The Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training
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Foreign Assistance Series

CECILIA PITAS

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INTERVIEW

Q: Today is September 27, 2023. This is Carol Peasley, and this is interview number one with Cecilia Pitas.

Cecilia, we're delighted to have this chance to speak with you. Could you please start by talking about where you were born and raised, what your family was doing, and any other things that might help us understand your eventual career choice?

Childhood, Early Background, Education

PITAS: I'm a local person, born in Arlington Hospital; my mother was born at her family's home in Falls Church, and my father was an exotic import, born in Missouri. They met after he spent World War Two with the Navy in China and came to Washington for graduate work at George Washington University. While I was growing up he worked as a psychologist for the Department of the Army for many years.

Q: So, after the military, he was then a civil servant working for the Army as a psychologist.

PITAS: Yes; we lived in Falls Church and then in Fairfax.

Q: Where did you go to high school? Did you go to public high school?

PITAS: I went to public schools including Woodson High School in Fairfax. My family was very outdoorsy, so we did a lot of hiking and camping and canoeing and so on as I was growing up.

Q: Siblings as well?

PITAS: I have a younger sister and a younger brother. My sister also trained as a psychologist; she now takes care of our mother who is 100. I have a brother who works with satellites for NASA (National Aeronautics and Space Administration) and he's the most entertained by his job of anybody I've ever met.

Q: A true scientist.

PITAS: It's wonderful to have that enthusiasm.

I went to undergraduate school at Virginia Tech in Blacksburg in the second year that women were admitted. It had been an all-male school; a military school originally back in the 1800s and the state land grant university, starting with agricultural and engineering programs. And then in 1967 it became completely co-ed.

Q: Until 1967. That's amazing.

PITAS: Virginia does not have a history of progressivism generally.

Q: And what did you study?

PITAS: I ended up getting a degree in international relations, starting with agricultural economics, which is what attracted me, but it turned out what I liked about it was more the economics than the agriculture, mainly because their program at the time was very focused on industrializing farming, which just didn't fascinate me.

Q: And you must have done some psychology classes, right?

PITAS: Only a couple of psychology classes and thought they were tedious beyond belief. Among the most amusing classes I took were math; abstract math, a lot of probability theory and so on and I found that very interesting. After that I went to George Mason University, which was new-ish at the time, and looked at International Relations and Latin American studies, and my plan then was to go do some research work in Latin America, but I was in a bad automobile accident just as I was finishing my master's. And

so that got very complicated and where I was set up to go was Chile which then had a messy government change.

Q: Yes, that's when there was the coup against Allende?

PITAS: That was right before I was going and the people that I was interested in working with were mainly either heading for the border or in trouble.

I was interested in land tenure and how societies organized themselves around who the land belongs to and what that means and so on. And that was something that took a lot of people to work with and then suddenly the resources dried up.

Q: Indeed. So, what was the alternative plan after this?

PITAS: Well, there really wasn't one. It seems that for my own career I was never a great planner.

Going back a bit, I was in the hospital for a while after this automobile accident and when I was leaving the hospital the discovery was made that I wasn't covered by my father's government insurance, which had been the assumption. While healthcare costs weren't as ridiculous then as it is now, it was still a lot of money. Anyway, so I decided when I got out of the hospital, I would get a job instead of looking for another research gig in Latin America.

USAID/W, Early Assignments - Office of Public Safety and Technical Assistance Bureau/Office of Rural Development, 1973 - 1977

The first place I looked for a job was USAID, (Agency for International Development) and the first thing they offered me was in an organization called the Office for Public Safety.

Q: Oh yes, it was doing work in Vietnam and Latin America.

PITAS: Yes, all over really, Africa, Asia and the Near East as well. The idea was I was going to be the editorial assistant to the FSO who wrote their newsletter and public relations things. That was interesting, a real eye-opener. The building I worked in was called the "police academy" where policemen from all over the USAID world came for classes. This was 1973 – 1974. And I worked there for maybe a year and a half.

Q: Did the big USAID (United States Agency for International Development) public relations nightmare with Dan Mitrion in Uruguay take place during this time?

PITAS: Of course there was a complicated history of U.S. involvement with police forces overseas, even before USAID got involved.

Dan Mitrion had been killed in 1970, before I started with Public Safety, but the shock waves and negative publicity were still going and growing. Ultimately, USAID public safety programs were shut down and the FSOs who were recruited from U.S. police forces were RIF'ed (Reduction in Force). They were in a specialized backstop and with the defunding and closing of all overseas programs the FSOs in that backstop were not needed, hence the reduction in force.

I had very mixed feelings – it certainly made sense to get USAID out of the police training business, but colleagues I liked and respected were losing jobs they had given up U.S. based careers and relocated for. I also had doubts about the whole "torture techniques classes" scandal, having sat in most of the Police Academy classes at one time or another as part of my newsletter gig. The emphasis that I was hearing was investigative techniques and the goal of uncovering facts, which of course does not reliably happen when you torture people.

Meanwhile for me personally the plan to be the newsletter and correspondence editorial assistant morphed into writing the newsletter and other communications because the FSO who rotated in from Vietnam for the actual editor job was not a writer and had no desire to be. He was really pleased when he discovered that I was delighted to do it. There were several women around my age working in the Police Academy building, too, most interestingly a group of Vietnamese women doing translations (including of the newsletter) and one running a little reference center that was a gold mine for me in my newsletter writing. So, interesting and people to hang out with; setting aside the geopolitical mess, it was kind of a fun job until it turned sad and depressing.

There were some personal advantages for me working in the Police Academy building. It was the old "car barn" at the Georgetown end of Key Bridge (which featured in the Exorcist film that had just recently come out) and for a few months living with my parents in Fairfax I could ride into Rosslyn with my dad to his office and walk across Key Bridge to work. There was an FSO Public Safety guy who lived in their neighborhood, and I could ride in with him when my dad was traveling so my commutes were always fun and companionable. Then I got an apartment in Rosslyn and the commute was even easier, just ride my bike across Key Bridge.

Another plus was vastly improving my Spanish, both in work conversation with native speaker training participants and via an early morning Spanish class at FSI that the office sponsored me for. FSI was then in Rosslyn, convenient to go to a 90 minute Spanish class before work. There were only 4 of us in the class with regular FSI teachers and not only did it improve my Spanish but later when IDIs (International Development Interns) and other FSOs with whom I worked were in FSI language training I could empathize more with their experience. It was the same 4 students for the whole 18 months or so: an older FSO getting ready to go into full time Spanish before taking up a post in South America (I didn't realize what a big deal he was, going out to be the DCM), a more junior State FSO positioning himself for onward assignment in a Spanish speaking post and a GS woman who worked in State's Office of Foreign Graves Registration. Very motley crew and great exposure for me to the foreign affairs community beyond Public Safety! When

Public Safety started folding my classmates were very concerned about me, giving me all kinds of leads for my next job. Foreign Graves needed someone to write letters (given that the student from there was always asking for the correct Spanish phrase to say things like "partially consumed by dogs" one can imagine what kind of letters!), the embassy where the DCM to be needed an intern, everybody had an idea for me, and the DCM to be (who kept coming to early morning classes even after starting Spanish full time!) wrote me a lovely letter of recommendation.

Another good thing about the Public Safety experience was that it gave me exposure to writing for the government as opposed to academic writing. Finally, I made connections to people who stayed with USAID that I ran into again over the years.

Q: That's interesting because Public Safety was a program that had good intentions and probably 90% of it was good. There were just some bad things that happened.

PITAS: As they say, road to hell/good intentions. I can remember when I went to work there, and I thought in all my 23-year-old wisdom, why is the U.S. government involved in this? This seems very crazy. And this was me, very unsophisticated. Disaster seemed almost inevitable.

Q: You were someone who wanted to do land reform work in Chile and ended up working in the public safety program. Quite different.

PITAS: Yes, I always wondered if they didn't think I was a little too left wing for Public Safety. As the Public Safety RIF continued, USAID HR told me no worries, I would just transfer over to writing other things for AID. But right about then I got married and my husband and I decided to go live outside Charlottesville in an apple orchard (I got a temporary job working on correspondence and so on at the University of Virginia Law School for a while). Then we went touring around the United States for a year or so, and that was also great fun.

Q: Just touring around?

PITAS: Yes, we had all kinds of adventures. I hadn't seen much of the American west before that.

Q: Cecilia Pitas, the hippy.

