitful in that we were able to coordinate some of our programs in LAC countries with the EU. We got very well acquainted with each other. What was interesting from a bureaucratic perspective was that we would have one DAA representing an entire region, and the EC would have three or four. Our people stood out because we had a handle on a lot of issues, more so than the individual EC reps. It was also fun heading the US team to Consultative Groups in Paris and speaking on behalf of USAID to the World Bank and to the host countries that we were trying to assist. It made me understand the importance of donor coordination and become familiar with the various donor countries.

The other part of the job that was not particularly fun was writing the reviewing statements for all the performance reports for the LAC mission directors. Eric and I knew very well what the various mission directors were doing. But we had to put it in Mark Schneider's language, so that he would sign it. That took a lot of effort and time on our part.

The most gratifying thing that I did when I was DAA was when the NSC called Mark and said they wanted someone to lead a multi- agency study of the small Windward Islands of the Caribbean. Mark asked me to do it. Okay, I want to stop there for the moment.

Q: Well, okay, I have several questions. As you know I was the Director of the Office of Caribbean Affairs from '93 to '95. During the time that Aristide had been thrown out, and military junta had been established, I remember going to meet with General Wes Clarke at the Pentagon thinking how fascinating it was that they were preparing to invade Haiti. But this was a second round, apparently, when they were getting ready to leave for it to get rid of the junta. One comment I wanted to make was how impressed I was with how well organized the military was.

During this almost six- year period that you were there, what was the nature of your relationship with Congress as you saw it as the Deputy Assistant Administrator for the Latin America Bureau?

PARKER: The relations were very open, honest, and I would say we trusted each other. I would go up to the Hill to brief, important staffers, Roger Noriega being one of them. They would ask very difficult and telling questions, and we would answer as honestly as we possibly could. If we didn't have an answer, we'd get it to them. There was a level of respect that I think doesn't exist anymore. But it was fun in a way because we traded information. It was a very positive relationship. Even on very difficult subjects, human rights being one of them. Because we were both aligned with each other or both supportive of human rights, both Republican and Democratic staffers. Senator Leahy, as you know, was a prominent supporter of human rights, and his main staffer, Tim Rieser, definitely had lots of questions. Now, that is not to say we were not criticized. But most of the criticism came from the US NGOs outside of government who thought we could be doing more and moving faster.

Q: In your position as Deputy Assistant Administrator, and you already alluded to it, given the challenges in Haiti and elsewhere, there was a good bit of contact with the National Security Council. Were you involved, at all, with the NSC during that period?

PARKER: Almost daily, very close working relationship with the NSC. They took a great deal of interest in what we were doing, including the anti-narcotics staffers on the NSC. My former position as Director of South America and Mexico was very useful in answering these drug questions. Yes, we touched base, I think, as we are doing now, under Samantha Powell- very close working relationship with the NSC, continuing now because of Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iraq, and I suppose Israel and Hamas. We also had solid working relationships with the military. It was the beginning of that period where we were the development leg of the stool with the State Department being the diplomatic leg and the military, the third leg. USAID at that point had gained a lot of respect among both the State Department and the military.

Q: Going now within the USAID structure, I know Mark had a lot of contact with the administrator Brian Atwood, and I'm not sure if you were involved in this, but were you involved at all in relations with other bureaus? And can you comment on that?

PARKER: I wasn't involved much in cross bureau discussions. We were independent entities. Brian brought us all together at his morning staff meetings, and we learned about each other. But we did not have particularly close working relationships across bureaus until the foreign service Rif. That was very difficult because we all had to participate, whether we liked it or not. The various criteria for letting people go were developed by the Management Bureau. So, in that regard, we did do a lot of talking across bureaus. Lastly, some of the work involved personnel decisions which required the LAC DAAs to sit on an agency- wide council made up of DAAs from other bureaus to choose mission directors. It was an interesting process whereby you would present your candidate and defend your candidate. Then there was some horse trading. Officers eventually got assigned after Brian Atwood signed off on our recommendations.

Q: Correct. Within the front office, you obviously had good contact with Eric, who I happen to know quite well, as his wife. But you also had contact with Susan Reichle, who went from being a junior officer to soaring up within the agency.

PARKER: Susan Reichle cut her teeth on the LAC Bureau. She was very smart and very articulate; not afraid to speak her mind. She was Mark's special assistant. He relied on her extensively. When she thought Mark was headed in the wrong direction, she would speak up and tell him so. There would be loud talking, each pushing his/her own position. She usually won out based on just sheer logic. She was very good. We all came to rely on her. She, as you said, moved up the ladder very quickly. Particularly when she got to Columbia and was Deputy Mission Director under Liliana Ayalde and then moved up to be Mission Director. The experience, I think, with Mark and the exposure that she had had with what a DAA does and what kinds of issues we faced on a daily basis trained her well.

Q: You spoke about the Caribbean and Haiti, what was going on in South America and Central America in terms of top issues at the time?

PARKER: Interesting. We had a political appointee in the AA's office, Ramon Dubon, and we had to divide up the hemisphere. Mark would not let go of Central America because of his long
standing ties to El Salvador. Mark basically handled the issues that involved Central America. Eric did part of South America, and I did the rest, plus the Caribbean. Mark just handed Haiti on a platter to me as he oversaw Cuba. In those days there were lots of USAID supported projects to bring Cuba around to some sort of democratic status. And that was the era that some of our LAC staff were allowed into Cuba to look at projects. So, Mark pretty much took care of Cuba. However, when things heated up in Haiti, he was right there beside me.

PARKER: One of the interesting events I was involved in was when the Vice President went to Haiti soon after Aristide came to power and gave a speech. I remember being on the Vice President's plane and briefing him one- on- one as to what he should say to the new General Assembly. He used everything I told him. As he spoke, I was sitting there praying that what I told him was right. That was kind of heady stuff, and the first time I'd ever been on Air Force Two.

Q: This was Al Gore?

PARKER: This was Al Gore. A wonderful guy to brief because he listened carefully. I think I want to stop there.

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Q: Today is January 29, 2024. And Norma, you are going to wrap up your description of your time as DAA of the LAC Bureau and then go on to the beginnings of your first retirement of several retirements.. Norma, you're on.