PITAS: Well, you might have thought that if you had run into us.

Q: You got hired as a GS officer?

PITAS: Right, going back to my first USG job while in undergraduate school, about 1970, when I had a summer job working for the Department of the Army and I think I was a GS-5. That was just a summer job.

Then, the Office of Public Safety was not a great start in a whole different way.

Finally, after Public Safety, the apple orchard and the time adventuring around out west we decided we should get more serious. Flash forward a couple years and we came back to Washington in 1977. I quickly got a new job working for AID, initially in the Office of Rural Development in the Technical Assistance Bureau, which again was going to involve being an editorial assistant. And again, it really was not a good match for me. They needed someone intermittently, but I've never been good at situations where one sits and waits for something to do. I like to know the big picture and how I fit in and how I can make it work better.

Q: Let me go back again because you had applied to work at AID given your background interested in land reform, so you came intentionally to USAID because you were interested in USAID's mandate. Right?

PITAS: Exactly, my initial application to USAID was because of an interest in the Agency mission, and that resulted in the Public Safety job, no connection at all to my specific academic interests.

The Office of Rural Development seemed promising; the professional staff were various kinds of anthropologists, and I had the jargon from my graduate work. Also, it was a place where I could get a job quickly because I had worked for USAID before and it was a government organization that I thought I could get behind. Unfortunately, they didn't really need a full time person editing and writing. I suggested that some kind of writer/editor pool be set up so that people like me could work wherever there was need, across the Agency, but that didn't fly.

After a few months in Rural Development, I was going around talking to people trying to figure out how I could get transferred to an office where there was something to do, and one of the people I talked with had been in orientation with me several years earlier when I started at Public Safety, at the beginning of that debacle. She by this time worked in HR/Civil Service Personnel. So, I went over and talked to her and said, there must be something that I can do that will keep me busy for eight hours a day, and about a week later she called me and said there was a possible job working in HR's Training Division with the International Development Intern (IDI) program.

USAID/W, Office of Personnel/Human Resources – Multiple Assignments, 1977 - 2017

Although I was happy to be able to move to the Training Division (initially on a temporary detail) it was sad in that the woman who was in charge of the IDI application and selection process was about to leave due to a medical condition. I was able to shift from Rural Development immediately and we were able to overlap for about a week. It looked like a busy office, and I was ecstatic.

The Training Division IDI team was 4 people, Shirley Marino, Director of the IDI (International Development Intern) Program, the application/selection person I replaced and 2 support staff, one of whom was a part time clerical person working only on the selection process. She turned out to be a wonderful ally. It was generally a strong and cohesive team, although I found out later that the person supporting overseas training had hoped to move into the higher graded application/selection job that I ultimately filled so there was some awkwardness on that front.

My first several months were chaotic, trying to learn the steps of the application review and selection processes while also catching up from a backlog of unprocessed files and working on both upcoming interviews and a planned entering class.

I was fortunate to be able to learn the process mainly from Shirley Marino, who was a wonderful supervisor and mentor to me for the 6+ years that we worked together.

After a quick nuts and bolts overview of the process the part time clerk and I dived in, gathering, organizing and logging in a huge backlog of unprocessed and in some cases unopened applications.

Q: And when was this? This was 1975 or so?

PITAS: 1977.

Given the large number of applications and the delay in processing them, I was desperate for operational efficiencies. Right away I ordered pre-printed postcards that said “thank you for your application, we’re now considering people for the class that’s going to start on such and such a date. If you’re not interested, please get back to me”. Unfortunately, that didn’t reduce the numbers by much, but it got me thinking about improving and still streamlining communications with applicants.

After logging in the backlog, we started sorting applications into probable backstop categories, but the existing criteria was vague and incomplete – I think my predecessor had it in her head instead of on paper!

Because I couldn’t find detailed backstop criteria, concurrently with processing the backlog Shirley had me set up meetings with representatives of each backstop to establish improved updated criteria with less overlap and vagueness, these were of course all very interesting people and great contacts. My idea was to test drive the new criteria while sorting the backlog applications and see when the backstop specific interview groups convened if new criteria improved targeting of candidates to the correct backstop. Shirley kept telling me “It will never be this bad again, get through this time and the system will work with you” and that actually turned out to be the case, but the first months were rough.

After that first round of selections, I was able suggest and implement some improvements to the application and selection process, including a suite of form letters and postcards so

that candidates could be advised of the status of their applications throughout the process instead of only at the very end when there was always a lot of other work, so notifications seemed to have been quite delayed. Applicants who were eliminated in the initial review (usually because they didn't meet basic advertised requirements such as U.S. citizenship or a conferred degree) were sent a letter at the end of the that part of the whole process, and so on through each step so that by the interviews only the actual candidates still thought they were in the running, much kinder to everyone. The part time lady, who came in at dawn (this was way before flextime, but Shirley always had her own ideas) could do that very quickly on her own, which was satisfying for her and helped rationalize our workload otherwise.

At that time, I also started to gather and keep data on each application batch, how many received, and how many eliminated at each stage, ending with specific data on the selected and alternate candidates. This allowed us to streamline responses to unhappy non-selected candidates and in many cases their Congressional representatives, a workload that had previously consumed a lot of time and energy with come-back questions and complaints. It was especially challenging to respond to in-house complaints from senior people who had encouraged contractors, PCVs, etc. to apply and were embarrassed when "their candidate" was turned down. It was helpful to have data on selected candidates to make the difference between selected and rejected more concrete and hopefully to improve in-house advice to potential applicants.

Since I was responsible for and in many cases the only one actually doing each stage of sorting up to the finalist list presented to each backstop group, it was essential to have clear, detailed criteria, checklists and good record keeping. This was before any automated spreadsheet technology of course – that would have been so helpful!

Another area to improve was the assessment of candidate written communications skills. The prior process required candidates to submit a statement of interest about working for USAID, but it was not made clear that or how the statement was an evaluation factor; some statements were too long, slapdash and obviously last minute, or omitted completely. We needed to tighten up that process and develop better guidance and written communication evaluation criteria. Also time consuming and not helpful was the process of developing and contacting a list of references who were asked for an evaluation of the candidate's potential to work for USAID. I was able to amend the reference step with a questionnaire steering the reference toward factors that were that relevant to us and allowing a quick clerical review of the reference and assignment of a point value to each one.

Q: Did you have to shortlist first? Did you cull through to decide those you thought should be interviewed? If so, what kind of criteria did you use to do that?

Yes, after the initial application review, rejection of obviously unqualified candidates, and sorting the rest into backstop categories, I did a second review to create a rank ordered list for each backstop using criteria developed with the backstop. Once we got to the point of being able to estimate how many hires we could plan for in each backstop, the

lower ranked candidates in a backstop doing little hiring could be eliminated. That was the second cull – I was basically the decision maker in each case.

Criteria included more specific degree requirements, experience relevancy, certification in the case of controllers and attorneys, etc.

Over the years we tried various approaches to involve the backstop groups in reviewing the rank order list and making the final interview lists but it was time consuming and there was sometimes a tendency to find an interesting candidate among the rejected applications who didn't meet the published criteria, and there was a lot of time consuming back and forth about some of these cases. We also worked with the backstop groups to fine tune the number of interviews needed – there was workload and expense associated with traveling candidates to Washington for an interview as well as IDI Team and interviewer staff time in the actual interviews, so we needed to interview a realistic list of candidates in each category. It was very labor intensive.

Q: So, just to go back again. Who did the interviews? How did you all manage that?

PITAS: When I started with IDI selection, the actual interview process involved really senior FS and GS from each hiring backstop as well as a consistent panel of former mission leaders and input from the IDI Team. We stayed with that general model until the NEP program, fine tuning it periodically as circumstances changed and technology improved.

From the beginning, interviewing was exciting – after the paper deluge of sorting and opening applications and then increasingly in-depth reviews, we got to see and talk to actual human candidates! It was also labor intensive as each candidate had to be issued individual travel orders in advance, then briefed about submitting travel vouchers and security forms, as well as group briefings about the Agency and the IDI program. During interviews all of the IDI team, not just the 2 of us working on applications and selections, were involved.

Each interview day started with a group meeting between the candidates and Shirley (or later me) to discuss the interview day and next steps. Then there were individual interviews with a backstop panel and the individual senior selection people (we started using retired Mission Directors for consistency as keeping a team of currently employed senior interviewers intact for a whole interview cycle was impossible which led to consistency issues). Each technical and senior interviewer had a scoring sheet I developed to evaluate various defined aspects of each candidate's presentation. These were invaluable when there were firmly held differences of opinion.