PARKER: Thank you, Marcy, I just wanted to add a few things I did during the five and a half years that I was DAA. We did a lot of budgeting for the Bureau. Eric, the other career DAA, was really good at this. I learned a lot just watching him in action on the budget reviews. We'd start out requesting a billion dollars every year which was constantly cut by the Congress. The other highlight of my time as DAA was the special interagency report I made on the Windward Islands in the Caribbean at the request of the NSC. I think Marcy, you were involved in this to a certain extent.

Q: Not really, but okay. I think I was gone by then.

PARKER: Mark got a call from the White House, Dick Clark, who asked that this study be done by someone in LAC who was a senior foreign service officer. The scope of work was an interagency team led by LAC would visit five or six of these islands and find out what their needs were, and why USAID left the Eastern Caribbean. We had closed down our Mission in Barbados and all the projects on these small islands. It was for budget reasons back in 1996. Mark chose me to lead the team. I headed an interagency team made up of people from Agriculture, Commerce, and Treasury, as well as LAC's own specialists in various development subjects and the Director of Caribbean Affairs. We went island by island and talked to the Prime Ministers and other members of the cabinets of these islands: Dominica, St. Lucia, Saint Vincent and the Grenadines, and ended up in Grenada. A dream trip if ever there was one. We came up with a set of recommendations for the White House.

I wrote the ten page report on the plane coming back, which explained what the islands needed and requested thirty million dollars and to reopen our mission in Barbados, with a small office on St. Lucia. This report went to the President. I know this because his comment back to Dick Clark was, 'Why did we screw these islands?' It was for budget reasons, of course. But the President liked the report and immediately authorized the thirty million and the reopening of our mission in Barbados. The Bureau did not like the idea of an office in St. Lucia, so that was dropped. Then the Bureau was charged with the implementation of this, which involved quite a lot of work to recruit people and put a program together. There were two aspects of the program: one was rule of law for these islands and human rights; and the other was trade and development with a strong emphasis on the trade side of things. This was a fun assignment.

That sort of terminated my time in the front office. At that point I had to retire because my 93- year- old mom needed to come back from Arizona and find a place to live near me. I couldn't handle a full time DAA job, clean out her house, and bring her back. So, I retired in May of 1999 and went out to Arizona.

Q: Norma, I see it rather unusual for somebody to last so long as the DAA, what kept you going?

PARKER: Yes, it was. And it was only because Mark Schneider, a political appointee, kept fighting to keep me in the front office. I also had to commit to either going overseas in 1999 or retire. This was dictated by the Human Resources Office. Therefore, I retired because I was planning to retire anyway. So yes, it was unusual. But on the other hand, it did provide a certain level of continuity for staff in the Bureau. Mark was upset with me because I left before he did. I mean, it was the end of the Clinton administration. As I said, I had to bring my mother back from Arizona and get her set up. At the tender age of fifty-five, I retired from USAID for the first time. What did I do? I finished bringing my mom back, got her settled in a continuing care place and then I opened a business called NJP consulting. I did short term consulting, mostly in Latin America. I had some very interesting assignments.

I put together a team composed of myself, Jim Michael, Fay Armstrong from the State Department, and Jan Stromsen from ICITAP for a rule of law project in Peru, at the request of the mission. We did a full justice sector assessment, and then a project design. There were various other consultancies, such as conducting a mission retreat in Panama with Bob Jordan and more project design work in Panama.

Q: I can't help but ask you, what was it like being a consultant with Jim Michael?

PARKER: Well, I had worked for him at one point when he was head of the Bureau and I was the Director of the Office of Administration of Justice and Democracy. He tutored me in rule of law issues, and mentored me in that field. It was a very effective collaboration. I enjoyed working with him. We did two consultancies together, successfully, I think. I have the greatest respect for Jim Michael.

As part of being a consultant, I was invited by the National Center for State Courts (NCSC) to their annual meeting of state court judges. The National Center was based in Williamsburg and was founded by retired Supreme Court Justice, Earl Warren. Their purpose was to provide technical assistance and other support to state courts, as opposed to federal courts. It was a fascinating experience. 95 percent of all cases go through state courts and not the federal courts. NCSC was involved in automating court administration and judicial training. They had an International Division based in Arlington. Every year they would hold these large conferences with all the Supreme Court Justices at the state level. The one I attended was in Salt Lake City, Utah. They wanted someone to talk about foreign affairs. Jan Stromsen, a good friend and now Head of NSCS's International Division, asked me to give the speech. I became acquainted with the organization and was asked to join their International Division as a program officer. That started an almost four and a half year stint with the National Center for State Courts. The job took me to Kosovo as Chief of Party on a rule of law project and Afghanistan where we were the subcontractor to a police development contractor in the early intervention years in Afghanistan. I was out there a couple times with NCSC.

Q: Norma, I think this is an appropriate point to make an observation. I might be wrong, but I think it was highly unusual for somebody who had a strong technical background to

get up to the role of DAA, which gave you the ability, after you left USAID, to do a lot of interesting assignments where you were playing a technical role. Correct?

PARKER: Correct. Yes. I wasn't only a project development officer but had picked up some technical skills. It was a wonderful experience working with the National Center. I was in countries, such as Azerbaijan and Georgia, doing both short and long-term assignments on rule of law projects. And I learned a lot about how judicial systems work in other countries.

Q: Norma, can I ask you as a consultant? Now that you were a consultant to USAID, what was your perspective on USAID? How were you treated? Were you treated with respect? Were you treated as a contractor? What was the interaction with your USAID counterparts?

PARKER: Well, because I think I had been DAA and was fairly well known in LAC countries, I was treated very well with a great deal of respect. Anything I needed, I was able to get. I remember in Panama, when Leo Garza was Mission Director, that it was a fantastic short -term consultancy working with him. He then asked me back to run a mission retreat, which I did with Robert Jordan. It was held at one of the sites along the Panama Canal. I think the takeaway for the National Center for State Courts experience was that it brought me out of the Latin America region, where I had spent almost thirty years, and into those parts of the world that I had never been. It was really a lot of interesting new countries, new programs, and I was able to compare and contrast how other regions conducted business as opposed to how we did it in the Latin America Bureau.