Q: Did you sit in on any of the interviews or were they just the interviewer and the interviewees?

PITAS: I sat in on a number of interviews every interview cycle, to get a sense of the process and how it all fit together. I also tried to give feedback to interviewers about their

process because while we did a briefing for interviewers about appropriate and inappropriate questions, etc, I needed to be alert to ways to improve that. No one person could have sat in on all the interviews; for one thing during an interview day there were multiple interviews concurrently. Plus, once things got flowing properly, while we were interviewing for one class, we were also receiving applications for two classes out into the future and developing the short lists for the group to be interviewed next. I was not a final hiring decision maker at this stage so I didn't need to attend all interviews for consistency of consideration.

Once the interviews ended there was a final time with the interviewers to develop a rank ordered consensus list of selectees in each backstop. In some instances, the technical people liked a candidate a lot more than the senior interviewers did, or vice versa, and we needed to be sure that the final list was acceptable to all. Fortunately, Shirley Marino handled this stage for the first couple classes I worked on because it could be very sensitive and I learned a lot observing her approaches.

I was also responsible for notifying the selected and non-selected interviewees and referring them on to security and the Foreign Service Personnel (FSP) staffer, in another part of HR, who would follow them through medical and security clearances, salary setting, travel orders to Washington and so on that got each individual actually in the door.

Of course, the most painful step was notifying interviewees who weren't selected. I had developed a form letter with statistical information about the selected candidate pool to send out to non-selected candidates, but we also gave them a number to phone after interviews ended to find out their results.

All in all, interviews were busy and exciting. After the first set I went through, as well as my ideas for process improvement to explore, I also interviewed managers of other government hiring programs (State, OPM and so on) and our interviewers and selected candidates looking for feedback. Although the Foreign Service is exempt from Civil Service hiring regulations, I took a couple OPM classes on CS hiring regulations and practices so that I understood the systems' similarities and differences, and what data we might need to defend challenged hiring decisions.

Q: Many USAID officers have talked about the instrumental role you played throughout their careers. Were you able to spot folks early on whom you thought would move up quickly in the Foreign Service?

PITAS: You know, that's a very interesting question.

There were definitely people that were selected that I thought from the beginning were NOT going to work out and frequently that did turn out to be true. One instance was a person who was shockingly rude to the support person trying to brief him on preparing his travel voucher. He was hired (the rudeness episode not shared with the selecting committee) but didn't last long as an FSO and I was sorry we used a hiring slot on him.

At that point I couldn't figure out how to include "not shockingly rude" as a selection factor.

People that were likely to do super well also stood out. Over time, some who looked like they were going to be stars ended up taking a different path, but I think my personal predictions were pretty good, as were Shirley's and other members of the team. Predictions were a private game that we all played. "Who's going to be a mission director in 10 years?" There were anomalies: I remember a woman who stood out somewhat negatively in her interview. Most candidates came dressed in office attire, but she had on startlingly tight jeans and sweater, and cowboy boots. The interviewers reluctantly kept her on the selection list because she was outstanding, with the caveat that someone had to talk to her about her self-presentation. I drew the short straw on that and actually it was surprisingly less awkward than I expected and there was some rational reason for her ensemble that I don't remember, lost luggage/no money maybe? Anyway, she actually retired as an assistant administration for a regional bureau and was Mission Director several places. I thought she had wonderful energy and was frequently interestingly dressed.

Q: And were communication skills an important part of this? If someone is effective in an interview process, it's a huge advantage.

PITAS: Exactly – in an in-person interview communications skills are critical and also a good predictor of success for an organization like USAID that values consensus development and dialog. Because foreign language skills are so important overseas, we tried to give additional points for that, although it was logistically tricky. Sometimes we held actual language tests and sometimes just a conversation with a native speaker for those self-appraising in French or Spanish. Having a language test usually meant staying for a second interview day and of course there was added expense.

Q: You got some extra points if you spoke a language.

PITAS: Yes, that was the idea, one way or another.

Self-appraisal didn't work because people tended to be optimistic about their abilities but as I recall there was a small number of points for exposure based on self-appraisal and more points if we could test. There was always some controversy; should there be points for any language or only "AID-useful" languages? And which ARE AID-useful languages? We've both seen that list shift dramatically over the years! As I recall the outcome for a long while was to rely on the assumption that any language learning made one more likely to be successful at other languages (and this is actually validated by research into adult learning). We also looked into using the Modern Language Aptitude Test (MLAT) but there was some evidence of cultural bias in the design at the time, so we decided against using it for selection.

Q: Since it's talked about so much in the news now, can I ask the degree to which diversity was a factor? How specifically did you all think about that when you were recruiting?

PITAS: There is another interesting and important question.

From my beginning with the IDI program I was concerned about looking at the IDI class pictures in Shirley's office, almost all white men! Evidently my predecessor had been tasked with looking at ways to incorporate more diversity but never progressed to actual procedures. In theory, before my time there was a mechanism to give bonus points to candidates who would increase the diversity of the service, but I couldn't find any record of how or even if that was done.

Anyway, at that point (late '70s) both racial/ethnic and gender diversity were terribly lacking in the FS generally and IDI classes.

I can remember sitting in a meeting very shortly after I started working with the IDI program about various policy issues including starting salaries for IDIs. One discussion thread was literally "we need to find a way to pay these guys more because they have families to support", and I remember saying surely we also hire women who might have families to support, so maybe drop the "guys" nomenclature? I don't remember the outcome of the specific meeting, but it gave me a bit of insight into the issues. I remember being horrified to learn that there had been an FS practice of requiring women to resign from the FS if they married that had been challenged at State and formally renounced only a few years earlier, but there were lingering impacts.

So I was looking for ideas, talking them over with colleagues. I remember working with hiring backstops to find women to include in the interview process. There basically were no retired women former mission directors for our senior selection team!

I found out that even then the Peace Corps had many more women volunteers than we were seeing among our applicants so that was a good place to look for women applicants. Since many returning PCVs were between undergrad and graduate school, there was lag time before they were competitive IDI candidates, but they were an accessible group to tap into. I started participating in briefings for returning PCVs, often with a former PCV USAID Civil Service employee from the Training Division. We gradually started seeing more women apply and the IDI class started including more women, but it seemed a painfully slow process.

Beyond gender, to start with I got a list of Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) and flagged candidates that had attended them, but it turned out we weren't getting a lot of applicants from HBCUs in the first place. I met with the HR recruitment office, which at the time mainly was focused on GS support staff recruitment, and they let me join at upcoming events, but those tended to be focused on local area high schools, some with lots of diversity but it would take a long time to produce an actual IDI applicant from a high school student. I also was able to go along on some of their

scheduled visits to HBCUs but discovered there was no mechanism to set up in advance with the departments I was most interested in and I mainly gained a greater appreciation of the difficulties of recruiting at universities (which was good because subsequently when I was managing IDI/NEP recruitment we did a lot of work with universities).

Another idea I had early on was to identify USAID FSOs who had attended HBCUs and other minority serving institutions and send them on recruitment trips to universities, but again the pool of possible in-house recruiters was depressingly tiny and funding was going to be complicated.

Meanwhile, earlier on in my tenure there, the Training Division contracted with an expert – I wasn't involved in any of that until he showed up so don't know where from, etc. – who was going to look at our system and candidate pool and tell me how to make our product more diverse. We spent two weeks together, looked at the current pool of applicants to identify candidates for special attention, and in the end it wasn't as useful as I had hoped. He felt we needed to hire someone who wasn't me, basically him, and expand targeted recruitment efforts, so we did refer him to the HR recruitment office. He also suggested that we drop emphasis on overseas experience, graduate degrees and foreign language, and not require FSOs to serve overseas. None of these ideas were well received in his final report and I remember being quite discouraged. Interestingly, years later we got very similar recommendations from other consultants hired to improve diversity in the applicant pool.

Around that time that I started doing mass mailings to HBCUs and other minority serving institutions with IDI brochures, our planned application and decision schedule and a request for a contact in their student placement office, because I continued to suspect that the difficulty in identifying candidates who would increase FS diversity (except for women, which at the time were woefully under-represented and whom we needed to encourage somehow to apply also) was a supply-end problem. I also started researching and communicating with graduate programs that might increase our diversity, and met with my earlier contacts at State, OPM, etc., to see what they were doing. Remember, though, this was very early in the general push to diversify government service, and I couldn't find any really robust programs to tag on to.