One of the best consultancies I had was at the request of Mission Director Larry Garber to go to the West Bank and Gaza and confer with Palestinian personnel in both Ramallah and the Gaza Strip to find out what kind of judicial system they wanted. This was after the Oslo Accords of 1993. I was joined by the rule of law ambassador and other key people from the Department of Justice. We put together, I think, a solid set of recommendations for Larry, and then, unfortunately, they had another uprising and that wiped out everything. But it was fascinating because it took me to Jerusalem and the West Bank and Gaza. It gave me an understanding of the situation in that part of the Middle East.

That basically takes me up to my time in Pakistan. What happened at the National Center? They had some budget cuts and had to let go of three or four people from USAID that they had hired, and I was let go. But that was ok because right after that I was recalled to go to USAID Pakistan to be on their first strategic team to draft a development plan for Pakistan. I was also asked to be the Deputy Director of the mission, which I declined because I didn't want to be working at that level. I wanted to work on strategy, journeyman kinds of things, rule of law, for example. Anyway, that's as far as I think I can go today.

I'll pick up Pakistan for our next meeting and talk a little bit about how, after a short time in Pakistan, I was pulled out to go to Nicaragua as Mission Director. That was a real awakening as to how far Nicaragua had slipped. It was very sad to see because we had invested so much money and effort to get Violeta Chamorro elected to the presidency through a free and fair election. Now to see what the Sandinistas had done to that poor country was devastating.

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Q: Now, today is February 20, 2024. And we are going to hear from Norma about her assignment to USAID[United States Agency for International Development] Pakistan when she was recalled from retirement from USAID. So Norma, welcome.

PARKER: Thank you, Marcy. I was recalled to Pakistan in order to help draft the long-term development strategy, along with a team of four mission directors from around the world.

Q: Pretty heavy duty there.

PARKER: Yes, it was. The year was 2009. I had never been to Pakistan. What a beautiful country. During the strategic drafting process, I worked with Pakistani personnel at various levels of the government. I found it very enlightening because, having never been to Pakistan before, I didn't know what to expect. But I found wonderfully educated, wonderfully articulate women and men serving in the government with every intention to help their country develop.

After we worked on the long- term development strategy, it went to Holbrooke, who was the State Department's coordinator for Pakistan assistance. He—I don't know if you knew Holbrooke—was a difficult person to work with who did not like USAID. He threw the strategy back for numerous rewrites. In fact, I'm not sure that it was ever finished. But in the meantime, the mission was carrying out its normal program which was quite large and focused on the northern region of Pakistan where there was a lot of kinetic activity around the border with Afghanistan.

I was pulled in to assist with a Baluchistan assessment in the south. It was a province of Pakistan that USAID had not worked in previously. We took a whole team of mission staff from all the various sectors, agriculture, education, governance, etc, to Baluchistan. The head of the Taliban was Mullah Omar who lived there, or so the US thought. We were, of course, surrounded by all kinds of US military because it was very dangerous territory. But we were able to talk to various sectors in Balochistan, who were willing to come to our hotel where we were staying. It was more like a fortress than a hotel. We gathered information about the development needs of Balochistan. I wrote up our findings for the team. I'm not sure what happened to that assessment, whether it was ever funded or not, but the needs were certainly there. An interesting aspect was that the Chinese were moving in very quickly to that part of Pakistan and building a deep-water port. And I think that was the reason we wanted to have a presence there in that province.

I was also involved in helping the mission with their rule of law project. They were about to put it out for bid. Then I went to a cocktail party at the Ambassador's house for a Christmas party. I was told by Ambassador Patterson that she had received a call from the DCM [Deputy Chief of Mission] in Nicaragua, and they wanted a seasoned senior FSO to come to Nicaragua immediately because they were having all kinds of management problems with the USAID mission and Acting Mission Director. She said, "Goodbye. Enjoy your transfer to Nicaragua." I had no say in this. It just happened. I was still on recall. I got on the plane—it was now 2010—in the middle of a snowstorm, flew back to Washington, and then began reading into Nicaragua.
Jim Micheal swore me in. I arrived in Nicaragua as Mission Director in March 2010.

Q: Norma? Did you have any time to be briefed by USAID Washington before going?

PARKER: Yes. I spent about two months in Washington, got caught up on Nicaragua. What a sad story it was at that point in time. All the gains made in the early 90s lost. The Sandinistas were now in power. Ortega was just out of control and gradually taking over the courts, and the legislature. Nicaragua was slowly evolving into an authoritarian regime, just like Fujimori in his third term in Peru. But in the middle of that, we did try to do a couple of things that could help Nicaragua in a time of need.

Q: Norma, could you let us know what Feed the Future is?

PARKER: First of all, poverty was rampant. After Haiti, Nicaragua was the poorest country in Latin America. The only common ground the US had with Ortega and his cabinet were his anti-drug policies. They collaborated very closely with us on the control of drugs. The other area was in alleviating poverty to a certain extent. In the 90s, we worked very closely with the then foreign minister in charge of foreign assistance. He came from the Atlantic coast, which is really the Caribbean side of Nicaragua. He was very supportive of anything that the mission wanted to do in terms of poverty alleviation. He remembered us from the 90s and liked the US. I met with him frequently.

I suggested to the ambassador that we do a needs assessment for Nicaragua. In doing so, we utilized all members of the country team who travelled to all corners of Nicaragua. They talked to the people and found out what their real needs were. This was the first time many members of the country team, including staff, had been outside Managua. They loved it, and in the process understood what the mission did. We developed a questionnaire and approach to talking to the people, and they just had a fantastic time going out and talking and coming back and trying to figure out what the needs and solutions were. The ambassador was delighted that we were able to involve the whole country team. I have to say, it was a really great learning experience for them and for our mission. We no longer fought with embassy staff about what we did. They actually became partners with us, and that was really personally very fulfilling. This was demonstrated during the development of our Feed the Future program (FtF) (see below)

The needs assessment highlighted a need for a twenty million dollar program, which of course, we never got because of the USG's distrust of Ortega. We moved on to design our Feed the Future program. This was an initiative of the Obama administration based on the global food crisis and resulting high rates of undernutrition. The focus of FtF was on improved agriculture productivity, expanded markets, resilience, and better nutritional outcomes. The initiative focused on small farmers, especially women in more than 24 countries. FtF programs competed with each other for funding. Presentations were made in Washington before an inter-agency group. This was to be a whole of government effort. We did all the analysis on the nutritional needs of the country, particularly the children under five, and the kinds of crops that could be grown by small farmers and all of the other elements of the Feed the Future program requirements. Our small country team put together a great program and did a terrific job of presenting it to the Washington Committee. Our presentation was kicked off by the DCM who explained the US relationship with the Ortega administration and how you do a program like this with essentially an authoritarian regime.

During the design of our Feed the Future presentation we enlisted the help of several members of the country team: political officers to address the questions about Ortega; and powerpoint experts to design beautiful charts and pictures which came out of the trips during the needs assessment exercise. We worked very hard on this. We brought the DCM as a heavyweight to defend the reason why we were going to implement a FtF program in an authoritarian country. I made the presentation of the program. We both made a very good case. But, unfortunately, in the end, Nicaragua was not selected as a Feed the Future country. This was a real blow for both the mission and the embassy.

Q: Norma, this would be a good quick point to ask you. What exactly was the mission doing? Were funds primarily going to nonprofit organizations, what money was going to the government, if any at this time?

PARKER: Our program was basically strengthening small farmers through working with local organizations and co-ops basically. And expanding health service delivery and democracy promotion. Whatever kinds of local groups that we found, especially in the democracy and civic participation area. I don't recall funds going to the government in the mission program.

Q: Was there pushback from the Ortega administration to your working directly with NGOs [Non-Governmental Organizations]?

PARKER: There wasn't any pushback because of our special relationship with the Foreign Minister, who was head of Foreign Assistance, and had worked with the mission in the 90s. He was very supportive of what we were trying to do in poverty alleviation, which Ortega also supported.

The program did have an environmental component and a tourism component because we were trying to develop the Atlantic coast, really the Caribbean coast, of Nicaragua, for

tourism. As you know, Nicaragua has beautiful beaches, but underdeveloped. This fact was included in our FtF program under the expanded markets component.

When FtF failed, it was pretty depressing, quite frankly. I remembered back in the 90s, Bob Gersony had done some assessment work on the Atlantic coast. I called Janet Ballantyne, who was then the AA for Latin America, to see if she would concur in my bringing Bob down and doing another assessment of the possibilities of development of the Atlantic coast of Nicaragua. And she did, and she was very excited about it. Bob came down. He's a kick the tires kind of guy. He was there for about, I would say, seven or eight weeks. He traveled back into the hinterlands of Nicaragua on the Rio Coco. He produced a wonderful report based on the possibilities of developing palm oil as the silver bullet for developing the Atlantic coast. We submitted the assessment to Washington, Bob briefed extensively, and once again, there was this negative sense of why do anything in this country. Nicaragua doesn't count. We're not interested. Forget it.

Q: I'd like to make a comment for the reader. I've done about a dozen oral histories, and Bob Gersony comes up in many of them. For those of you in Central America, I have been told over and over again that he was quite an extraordinary guy.

PARKER: Yes. Well, Bob and I were together in Guatemala, right after the 1976 earthquake. That was when he was discovered, and the Deputy Mission Director, Fred Schick, put us together on the model housing program. We became very good friends. This assessment he did for Nicaragua was a real opportunity to develop that area of Nicaragua. And once again, it was focused on raising incomes and tourism. It would have been a fantastic program. But Washington said, no.

Now we are in mid- 2011. I was getting more and more frustrated, thinking: what am I doing here; I can't accomplish anything. They cut the budget again to something like eight million dollars. It was at that point, I said, well, I'm going to retire. (for the second time). It was a lose lose situation at that point for me in Nicaragua.

Q: Before we move on, you were sent there because of management issues. Is there anything you'd like to share about that or not?

PARKER: Yes, it was a very particular situation where the Acting Mission Director—not very diplomatically—fired the Executive Officer who was on contract. She was a very talented Exec Officer, I might add. But that firing just tore the mission apart. There were two camps; one for the Executive Officer; and one for the Acting Mission Director. It was a divided mission when I arrived. I spent a few weeks when I first got there talking to as many people as I could to get a sense of where the various staff, including the foreign nationals, stood. There were good arguments on both sides but it became apparent that it would have further divided the mission if I reversed the firing decision and hired back the Executive Officer, which I really wanted to do because we needed one. We found someone else and slowly tried to pull the mission together. I hosted a mission retreat on what our long- term strategy in Nicaragua should be. Within that retreat, we discussed fairly openly management issues. We were finally able to pull the mission together. I

wouldn't say it was completely healed, but it was a lot better than when I got there. The Ambassador was happy with how it all came together. Then my Deputy, who had been Acting MD who had fired the Exec officer, left the mission and things got even better.

Anyway, that was Nicaragua. I had my first mission, which came very late in my career and was a mixed experience. I loved being able to get out and talk to the farmers and see those projects on the ground and see the health projects, everything we were doing. It was just fantastic. But it was so frustrating to be caught up in the political morass of Ortega.

I say it was my choice, because prior to Nicaragua, I had been offered at least five times the mission directorship in Peru and turned it down because I wanted to retire for the first time and help my mom move back from Arizona. I have regretted turning down the Peru Mission directorship.

So, I came back to Washington. I think the Ambassador was a little angry that I left before him, but I just didn't feel I was accomplishing anything. And frankly, I wanted to get back to Afghanistan and Pakistan issues.

And lo and behold, there was this task force that was set up called AFPAK [Afghanistan-Pakistan]. The task force was headed by Valerie Dickson-Horton with Frank Miller being my day-to- day supervisor. We were charged with recruiting FSLs (Foreign Service Limited) people who would serve on the PRTs,(the Provincial Reconstruction Teams), that were created during Obama's surge of 30,000 military troops in Afghanistan. We were trying to recruit up to 378 FSLs. That was the magic number to get them out there to work on these PRTs that were headed by a Colonel, with a senior civilian political officer from the State Department and a senior development type from USAID. That was attractive to me.

What I did was call up Valerie and ask if I could be transferred to work on the task force. Since Afghanistan and Pakistan was the numero uno (number one) priority of the agency, there was no problem. I was immediately transferred and assigned to the task force. Can we stop for a second?