All fun and stimulating but not my core job which was also very busy!

Fortunately, beyond my little project of increasing the supply of more diverse applicants, there was a new-ish federal office looking at equal opportunity issues in the federal government, and I went and talked to them, and then finally a similar office was established in USAID that we were able to partner with, adding diversity to briefings for interview panels and so on. Later we also added a representative of the new equal opportunity program office to our application review process. I can't remember how that then folded into the process but I know when we finalized interview lists we tried to make sure that we interviewed enough candidates to pick up some of the identified diverse applicants, somewhat like a FS promotion process initiative I recall that allowed

adding a set number of promotions to the list if there were promotion eligible officers that would increase the diversity at the higher rank.

Q: But you began to more explicitly factor it in to try to get a more diverse workforce?

PITAS: Yes, having a more diverse entry class must have been an IDI program concern before I got there, based on the tasking of my predecessor to come up with a plan, so that was an on-going issue.

Really, even after gender diversity in our entry FS classes was well-established, over-all diversity remained a challenge. I don't know about now, but I know there are some creative programs I wish we had been able to implement much earlier. It's very hard, I think, not to want to replicate yourself. On some very deep level we all think somebody like us would be the most wonderful choice.

Q: So, how long did you work for Shirley?

PITAS: I worked for Shirley from 1977 until she retired in about 1982, first on a 4 day a week part time appointment and then full time. As the recruitment and selection activities became more tightly organized, I was able to do more with IDI Washington on-the-job training, overseas assignment decisions, the off-site exercise part of orientation, and overseas training while keeping my hand in on selection activities. The IDI team also had some fortunate personnel shifts with the addition of a new support person who worked on both selection and training and then a junior GS person focusing on day-to-day selection as I had initially. Meanwhile there were other shifts in the Training Division. The division chief when I started was sort of a creative entrepreneur type, very open to consolidating activities in TD that were not traditionally training responsibilities, including IDI recruitment and selection. With his retirement an FSO rotated in who decided to divest TD of everything that didn't meet his own much narrower definition of training, including IDI recruitment and selection, and identifying and tracking overseas assignments. About this same time HR expanded the existing standalone recruitment office, that had previously focused exclusively on Civil Service hiring and 2 political appointees were assigned to run it.

Q: So, this would have been 1980 or 1981, something like that?

PITAS: Let's see, it was when Reagan was president, late enough in his first term for political appointments to have worked their way down to USAID and before '83, so probably more like mid-1982. I was offered the opportunity to move with IDI recruitment and selection to the recruitment office, but I had a concern with the direction of the leadership, in part because I kept hearing things like "we need to hire the right kind of person," and it appeared to me the right kind of a person might be an ideological match.

Q: Right. Now, at the same time they brought in two people from outside for what has been called the Senior Management Group; one was Judy Ross, but I don't recall the

name of the other woman. You're saying they also brought in two people from outside to head up general recruitment as well?

PITAS: Yes, Judy Ross started in the revamped recruitment activity and fairly quickly moved to the Senior Management Group. I can't recall the second person's name (Virginia something, like Corsi?). Anyway, I was enjoying my work beyond just recruitment and selection and didn't think that office would be a good match for me so the junior selection person and one support person from the old IDI team moved with recruitment and selection to the new recruitment office. I stayed in TD running IDI entry on duty orientation and other bits and pieces. That was fine for a very little while, but then it was repetitive.

By then the FS Act of 1981 was in place and required every FS agency to implement a career development program. USAID considered a variety of approaches; I recall giving a briefing on the IDI program and the orientation activity I was running at the time and someone said that maybe that WAS enough FS career development? I said not really, IDI entry on duty classroom orientation is an introduction, a "where are the bathrooms" – surely career development should be much more longitudinal and comprehensive than that?

Meanwhile the Office of Career Development (CD) was established in HR's Foreign Service Personnel (FSP) Division with 4 or 5 FS-01s recruited after overseas postings to set up a career development unit**.** The FS performance evaluation and promotion process was also folded into the CD team, supervised by the lead career development FSO, with two or three FS secretaries and a deputy FS Executive Officer as well as some GS support staff.

Meanwhile in the fall of 1983 I was in the TD managing IDI orientation and some residual IDI overseas training activities. Two of the FS CDOs came to talk to me about that function and were, I think, a bit appalled to be inheriting most of the IDI program. Complicating matters, I was about to go on maternity leave so there was a real life deadline for action and an obvious break; when I went on leave IDI Orientation would be managed in TD but nothing after that. Ultimately it was suggested that I move with the management of the IDI program over to the new Career Development team. I was enthusiastic, I remember I said "I can be there Monday!". At this time I was enormously pregnant, and they said, well maybe after the baby would be better. The baby turned up in December 1983 and in March of 1984 I moved over to manage the IDI program.

Q: To take the Shirley Marino position basically.

PITAS: Well, sort of, a reduced and expanded Shirley Marino position with no supervision of staff, recruitment/selection or entry on duty orientation responsibility but with an additional focus on IDI promotion consideration, and onward, post-IDI assignments. The 4 or 5 person IDI team from the '70s and early '80s was completely dispersed, recruitment and selection were now in the new Office of Recruitment and

classroom Orientation stayed in the TD. The offsite training component of Orientation (which I had been running and had come to really dislike) also disappeared at this point.

In her final official IDI appearance Shirley, God love her, returned from retirement and filled in for me running IDI orientation activities and shepherding the IDI files and activities as they moved physically and organizationally to Foreign Service Personnel, while I was off with the new baby.
Q: Let me ask you just another question on career development because one of the things that AID did during this period was academic training. Folks could be selected to go off to a university for a year.

PITAS: Yes, sometimes called Long Term Training (LTT). USAID had several such programs; when I joined the Training Division in 1977 there were various academic training opportunities, all managed by a senior GS and a support person. USAID participants (I only know of FSOs but maybe there were also GS employees participating?) went to a variety of graduate programs, including Cornell for an agricultural focus and public health and population studies at Johns Hopkins. Others were at Harvard, MIT, and Stanford. It was an interesting concept, partly based on the idea that current FSOs already knew the USAID landscape and could have skills updated or retooled to serve evolving program directions and fit in immediately to fill overseas needs. I don't know if other government agencies had comparable activities. As with many government sponsored training programs the trick was to get the right people assigned at the right career stage and then get them back where they were needed most. Sometimes this worked brilliantly.

Q: Although it all ultimately ended.

PITAS: Yes. I'm not sure exactly when; I know it was after I moved to FSP in 1984. Since part of the purpose of Long Term Training (LTT) was to re-tool existing staff in new or higher priority technical areas, as IDI technical hiring was more closely matched with evolving workforce needs and these new technical officers moved up organizationally there was less need for LTT. There were also some real downsides as the program evolved; the useful career window for training FSOs was fairly short since retirement eligibility began at age 50 – there were some LTT participants who took their new degrees almost immediately into non-USAID work or who for various reasons were not afterwards deployed overseas as intended. Also, in cycles where there were no really first rate LTT applicants the tendency was to assign someone less ideal anyway in order to not let the program lapse, and in some instances such graduates were not readily placeable in the field. As always, the devil was in these implementation details. After LTT outside government ended there were programs at what was then the DOD War College and State's Senior Seminar.

Q: Right. And that's all AID does now is the training at the National Defense University/War College. They don't do any of the university programs. Were they thought of as part of the career development scheme or was it all more accidental and dependent on entrepreneurial employees seeking the opportunities?

PITAS: Long Term Training continued to be administered in TD after the Career Development program was established in response to the FS Act but CDOs became increasingly involved in LTT including recruiting and selecting applicants and post training assignments.

In 1984 the FS career development office had only been in existence for six or eight months, probably not even a year, when I arrived post-baby. At that point CDOs sat on deliberative groups dealing with LTT, as did the target backstops (e.g. Health/Pop for LTT academic programs intended to produce candidates to work in Health). Since my personal portfolio was junior officers, I was not involved in LTT selections at that point, other than as an observer (I was very keen to see everything that was going on in the Career Development program).

Q: Okay. Sorry to interrupt. So, then in 1984 you were running the IDI program?

PITAS: When I moved over to Foreign Service Personnel from TD, I was running the post Orientation IDI program which included Washington on the job training, language training, overseas placement and training. At this point it was largely a monitoring and problem-solving function.

I was interested in getting more involved in other aspects of the IDI program, for example the IDI promotion process; at that point most IDIs were eligible for 2 promotions at their one- and two-year anniversaries as FSOs. Some missteps with individual promotions had recently come to my attention and I wanted to insert more quality control without offending the responsible staffer in another part of FS Personnel – easier said than done!

I also wanted to look closely at initial and second overseas assignments to be able to loop back and see what we could improve in hiring and Washington training to get ready for the most important next steps in the field.

Q: Were you able to bring in very many interns during that period? International Development Interns?

PITAS: Yes, IDI hiring continued, although the Reagan years were not big hiring years for USAID in general and the shift of IDI recruitment and selection from Training Division to a standalone office resulted initially in slower recruitment and selection for whatever reason. Variations in hiring numbers had always been a feature of the IDI program as needs evolved. While I was managing recruitment and selection scheduled classes were sometimes delayed and hiring freezes (a frequent by-product of administration changes or budget shortfalls) occurred periodically.

Earlier during the Shirley Marino era, we tried to anticipate and schedule classes to enter prior to potential freezes. I can remember sitting down one New Year's Eve and calling all the candidates in process for a February start date to advise them that there was an anticipated hiring freeze late in January (after a new administration began) and that we

would swear in anyone who could get to us before that, otherwise they would be rolled over to the next start date, which was at that point not scheduled at all. It must have been so upsetting to be on the receiving end of those calls!

I remember Shirley got her hand slapped afterwards, but she had gotten advance permission to continue the class for anyone who happened to enter early, and she wasn't the best person to pick if you were going to slap a hand. In the end there was a reduced class that beat that freeze and then a fairly long hiatus before the next class

Since you knew her, I have to tell this Shirley story. The head of the Commodity Management Office was a big blustery man. At one point he and Shirley had been butting heads because Commodity Management (which was then a separate backstop from Contracts Officers) wanted to bring in IDIs because it was a way to hire, FSOs but didn't want to do any of the IDI linked classroom and on the job training in Washington. Shirley's position was "no training/no IDISs, if they come in with IDI on their t-shirt, I will train them and then you will get them to train in Commodity Management after a while." So that went back and forth unproductively and finally there was a big show-down meeting. I was thrilled to be there.

After a bit of restating their opposing positions, finally, the Commodity Management guy stands and says—to Shirley, mind you—"young lady, I was a colonel in the Marine Corps, and I'm not used to being told no!" and Shirley stands and says, "I was a sergeant major in the Marine Corps, and I've told more colonels no than you've had hot dinners".

So, aghast pause, then he said "your way doesn't sound all bad, let's just go ahead". We did keep a very keen eye on training in that backstop, and actually several who entered as Commodity Management IDIs in that era went on to be Program Officers and at least a couple were ultimately Mission Directors. Training works, although Commodity Management might have seen this kind of movement as unwanted attrition from their backstop.

Q: That's a wonderful story.

PITAS: That was such a Shirley thing. Afterwards I said, I was so happy I was there, thank you for letting me come to the meeting. Shirley said, you know what did it? And I said when he stood up. Because he was a huge tall guy and he stood up and walked much too close to us, being intimidating. But of course, Shirley was a tall stately woman, so she stood up too. I was probably cringing under the table. It was great. Anyway, that's very off track.

So yes, there were years when we didn't manage to hire as many IDIs as hoped and sometimes no hiring at all, but we always wanted to keep the recruitment and selection pipeline going so that when we got the go-ahead to hire we could bring people in without too much delay. Once I moved over to Career Development my involvement in recruitment and selection dropped off a lot for a while, although ultimately I was back sitting on IDI interview panels. I still did recruiting, mainly local trips (having a new

baby at home) and made selected presentations to IDI orientation classes; there continued to be IDI class entries, although I don't remember numbers.

Q: And where did you do the recruiting trips, was that to universities?

PITAS: To universities, to returning Peace Corps volunteer conventions, to technical conventions, especially in the health pop area, which was booming at that point. There was a Peace Corps outplacement training for returned volunteers and for a long time I went over and talked to groups about USAID opportunities. The Office of Personnel Management (OPM) had a newish program, what was then called the Presidential Management Intern Program (now Presidential Management Fellows) and that was one of the government hiring programs I had studied back when I was looking at ways to refine the IDI recruitment and selection program – it was new then. I thought that would be a great way to get people into the Foreign Service who had terrific credentials and wanted a public service career.

Q: So, did that start under your watch in USAID? Because USAID ended up recruiting some of its very best officers through the PMI (Presidential Management Intern) program.

PITAS: It was a very interesting process. My idea, going back to when I was working on IDI recruitment and selection was "we'll just steal the individual Presidential Management Interns we want to be IDIs. Let OPM recruit and select them and we'll cherry pick the ones we want for the Foreign Service." Hopefully I put it much more diplomatically.

OPM said their establishing legislation didn't allow that (and I checked, it truly didn't, unfortunately), PMI candidates at that time had to be hired linked to a Civil Service career and there had to be a specific Civil Service position set aside for them by the selecting agency; this was monitored carefully by OPM (they are ace monitors).

My idea was that USAID would set aside a FS hiring position in lieu of a Civil Service position, but it really was a non-starter because the establishing legislation specified Civil Service. Too bad because FS positions were, at the time, were monopoly money anyway—

Q: In Washington.

PITAS: Right. Overseas training positions used for IDIs came from a separate pot and were largely additive to mission numbers in that era, although they eventually had to be approved by State and that got harder and harder over the years, to the point that the concept of an additive position for a trainee disappeared and hiring at a truly junior level for new FSOs was increasingly untenable.

Anyway, back to my bright idea to use PMIs as IDIs, basically it didn't work out as simply as I envisioned (so frequently the case). But in my interactions with OPM in the

late ’70s I said many times how much I admired the way they were finding these people and hiring them and so many of them were just great. OPM suggested initially that I come work there (no) or at least help with the interviews. They already, as a new program, had a mechanism to use for interviewing staff from agencies hiring PMIs. Anyway, for years and years I spent a week or so a year serving on PMI interview panels and I saw that as an IDI recruitment activity.

Q: So, were you identifying some candidates you wanted to then encourage to come to USAID?

PITAS: Sure, informally. Panels included representatives from various agencies that used PMIs – it was interesting to meet some of these people! We weren’t supposed to be there recruiting per sea, but as we did the interviews, we would introduce ourselves with a few sentences about our own agency and there were always candidates who lit up a bit at the mention of USAID. I also passed names to offices with civil service openings which were considering PMIs and my HR colleagues in Civil Service Personnel who worked with PMI hiring.

Q: So, they then came into GS positions but many of them then converted to the Foreign Service afterwards through the regular process?

PITAS: I don’t know the percentage entering as PMI/PMF that actually converted to FS; it would be interesting to know, wouldn’t it? Over the years there were a variety of “regular processes” related to FS entry for Civil Service USAID employees, because for many years the party line was that the IDI program was the only way into the USAID FS.

But yes, there were enough PMI to FS conversions to justify my interviewing time for sure. We explored and piloted a number of different PMI to FS mechanisms; one FSP boss, who didn’t approve, called it “Cecilia’s back door into the Foreign Service”. Supposed to be derogatory, but really, I go in back doors all the time, what’s wrong with the back door? From my perspective, once a PMI finished their training years in USAID as a GS person, they were a known quantity. We could have insisted they apply as IDIs, but by that time most would be taking an initial salary cut to come in as IDIs and it seemed pointless.

So, over the years there were a variety of mechanisms to move PMI “graduates” into the FS. At various times there were other CS to FS conversions, both one off and programs I was involved in establishing where people that were in certain CS categories could apply to convert to FS overseas positions, usually ones that had gone unfilled in the FS assignment process.

To close the loop on my personal involvement with the PMI/PMF program, by the early 1990s when I had moved up to the Career Development Office branch chief, the person who managed USAID’s involvement with the PMI program was one of the people I supervised; this allowed much more cross fertilization between the PMI program and various FS opportunities, which continued for a while into the early 2000s. However,

Presidential Management Fellows could be hired at much higher CS levels than PMIs, tended to be more specialized at first anyway, and there seemed to be less interest in movement into the FS by then.