Q: Sure.

PARKER: Okay. There was a whole process for interviewing FSLs (Foreign Service Limited) personnel, who would go out to serve on these PRTs. We interviewed a lot of former Peace Corps volunteers who did have some development experience. Also from the NGO community, there were a lot of volunteers coming through to be interviewed. We had developed a questionnaire and then an oral interview that followed, and then we ranked everybody. And finally gave our list to the Afghan mission, who then continued the hiring process. I think we did over two hundred interviews when I was there, as I recall. And then, in the middle of this, Obama decided to start closing down PRTs and return personnel back to the States. So, we had a lot of people coming back to Washington. We did interviews of returning FSLs to capture lessons learned and to understand what happened out there on the PRTs. I wrote a paper on that subject.

The strategy in Afghanistan at that time was a counterinsurgency strategy of clear, hold and build. We were clearly clearing and holding territory, but we were not so much in the building stage. And it was at this time that we started losing ground in Afghanistan as the Taliban started to get stronger. In most cases we were clearing, and in most cases holding territory, but we never got to the build stage. I guess the takeaway on all of that was, it was evident that you couldn't do any kind of real stabilization or development, whether it was a small infrastructure project or a small agriculture development project, until you got to the build phase. It seemed like almost all the PRTs were somewhere between clear and hold. It was a real eye opener. When FSLs tried to implement projects, people got hurt. Not in every case, but it was a dicey and highly kinetic environment.

Q: Norma, remind us what a PRT is.

PARKER: Provincial Reconstruction Team. I think they used these in Iraq as well. But I'm not sure about that.

Q: And these were people contracted direct hire?

PARKER: They were FSLs (Limited Foreign Service Officers). I think it was a five- year appointment. We used the same type of personnel in Vietnam. And then, of course, when they returned, they wanted to join USAID as direct hires, which was difficult to do. Most wouldn't have met the foreign service criteria, and in other cases, the need for more FSOs just wasn't there at that point. I think I want to stop there. And then when we pick this up again, I'll have my paper which analyzed the PRTs and what our mistakes were, and what the successes were

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Q: Today is Tuesday, March 12, 2024. We're picking up with Norma Parker, who, in her last recording, was talking about her time in Afghanistan. She's going to complete that and then go on to further assignments. Norma, welcome.

PARKER: Thank you. I did a paper on lessons learned from our experience with the provincial reconstruction teams [PRT] in Afghanistan. I'd like to incorporate those in the interview. But before I start, I would just like to say the background of the PRT was really the Vietnam experience with CORDS. I did a deep dive on CORDS, which was the Civil Operations and Rural Development Support Program. This program had a very similar mandate to the PRTs, which was to do stabilization activities and rural pacification, and to coordinate with military operations in kinetic areas. Based on the CORDS experience, we did bring in special personnel, FSLs, for CORDS and gave them special training. They were accorded much more freedom in going out to the rural villages in Vietnam and working directly with the civilian population. In Afghanistan, that was not possible because of the highly kinetic, or combative atmosphere. They developed the COIN strategy, the counterinsurgency strategy, which was composed of three phases: clear, hold, and build. The clear stage was obviously when the military

came in and pacified the village, so it was safe to work in. The hold stage is that we would continue to hold that territory and begin some development work. Then, in theory, the development officers and development programmers would come in big time for the longer term during the build phase.

That rarely happened in Afghanistan. We were called upon by the military to come in even during the clear phase. It was almost impossible to implement stabilization or development activities in these very highly kinetic areas in the clear phase. It was even harder in the hold phase. So, we learned a lot about what not to do in these highly volatile, violent areas. An example would be Gaza today. What happened was that Obama ordered a surge of 30,000 military troops between 2009 and 2012. The Pentagon wanted alongside those military troops, development officers that would come in and assist with the stabilization and development programs. USAID was hard pressed to come up with the large numbers of people to serve on the rapidly growing number of PRTs. I think the target was three hundred and seventy-eight new FSLs and FSOs that could go out to the twenty-six PRTs and serve as development officers in specific local areas. Most were doing local government programs to stabilize rural areas. We learned very shortly after Obama authorized the surge that he reversed himself. Then we were in the process—we being the U.S government—of reducing the number of PRTs and bringing people home. What my paper is based on is a hundred personal interviews, face-to-face interviews, with the returning FSLs who had served as field program officers on the PRTs, or on district stabilization teams at the municipal level.

What we had at that time were regional platforms, which were co-located with the five regional commands that were headed by generals. USAID's role was to supply the Senior Development Officer on each PRT. The State Department supplied the Senior Political Officer who was in control of the Senior Development Officer, and all were under the supervision of the Colonel in charge of the PRT. In terms of lessons learned—first of all, I should say that billions of dollars were spent during this period, through both military sources and through our own USAID appropriations. One of the problems with these PRTs—people wanted to know later if we should keep these in our toolkit as a way of doing development projects in countries that were on the verge of becoming failed states____ was that the PRT model was not fully integrated into whatever the mission's ongoing stabilization, and development programs were. This created problems. In addition, going out and having to recruit new people, FSLs, meant there was little success in matching skills and experience of these FSLs with the needs of the PRTs and DSTs [DIstrict Stabilization Teams]. Even though they were trained, they were only there for one year, or even less sometimes, so it was impossible to achieve any kind of development objective within that time frame.

I did seven basic lessons learned from the PRT experience. This paper is now in CDIE [Center for Development Information and Evaluation]. The model was most effective—in other words, the project activities, stabilization activities had the best chance of being sustained—when there was a reasonably stable, or semi-permissive environment. In COIN terminology, this was the build phase, in which we were very seldom working.

The lesson learned here: the mission needed to take ownership of this model, PRT model or DST model, and integrate it into its ongoing development programs. The FSLs operated somewhat independently from the mission. Even though they were the eyes and ears of the mission and carrying out project monitoring and extending the reach of the U.S government in the hinterland, it was often not taken advantage of by the mission in Kabul. They operated side by side rather than in an integrated fashion. The funding levels for these countries should be based on country development strategies that take into account the local needs, economic, social, and political. Analysis of institutional absorptive capacity needed to be conducted because there was a lot of money out there chasing after very few projects.

The development programming decisions had to be made by USAID in close collaboration with the State Department and the military. This would sometimes happen on a PRT, and sometimes it would not. It would have been better if USAID directly coordinated with the FSOs and the Foreign Service limited people in the field and used them as monitors for their projects. We needed to coordinate closer with the State Department and the military.

There was additional funding from the military. It was called CERP [Commander's Emergency Response Program] funding, somewhere in the range of 50,000 dollars, that was given to each PRT. The purpose was to focus on small local initiatives requested by the local district or provincial government. Sometimes this just became a bag of money that was dropped on the table of the governor with no idea how to use the money. The mission wasn't involved in any way in the use of CERP funding. And that was another great weakness. Sometimes too much money is a bad thing.

Continuity of leadership and other staffing at both the regional platforms and the PRTs was really critical for success. From the hundred interviews that we did, it was clear that a one- year tour was totally inadequate to achieve the objectives of the stabilization or development programs. Today there's a lot more information and background on the Vietnam experience, the Iraq experience, and some of the Kosovo experience, which readers can go to CDIE and read.

Q: Can I ask since this experience had been done elsewhere in Vietnam and elsewhere, were there lessons learned from those experiences and adjustments then adapted for the use in Pakistan or Afghanistan?

PARKER: Sadly not, although the data was available.

Q: Sadly, not.

PARKER: Whole books have been written on Vietnam and CORDS experience and are very, very well done. I read those books. I didn't see any of that being reflected in how we set up the PRTs. In fact, we didn't have a lot of say—we being USAID—on how the PRTs operated. It was really a military initiative. And so we were pulled in, maybe you weren't in USAID at the time. I was in meetings where the Administrator of USAID at the time

was under enormous pressure to recruit these 378 civilians. That's all they could talk about.

It was a crazy, crazy time. But the lesson learned there is to use prior experience, obviously. I don't know why we didn't.

One of the takeaways from our interviews was that you need a local development strategy, a development strategy focused on local development issues with input from the local people. I was at first very taken with PRTs. We sent out very good people to be Senior Development Officers with lots of experience, but it was getting their knowledge and advice up to the level of the Colonel of the PRT that was very difficult. Some were successful, some were not.

Q: It must have been very frustrating for those who are putting together this program

PARKER: I think so. When you talk to some of our senior people who served out there, you do get that. I mean, I think it could have worked had it been set up correctly. And of course, I think USAID should have been in charge of the development side of the equation and not subjected so much to the control of the military or State Department.

Q: Did that last?

PARKER: I don't know if we will ever use the PRT model again. My paper, which was based on actual interviews conducted by the whole FSL team in AF/PAK, explains some of the drawbacks of the PRT approach.

Q: Was this on top of your operation, or done over several years, or one or two years? The PRT?

PARKER: It was a two or three year operation. Just as the PRTs got set up, the twenty-six, Obama pulled the plug and reversed the decision. They were slowly closed down. There was no real presence in the local district areas of Afghanistan after that. Anyway, that was an interesting—intellectually and in every other way—part of my service on the Afghanistan and Pakistan Task Force.

Dealing with these FSLs—they were talented. They were usually Peace Corps volunteers. And once they got a taste of what we were trying to do in Afghanistan, in development in general, they all wanted—not all, but many of them wanted—to join USAID. And of course, we weren't hiring at that point. It's a shame because they were a nice pool of people to have selected for some of our new FSOs.

Okay, I ended my USAID career on that Task Force and retired for the third time in July 2017. At that point, all the PRTs were closed, and there was no need for us to do any more recruitment. What little recruitment was left was passed to the mission in Kabul. They had just built a new USAID building out there on the base, and we had a new

embassy out there. It was starting to look like a very nice compound that we would be in for the long term.

Then, of course, we had the decision by Biden to withdraw from Afghanistan. It was sad to see some of the interpreters and translators left behind. But we won't go into that.

It was July 2017, resulting in an almost forty year career with USAID—thirty-eight years specifically. I was ready to do something entirely different.

Q: Forty years? Oh, my gosh. That's amazing.

PARKER: Thirty-eight years, yes. I'm counting those seven or eight years that I was in the civil service with USAID because I did a lot of development projects both in health and family planning, and in early democracy stuff. We were supporting the Overseas Education Fund of the League of Women Voters. We were starting to support civic participation organizations back in the 60s. There is nothing really new in USAID. At some point in time over its sixty year history, we've done it, or so it seems. I retired in 2017.

Janet Ballantyne lived near me, and we both decided to join a church, Bradley Hills Presbyterian Church on Bradley Boulevard. It turned out that they had a very large mission program. They called them mission projects, but they were really like development projects. They had a nice array of international projects, one of them being Forman Christian College, in Lahore, Pakistan. I knew Lahore but had not seen this College. Turns out, a member of our church founded the college back in the nineteenth century.

We had a special relationship with Forman Christian College. The Rector was a former Senior Political Officer for Kandahar, Afghanistan, Jonathan Addleton. He had been the US Ambassador to Mongolia and before that a USAID Mission Director in several countries including India. He ended up managing not only our resources, but the resources that came in from other churches in the US.

This project supported poor Muslim and Christian girls from the rural areas to come to Lahore and stay overnight and through the week so that they could take courses and not have to go home to their families every evening. They had a special dormitory for these women which USAID/Pakistan built. We in the church provided scholarships for them. That was an exciting thing to do in retirement. We also supported projects in Africa, a hospital in Gaza, and I was designing a project in Peru. This was in addition to all of the local projects that supported nonprofits that provided a variety of services including feeding poor people.

Q: Can you describe for us, what was involved—maybe the one in Pakistan—what was involved and what your role was there when you were helping out?

PARKER: It was very similar to USAID except I was based here.. My role was to be a project manager to send the letter and money that the church was giving to Forman Christian College for scholarships. We gave enough so that seven to ten poor girls each year would receive scholarships. The role was to oversee that, to get the information from the girls, and to feature them in some of our literature about the experiences that they had had going to college for the first time in their family.

Q: That's fascinating. Let me just share with you some questions you can answer at your leisure. One, what was the level of funding? This is an opportunity to highlight that the nonprofit NGOs and churches in the United States play an important role overseas. So that was another point. The other, what were your observations, if you could make them on the mechanics quality of what you did versus USAID? That might be unfair.