Q: I know of a few that were very successful, and I was wondering if you could cite a couple of names?

PITAS: Oh well, it'll come to me tonight.

Q: When you edit you can stick them in.

PITAS: Hopefully.

Q: But I know people like Ann Aarnes, Robert Clay, and Earl Lawrence are examples.

PITAS: See, you should be doing this not me!

Well, Nancy McKay, who just died, was another impressive CS to FS conversion. Connie Carrino, Jennifer Adams, both Health Officers. Lots of Health Officers since there were so many strong technical people in the health field working in CS jobs and lots of field demand for more senior technical FSOs.

Unrelated to the PMI program, there was also a one-time program in maybe the late '80s thought up by Hank Merrill, an FSO who at the time was in charge of the Recruitment and Selection Office (which didn't stay a political appointment position for long). He had been approached by a couple junior Civil Service people with strong academic credentials who were working in Civil Service support positions because that was the way they could find into USAID, who had not been successful IDI candidates because their work experience was not competitive. He thought moving them into the FS would be great (and it was a good idea). There was an announcement that CS support staff with certain credentials could apply to convert to FS and join the next IDI class, be placed overseas for training, etc. I got involved very late in that activity and there were some terribly painful miscommunications with candidates that should have been avoided. For example, there was an assumption in the recruitment office that the selected candidates would convert to FS at the same level as entering IDIs but that wasn't possible under existing OPM regulations; instead their CS support salary was matched, which meant that instead of the salary increase they anticipated they came in at a significantly lower dollar level than outside hire IDIs and in some instances at a lower FS class. That was a big disappointment and morale problem, unfortunately, and the pilot wasn't repeated. There were maybe a half dozen CS to FS conversions in that one pilot program, most of whom had exemplary FS careers.

And of course not all GS to FS conversions were PMI/PMFs.

Q: That's interesting because I've heard people say that whoever was the director or the Office of Human Resources (HR) made a difference, particularly in the issue of Civil Service to Foreign Service conversion.

PITAS: Oh absolutely.

Q: That some directors of HR were very supportive of it and promoted it and others were very resistant to that. Is that correct?

PITAS: Yes, that was my experience too.

Sorry, we've gotten a bit away from chronological order!

Q: No, that's fine because we can go ahead, but what position were you in? Career development?

Right, to recap chronologically, I moved from the Training Division to FS Personnel Division in 1984, bringing IDI program management with me. As it turned out there was less FS hiring in the mid 1980s, and at the same time the FS Career Development program was in the very early stages. There were 4 FS-01s in a variety of backstops, 3 from USAID FS careers mainly overseas in SE Asia including in Vietnam and Laos. There was also a CS woman who had been an FS Staffer for most of her career, handling the nuts and bolts of personnel actions like transfers, promotions, etc. I think the idea was that she would be the link between FS operations/staffing and the newer and mainly FS staffed career development program. There was also a psychiatric social worker, Len Cohen, who was to be a link with State/MED, and also a first line person for negative personnel outcomes, family issues and so on. These were all new roles in USAID HR. My IDI management role was actually the most traditional HR job.

It turned out to be a wonderful and exciting opportunity for me, a chance to learn about FS careers over time instead of just at their beginnings, and get into the weeds on things like the FS assignments, evaluation and promotion systems.

There were lots of new things coming out of the FS Act of 1982, including the FS tenure system, commissioning and low ranking and selection out as part of the evaluation process. My FS colleagues had years of experience and had many FS contacts at the mid and senior levels, while most of my contacts had come in as IDIs over the last 6 years, mostly still junior people.

However, my FS colleagues were familiar with the old order; all the FS Act driven changes were new things for them too, which I didn't realize at first – I thought I was the only one that didn't know anything, rather than just the newest person in a new program. To help prepare us there were some formal training opportunities, including a weeklong counseling workshop for the Career Development team, and I was very happy to be there.

With the slowdown in FS hiring, and the natural movement of IDIs through and out of the program, I soon felt I was under-utilized. Meanwhile the FS CDOs were figuring out what size client load made sense in this new function. At that point no one knew what client demand and interest would be like, but the plan was to focus on assignments, career progression and the somewhat amorphous category of individual issues.

With me feeling under-employed and the FS CDOs in some cases with a very large client load it was decided that I should pick up a non-IDI group of FSOs. Since none of the FS CDOs had a particular background or interest in the Health/Population (as it was then) backstop, at first the plan was for me to understudy as the CDO for that backstop, working with one of the FS CDOs, but quickly other activities picked up for him and I was able to strike out on my own with my first backstop.

Q: Yeah. So, how did you go about doing that?

PITAS: I leaned hard on familiar tools from the beginning of my IDI selection work. For example, I did a lot of mass mailings (remember, no email, etc., these were hard copy letters in envelopes; the guy who picked up our inner agency mail came to see who I was and what I was doing because there was so much mail from me!). I wrote to all the senior Foreign Service and FS-01s Health/Pop Officers and said, "I hope you'll help me learn to do this CDO job. You obviously are somebody who knows how to be successful in the FS". And people were very generous with their thoughts.

To encourage face to face contacts, I went to all the Washington based offices with FSOs in my area of responsibility to meet with and interview them, developing an interview worksheet so I could focus on the most accessible career development issues. I also urged overseas Health Officers to come see me when they were in Washington.

My other "getting to know you" effort was to read the FS evaluation files for each Health Officer – eval files were kept in a secure room around the corner from my office in SA-1 and I tried to read 3 or 4 a day and make notes to get to know my client pool.

As I added different backstops throughout my CDO career these approaches continued to be helpful.

Q: So, you became the CDO for the Health Officers. So, that involves recruitment but then also placements, transfers, all that?

PITAS: Actually, by then IDI recruitment and selection responsibility was based in the new recruitment office, with 2 former IDI team members managing it, and outside hiring was way down, so I had little or no involvement in recruitment during this period except for a few trips to technical conferences. This freed me up to concentrate on the remaining IDI program trainees and my new CDO role with Health Officers.

I met with Health backstop leadership, the regional bureaus and missions to learn about health/pop programs worldwide. Within HR, the FSP Staffing Branch did all the

processing of employee actions around travel, promotion, etc. and managed the assignment process, in which I was very interested, since assignments struck me as an accessible and important component of FS career development. I still think that is the case!

Q: And at this point CDOs generally were involved in FS assignments?

PITAS: Right. Of course, the other CDOs were FS with years of personal experience with the assignments and evaluation functions. It was all new and interesting to me. I spent time with the woman in the FS Staffing Branch who managed the logistics of the assignment process. She was very helpful and patient and gave me little tasks to help her and familiarize myself with the mechanics of the process.

Career Development Officers (including me!) did some outreach to bidding employees and missions/bureaus with openings in "our" backstops and participated in the assignment meetings to negotiate and finalize assignments. Since I didn't at that point know everybody in my backstop, I created a simple tracking system to identify "my bidders" and reach out to them at the beginning of the assignment process so that I could focus on eligible bidders first.

Q: So, did you help them with their bidding?

PITAS: Yes, that was a bigger and bigger part of my job over the years as I evolved into a more experienced CDO after being on the periphery of the first round of assignments after I moved to Career Development. I found the assignments process fascinating, both the mechanics and all of the staffing work to set up and manage the process (remember there was no email, no spreadsheet programs, etc., at that point so everything was hand compiled), all the different possible outcomes, and all the fact finding, negotiating and emotional turmoil on the bidders' side. That first year I just tried to be a resource for IDI first time bidders as well as for my colleagues who were having new bidder IDIs join their client pool.

Once I got more deeply involved with my own Health Officers, I continued to focus heavily on the assignment process, as one of the places where I thought FSOs could really have input into their career: researching, lobbying and bidding strategically on the optimal next step. I thought there was sometimes too much focus on a conventionally desirable post, and less attention to a full career span – when would an individual FSO need a high school post to accommodate family, and when and where could they build experience and credentials in less popular posts to be positioned for a bigger job in a more desired post later on? One of the fun things about Health Officers was that as well as assignment concern issues shared by all FSOs (tandem assignments, high schools, accessibility to the U.S. or to health care, language skills, etc), some Health Officers were particularly interested in evolving public health issues like epidemics, sanitation issues, etc. I can remember someone telling me that they had missed Green Monkey Disease but were determined to be assigned next in a post with what came to be called HIV. We didn't know how many chances there would be in that regard, tragically.