PARKER: It's interesting. We had in Forman Christian College two retired NIH [National Institutes of Health] scientists from our church. They were teaching biochemistry and very sophisticated science courses over there. They also kept an eye on the 4,000 to 5,000 dollars a year that we would send and advised the prior rector on management issues. In terms of quality of personnel, I was really blown away. But this is a very special church. The congregation had many lawyers and retired government people ,like myself. We had several retired FSOs, and our own Pastor had been Assistant Secretary for Policy in the Department of Labor. He and his staff understood, and most of the congregation understood, development activities overseas, which was heartening to tell you the truth. But we also had a domestic program that centered on interfaith activities. This church—the reason I joined—had the three Abrahamic religions co-located in its facility. We had a synagogue and two mosques that worshiped in our church. That really was a fantastic situation when Afghanistan fell, and all these refugees were coming to the United States. We were able to set up apartments and provide services to the Afghan refugees. Members of the mosques would provide food that they were used to eating. So not only could we give them the indigenous food, but we also had the ability to talk to them in Dari. It was just a very different operation from other churches assisting Afghan refugees. In addition, we hold joint religious services, or Sunday interfaith services, twice a year in which the Imams, the Rabbi, and our Pastor would discuss relevant topics of the day.

Q: Rabbi.

PARKER: Yes, the Rabbi, and then of course our own Pastor and the Imans, would all speak about issues of the day from their perspectives. It was just fascinating to hear. There was great love and consensus and no real difficulties. In the last couple of years, they've had to provide some security for the church. The people from the mosques came in for Friday prayers, to which we were invited. They had to put security because there were issues not with the congregation, but with the local community. The Rabbi who retired recently was particularly interesting. He had close personal ties to Cuba. So, he took some members of our congregation and the synagogue to Cuba for a tour. He just knew a lot about Cuba. He was heavily involved in the release of Mark Grossman who was captured by the Cuban forces about two years ago. Grossman was a USAID funded

contractor working in Cuba. He was part of the LAC Bureau's Cuba program. Basically, this is what I'm still doing. I'm working on the committee that is overseeing nineteen different programs, including these interfaith programs.

Q: What budget are you dealing with roughly per year?

PARKER: Churches are not getting a lot of money. People are not really living up to their pledges, but we had about 96,000 dollars a year to allocate to these projects. These were small grants, very small grants to nonprofits, but they were strategic and key to helping various organizations to provide services to the poor of Montgomery County. A lot of what we did was to work with the homeless. And we have a racial justice component. Believe it or not, we have a lot of homeless in the Bethesda area, particularly during the pandemic. One organization was called Bethesda Cares, where people could walk in off the street to the church, and they would be directed where to get food, medical care, or whatever.

Q: I wanted to pitch in to say—and see your perspective —when I retired from USAID and basically spent my last twelve to fourteen years working with volunteer organizations, it was really impressive to see the role that volunteers play in our country, and how much volunteers are dependent upon exposure I didn't have. Did you have the same?

PARKER: I found that to be true. The number of volunteers willing to work, and to work like professionals, and to freely give their time was impressive. The volunteers were extremely well educated, and well informed about world affairs.

Q: Sounds like it. Just out of curiosity, did it operate entirely independently of USAID? Were there any links with USAID?

PARKER: No, it operated entirely independently, except for Forman Christian College. USAID got hold of the information regarding the need for dormitories and built the dormitory for the Muslim and Christian girls coming in from the rural areas. I thought that was kind of cool. Then the current rector came from a USAID background.

Q: What a nice transition to make.

PARKER: It made retirement kind of painless. I didn't miss it because I was basically doing much of the same thing, but in the private sector.

Q: You also got to do what you wanted to do.

PARKER: I did. Because of the budget training that we've all had working in USAID, I did a lot of the budget for the mission committee.

Q: That must have been very helpful. Wow! Thanks for sharing that. That's fascinating and good for you.

PARKER: I'm now trying to branch out into gardening.

Q: Well, that's a valuable thing. I think one of the nice things about retirement and volunteering is that you do things that you really believe in, and that you want to do, when you want to do them. It's a far cry from having a nine to five job where you're told what to do. You say, no, this is what I want to do.

PARKER: Yes, exactly. It's been very gratifying.

Q: Very gratifying. Okay. Do you have any lessons learned more broadly?

PARKER: Yes, I do. I was starting to write them down.

Q: Do you want to do this for another session?

PARKER: I can give some right now. This comes from a thirty-eight-year perspective. The idea, as Eric used to say, is that all projects happen in a country. Something the Global Bureau forgets. Well, not only that, but most projects should be locally based, with local participation and consultation with the people who are being assisted. They should not just be viewed as beneficiaries.

Q: How did they do in that category?

PARKER: Pardon me?

Q: So yes, you say this lesson, how does AID measure up in terms of its design?

PARKER: It's like they just discovered this as I was leaving in 2017. Under this initiative called USAID Forward, they were starting to realize that they had to do much more locally based programs with local people taking the lead or at least having a say. Now I understand under the new Administrator Powell, that has become policy. The problem is, the people who did this, like you and me years and years ago, have all retired. I think the base of experience for that is not as strong as it used to be. But it is definitely a policy now. That's gratifying to see.

Q: I joined AID after you in 1978. We had to do a social soundness analysis. Sociologists were used—I don't know how effectively but they were used—and then that sort of disappeared?

PARKER: Yes. That analysis was key to learning how things worked at the local level and where power centers were in a village. It's too bad we got rid of that, because I think that contributed to better strategies and local projects. The other thing is something you would agree with. Remember when they took PPC apart, dismantled it and took out the budget function and gave it to the State Department? I think that was when they set up F. Our budget was going through the Secretary of State. I remember, as DAA, having to

brief Madeleine Albright on the LAC Bureau's budget and defend it. It was one-on-one and it was tough. But we prevailed. But taking PPC apart and eliminating the budget component and separating budgets from strategy was a terrible mistake. Lesson learned: you really can't do strategic development without having a budget alongside it.