Right around then I became especially interested and concerned about the distribution of Health Officers globally – for example, in Zimbabwe when the beginnings of the HIV epidemic in Africa was just blazing up the inter-African highway and one heard more about HIV orphans, homeless children and terrible teacher shortages because of HIV deaths of parents and teachers, USAID had no Health Officer in Zimbabwe. There was a health program, but no Health Officer assigned to the post and limited support regionally. And yet Egypt, admittedly a huge important USAID health program, had multiple FS Health Officers, even though there were many more in-country resources for doing the work of the Health Office, including FSNs and contract hires. This was when I started wondering how assignments could be prioritized to better address USAID needs as well as employee and regional interests.

I did some proselytizing at USAID health conferences, urging bidders to be alert for the positions and missions that would allow them to work on a range of different types of technical programs and promised to focus on the right match for FS families that needed an overseas high school after a series of less popular but important posts.

As it turns out the assignment process would be important to my work for the rest of my time in USAID; while the assignments/bidding process evolved over the years with various refinements and improvements as well as some major glitches and unnecessary complications so while we talk about 'the" bidding process it was actually many different systems that evolved over time. I was personally involved in drafting various regulations and procedures around assignments over the years and in the 2000s when I was the Special Programs branch chief in the combined FS/CS FS Personnel Division my branch managed the assignments process as it was then.

One interesting individual employee issue related to assignments is tandem couples (couples where both spouses are FSOs). With more and more women in the FS, there were naturally more tandems and of course they were critically interested in having their assignment cycles in sync and being assigned the same place. I was surprised at how little empathy there was at that point in HR for tandem couples, even among my FS colleagues – it made quite an impression on me when someone remarked that there was resentment "because they are both getting salaries". My thought was, of course, they are both filling and performing jobs, no? Why wouldn't they both get salaries?

On a related front I poked around and figured out an illustrative cost savings to USAID for a tandem couple: only one housing unit, only one family to travel to post, only one set of children to be educated, and so on. This aspect hadn't gotten attention before, and was quite striking.

So to learn about tandems generally, I started with how many tandems we actually had in the FS, including both couples with 2 USAID FSOs, and those where one USAID FSO was married to a FSO from another U.S. foreign affairs agency. No one was keeping track of any of that. I got my colleagues to refer any of their clients they knew were part of a tandem for an informational interview and tried to figure out how USAID could

facilitate assignments (because once the tandem was split between 2 assignments all cost savings were negated, and cost savings was the peg I was hanging the "this is a good thing" argument on).

I remained interested in tandems throughout my career and believe we saw real progress toward better utilizing and accommodating these employees.
Q: I've heard several people refer to your help in securing tandem assignments, whether both work for USAID or if one is with USAID and the other another agency. How did you go about trying to manage that for people? Obviously, it took a lot of reaching out to other agencies as well.

PITAS: Tandem assignments are an example of an issue that evolved a lot during my career. I was aware very early on of the former FS policy of requiring the resignation of any woman officer who was married after joining the service, which had been eliminated around 1968, fairly recently at that point.

My first interaction with the tandem issue came when I was doing IDI selection, and we had two people interviewing as program/project development candidates who in the morning interviewed Shirley and I disclosed that they were a married couple. Afterwards Shirley said we would not be able to hire both, but they both interviewed brilliantly so I knew they would both be selected. She told me to figure it out. First, I talked with my contact in the General Counsel's office, and they of course cautioned against discrimination on the basis of marital status. In reviewing the couples' files, I noticed that one had public health exposure as a PCV, as well as graduate courses in international public health as part of the graduate degree. That particular hiring cycle we were not recruiting for Health Officers, but I met with the health leadership, and they agreed to do Washington based training targeting overseas assignment for this IDI in the health backstop without interviewing. I then called the candidate and explained that while we could select and train both of them as program/project development officers the chances of assignment together were practically nil since most posts did not have more than one junior program/PDO option. Instead of two Program/PDO selections I offered the Health Officer option which was enthusiastically accepted, and it all worked out beautifully (and both had long stellar USAID careers).

Once I moved over to FSP Career Development I discovered lots more tandems and as mentioned earlier noticed a marked lack of enthusiasm for tandems among both the CS staffers and the FS CDOs.

In fact, one of my early research and statistical efforts as a CDO was identifying who exactly among the FS workforce was part of a tandem, looking at tandem couples and figuring out where they had been and were currently assigned. As it turned out, the chances of assignment to a hard to fill/high differential/ high difficulty post as part of a tandem couple were exponentially higher than for FSOs not part of a tandem couple. So, places where people were pushing and shoving to get in there might not have two positions available. But places like Liberia and Haiti…

Q: Yes. The Africa Bureau thrived on tandem couples for a while when recruitment was difficult.

PITAS: Exactly. So that was very interesting if not something that turned all my colleagues into cheerleaders for tandems.

When I was trying to compile a reliable list of tandems to run my statistics, I had sent a form letter to all EXOs and AMSs asking for help in identifying tandems at their post. Being new to the whole game I hadn't anticipated 2 agency tandems (USAID/State, USAID/Ag, etc). When I started focusing on FS assignments, I discovered that 2 agency tandems brought a new set of issues entirely than within USAID tandems.

Following on my initial foray into information gathering about tandems (you can see by now that my supervisor was indulgent of my interests!) I sent a form letter to all the USAID tandems asking about assignment and other tandem related career issues they had encountered to help me understand how I could perhaps assist them. I got a big response (and at this point supervisory concern began to surface – was I raising expectations I wouldn't be able to meet? A legitimate worry!). I also started hearing from tandems that were not associated with USAID, State/State and so on).

I got back to all my "tandem correspondents", with a form letter to those with a USAID member saying would you mind getting in touch with me when you're in Washington so we can talk about what being a tandem has meant in your career, and would you fill out this form about what your situation is and so on? I had always found that having data was a powerful tool!

There wasn't much I could do for a tandem couple neither of whom worked for USAID, although I did say I would be delighted to meet with their HR folks if invited. I also found out that the Defense Department had a working group that looked at tandem assignments within Defense and was invited to attend some of their meetings, which was very informative. Later when we had a USAID/Defense attaché tandem I knew just where to call!

For USAID/other agency tandems I sent a letter to the other agency saying that we had a common denominator and suggesting that we team up when assignments came up for our shared couple. Responses varied a lot; I remember State and Commerce said they would let me know where they had assigned their person and USAID could try to make it work, not exactly what I was hoping for! In one instance the State person had been assigned to Paris or Geneva, where there was no USAID presence. In the end in that case we were able to work out a detail for the USAID person to an international organization based in the same city that had lots of USAID business, and that model was applied in other cases later. So things could be worked out but it was enormously time consuming.

When USAID assignments time came my suggestion to tandems that they identify themselves and their tandem partner on their bid form produced yet more tandem names. The first assignments cycle after I came to FSP I had volunteered to annotate the "real

CDOs" assignments agendas (a data print out that showed positions and bidders) with information that I thought might be helpful, and I included tandem status as well as who was a first time IDI graduate bidder and other stuff I thought they might not know. There were a few snide remarks in staff meetings but in general I thought my efforts were appreciated, at least the boss didn't tell me to knock it off!

Later on when I had my "own backstop(s)" I did find that placing tandems was an increased workload but that advance planning helped. For USAID/other agency tandems that involved finding out the other agency's assignment schedules and contacting the action person for each non-USAID tandem with information about our timeline and a promise (threat) to be in touch as often needed. Everyone told me tandems were never guaranteed assignment together and perhaps I should let them work it out, so it was interesting to see that negative attitudes were not unique to USAID, but I still felt there was room for more efficiency and that employee retention was not as valued as it might have been.

Over time I had more successes with finding 2 jobs at the same post for both kinds of tandems, but it didn't always work. I suggested other approaches when 2 jobs were not possible, including guaranteed LWOP for a requesting FSO when a tandem was not possible (truly a next to the last resort, but I thought resignations, which also happened, were the least desirable option from the Agency's perspective).

Within USAID this too got a mixed response – if we are short in a backstop why would we approve LWOP? My position was that LWOP was better for the service than a resignation and sometimes a short LWOP would allow a position to open up at the target post. We were also able to facilitate some job share situations when there were 2 tandems at post and only 3 jobs, with a member of each couple sharing one position.