The third one, coming out of the Afghan experience—and I'll have more lessons___ you can't do development in combat areas. We still are trying to do that with certain countries, and I don't know when we'll learn that there's nothing sustainable that will come out of that. Any program begun while the fighting is still ongoing will not last. The next time we talk I'll have a few more.

Q: That's great. But we will stop now. I'm going to stop the recording.

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Q: Today is Wednesday, April 3, and I am sorry to say this is my last interview with Norma Parker, who I worked with—who I worked for. And it's been a fascinating, fascinating journey, not just during her time in AID [United States Agency for International Development] but Norma, taking your experience to post AID, working with your church, working overseas. So, Norma, we are going to end on what takeaways or lessons learned you have for others.

PARKER: Okay, thank you Marcy. Keeping in mind, there were some takeaways I had given earlier. One that dealt with budgeting and strategy should be kept together in the same office within USAID and not split apart as they were up until the day I finally retired from USAID in 2017. Having thought back over the last thirty-eight years and in no order of priority, I'm going to give us about six takeaways.

From my experience, USAID is most effective when it can do things directly with the fewest number of contractors. Our USAID technical people are actually development advisors to the sector in which they are assigned. I found that to be true in Guatemala, after the 1976 earthquake. We had twenty-five million dollars for reconstruction. We basically did the whole program directly. We had incredible officers serving in the mission and in the country itself. If we used contractors, we actually used local partners on the ground, like NGOs [Non governmental organizations], such as co-ops.

Two, would be from my experience particularly in democracy and governance and administration of justice: the importance of supporting regional organizations is just paramount. We found within the hemisphere—and of course, Latin America is much more homogeneous than other places in the world—three or four regional organizations already working on administration of justice and human rights. It was a matter of hooking up with them and supporting them to broaden their reach. But I also found that developing new regional organizations was equally important. When the Summit of the Americas started back in the late 80s, early 90s, we huddled together with people from the National Security Council and representatives from LAC countries to develop a Justice Study Center in Chile with the financial support of other LAC countries. The

Center survived, has the support of most countries, particularly the Caribbean countries, and has proven to be one of the sustainable things we did in the area of administration of justice. These regional organizations are important. Don't overlook them. Don't let them slide over to the Organization of American States. There is a role for USAID to support them.

In terms of working in conflict countries, or I guess they're now calling them countries with violent extremism, what I found from my experience in Afghanistan and Pakistan, that if there's a development component to whatever program or strategy is present in those countries, it is just imperative that USAID officers be in charge of the development program, and not have State in charge. State thinks that they can do development, but really what they're doing is short-term win-win kinds of things. There's little to no institution-building component to their work. I'm an institutionalist. I believe in building institutions, and that gets totally lost if development officers are not in the driver's seat. In conflict countries, the takeaway is to put the development officers in charge, people who know how to do development.

I think this is an old one. And I know you've heard this before, but the Administrator of USAID should be a cabinet position so that he/she has direct access to the President. This used to be the case, in the very early days of USAID back in the early 60s. Mission Directors were invited to the Rose Garden. They were sworn in at the White House. There was a certain level of prestige attached to being a Mission Director. I think we should return to those days when the Administrator and Mission Directors had that kind of presence within the government.

Now on a sort of lower level, I did a lot of donor coordination in all the countries that I worked in. I found that to be really very important: to get to know the donors; to find out who the largest donors were in a country; and what they were doing. We were able to work together in countries like Nicaragua, where it was imperative to have a single unified development strategy for the country across the board. The same thing holds for these conflict countries. We don't want new officers assigned to a country to forget the importance of and to participate in donor coordination. I think that has slipped a bit. I don't think they hold those meetings that we used to have in Paris managed by the World Bank. Now they're run by the IDB [Inter-American Development Bank] for LAC countries. Bolivia was a good example where we had wonderful donor coordination for the democratically elected government of Bolivia. Bolivia brought most of its cabinet to the donor coordination meetings. We were able to get a lot of information and do coordination of programs.

On a lower level, at the project level, and you've heard this before, we don't do enough participant training. I don't know if we should require it, but the project design officers should at least consider it a serious component of every project they do. Participant training has been one of the most successful programs that USAID has supported. We are still reaping the benefits of it.

Q: Norma, I couldn't agree with you more. Why do you think it fell out? It just wasn't sexy enough?

PARKER: Yes. It wasn't sexy enough, and there were other initiatives that overtook it. We went from pillar to post with initiatives. It just dropped out. What we did in Peru under John Sanbrailo was really very exciting. We had, at the time of my arrival, half the Cabinet had been trained by USAID. We just had a fantastic time with returned participants. We set up alumni groups and created directories of returned participants. What a resource that was when you came to design new projects or negotiate issues.

The last thing that I thought of, and I think it's still true, is that we're still not diverse enough as a Foreign Service Corps. There are still not enough ethnic groups represented. Women are still struggling to a certain extent. I'll just never forget why I never joined the American Foreign Service Association, (AFSA) because when I first tried to go to Guatemala as a new FSO transferring from GS, AFSA opposed the transfer. They said I was taking a job from a man.

Q: Oh, my God!

PARKER: I'll never forget that. I don't think it's that bad now, but I also think women are not mentored as much as they should be. I'm not sure that they're reaching the levels within the bureaucracy that they should. To a certain extent watching the West Bank/ Gaza mission directors speak the other day, it was very heartening to see Monica Stein as the last mission director in the West Bank/Gaza. That was incredible. There she was, in a conflict country, in a very tough post. And USAID had assigned a woman there. So, it's getting better, but it's not perfect. I'd like to leave with the idea that we could do more on diversity.

Those are my takeaways. If you have any reactions, Marcy, I'd like to hear them.

Q: Excellent. I agree with all of them. I'll get off camera with you in a little bit. Yes, they are right on target. Especially when you look at people like you and Wayne and others who've been there for so many years who were able to provide those reflections. I think it's excellent.

Well, Norma, this has truly been a pleasure and an honor and a lot of fun to learn about your journey, to accompany you on part of it and to watch your dedication to development and your thoughtfulness and again, what you've continued to do and are doing through your church. Thank you so much, Norma for this excellent opportunity to interview you.

PARKER: Thank you, Marcy. It has been interesting to revisit my career and discuss it with you.

End of interview