Another thing that we were able to do in some instances (and this doesn't sound at all radical now, but at the time it was innovative) was to have supervision of an FSO in a small post handled in the appropriate regional office or even in Washington. For example, Nairobi could supervise half of a tandem assigned in Somalia. This required a lot of negotiation with USAID/USAID tandems. Even State/MED in several instances was able to assign a physician to a different post to facilitate assignment with a tandem USAID spouse. Interestingly the State/MED office that did physician assignments was much more receptive than the one that handled FS nurses.

Q: So, you used lots of creative opportunities to manage the assignments.

PITAS: At first it was pretty much just me but in time with some pushing and coaxing on my part, tandem placements did become more "we" and less "me". Over time we began to see more successes than failures and in general got a positive response. Tandems sometimes ended up in Washington more than they or the system preferred, because there were lots of vacant Foreign Service jobs in Washington. There were also instances where a FSO could be based overseas but assigned to a Washington job with regional support responsibilities, something that only worked in the case of tandems, at least at first,

because the relevant embassy didn't want the additive security and housing responsibility for someone not assigned there, unless they were a FS spouse. So, there were workarounds, and they were a little more effort, but it just doesn't make sense not to try.

Q: Yes; and it's good to document that because I know your efforts were greatly appreciated by many people.
PITAS: It's always nice to be appreciated!

The most awkward cases were those where half the tandem was very strong and thus in demand, and the other half was much more difficult to assign.

Q: Question because I think it's unique in the health field, I can think of two senior health officers who were given multiple opportunities to move into senior management group positions with the expectation they would eventually become mission directors. But, they were so committed to their health technical field that they refused them. Do you recall having discussions with health officers about this? Why are they different from any other technical backstop in terms of their desire to stay within the field?

PITAS: Yes, that was one of the things that I really found intriguing about Health Officers; many of them were very mission oriented and wanted to save the world. While most USAID FSOs I met brought laudable idealism to the job, leadership positions were so frequently an accompanying goal. With some Health Officers the focus was at the technical level. I remember Dr. Mike White saying that everybody has a boss, but he would rather have the Mission Director who understands development issues than the ambassador as the Mission Director did. Of course, there were many many Health Officers who went on to be Mission Directors.

Q: Absolutely.

PITAS: But there were some that wanted to stay in their technical field and also stay overseas.

Q: I was just curious whether you had had discussions with them and tried to encourage them to look at broader senior management positions.

PITAS: My approach was always more to start where the FSO was than to persuade toward a particular path. My observation was that some Health Officers who became Mission Directors, like Linda Morse (a particularly strong and effective Mission Director), seemed to enjoy mixing it up a bit with the mission health team. She was an engaged mentor for lots of junior Health Officers and seemed to have enough energy to be the Mission Director and also make leadership contributions in her mission's and regions Health Office!

Q: Let me just ask another question about the bidding process, how people transferred, and how those decisions were made. Part of the time when I was in Washington, I saw it up close and personal, and I was always impressed by the women who headed up the

management offices in the regional bureaus. They knew the people in their bureaus, and they worked closely with HR in moving people about. Did you have much involvement with the four of them?—

PITAS: Each bureau had (and maybe still has?) an AMS (Administrative Management Services) office, then frequently but of course not always led by Civil Service women, and yes, they were an impressive and powerful phenomenon! They went everywhere in their region and could really make things happen.

Regional Bureau AMS were very involved in assignments and also pivotal in various overseas special individual employee issues, such as medical clearance changes, family and personal emergencies, post evacuations, etc., and CDOs worked closely with them in such instances.

When a mission in their region was evacuated, the AMS was of course very involved as was HR/FSP, including travel orders, allowances, etc. I was very interested in what HR and CD could do to assist in evacuations, and early on asked to be on a working group that was to go into action when there was an evacuation, assisting families and employees who were relocating to the U.S. with USAID work, locating housing, schooling issues, etc. FSI established a Family Resource Center that was especially valuable for evacuations, also, but I enjoyed being able to be personally involved.

Back to AMS and assignments, at first my AMS interactions were mainly to do with placing IDIs in Washington offices and overseas for training; even though IDIs did not use a ceiling, an established position, they did need workspace and their evaluations were an additional AMS workload and the benefit of hosting IDIs was not directly to the AMS but rather to an individual office (if the IDI was a producer) and to the Agency over all. Some AMSs were more receptive to hosting than others, something of an eye opener to me early on when I thought of the Agency as one team.

Later as a CDO and then as the CDO Branch Chief, I was especially involved with AMSs around the assignment process, especially, in my case, with the AMS for whatever the Washington based health bureau was called any given year. The technical bureau AMS (vs. regional bureaus) were also mainly women and also powerhouses. Across the board, some were easier to work with than others, but all were deeply knowledgeable, as you say.

Later on when I was the branch chief for the organizationally based team for Africa Bureau in the combined FS and CS Personnel Operations Division I worked especially closely with the Africa Bureau AMS team on assignments there.

At any rate, each assignment cycle involved a series of meetings with all the AMSs, regional and technical, CDOs, the AFSA rep, etc., to consider position by position where bidders should be assigned. The regional AMSs and each concerned technical bureau and the CDO, representing HR, voted on each assignment.

Because the AMSs were so knowledgeable and powerful, and because they sometimes got together to agree how to vote before assignments meetings, there were many instances when both employee bids and technical needs were bypassed.

Q: And it wasn't always in the agency's interest?

PITAS: Always complicated to identify the agency's interest, but it seemed to me that while the assignment system design allowed individual bidders and technical and regions/bureaus to be heard from in the assignment process, the overall USAID interest wasn't always represented or being given an appropriate voice.

Others shared that concern and over time assignment policies were amended to prioritize positions (regions and tech areas were required to designate their top priority positions when the bid list went out to bidders, in part to end the AMS practice of claiming that virtually every position in a region was the highest priority and should be filled before those in other regions). To ensure that priority positions received bids, bidders were required to include a priority for which they were qualified as one of their top 3 bids. Priority positions were addressed first in assignment review meetings, and if no candidate was agreed to, assignments could be halted and unfilled priority positions readvertised, with all unassigned bidders required to re-bid. This approach better addressed agreed upon USAID priorities but was unpopular with bidders and missions – readvertisement meant that bidders might not have their new assignment in hand until late winter, in some cases too late to make arrangements for boarding schools, for example. It was also labor intensive for HR because although the instructions cautioned that priority bids had to be on positions for which the bidder was qualified, some bidders persisted in bidding on positions they knew they would not be selected for, such as a Program Officer bidding on a priority controller position. The early automated system could not catch such bids and reject them, so a human had to carefully review the entire bid list to reject unqualifying bids. At one point all the bidders in a backstop agreed to bid on the same priority position, believing that once that was filled the rest of them could be assigned to non-priority openings they preferred. In that case assignments in that backstop were all frozen and all bidders had to re-bid, while assignments for more compliant backstops proceeded. You can imagine the morale implications.

Because of the delays caused by rejected and frozen bidding, in some assignment cycles many assignments were not finalized until February rather than the usual October/November time frame, and bidders who needed to make schooling arrangements, etc, were frantic. There was discussion of simply directing assignments to priority positions rather than going through a bidding process.

Over time the prioritization process became more normalized and required percentages of prioritizations were adjusted. Also, GS to FS conversions were allowed much more freely to fill priority positions after the first round of assignments. It all turned out to be good practice for the extraordinary process to come with assignments to Afghanistan/Iraq/Pakistan, etc, the various Critical Priority Countries (CPCs).

Perhaps the biggest power shift in the assignment system came after the RIF and the consolidation of FS and GS operations. The then head of the Personnel Operations Division was giving his usual gracious remarks opening the first assignment meeting of that annual cycle (this was in the late 1990s) and said very casually that we were going to change the meeting up a bit and instead of voting on each assignment, all interested parties would have a chance to speak, and then the final decisions on each assignment would be made later in HR.

There was a bit of dissension from AMS representatives, but he pointed out that the assignment process regulations, which had been rewritten fairly recently with input from the AMSs and AFSA as well as HR did not specify a vote, simply that everyone's voice would be considered. I had actually been one of the main authors of the regulation but had not realized how radically that phrase would change the process. At any rate, from then on rather than voting, which made it much harder to consider overall agency priorities, there was discussion. It didn't work seamlessly, there were still lots and lots of assignments that weren't good, but I did think it was a plus.

Q: So, what about FS promotions, surely a big career concern?

As I mentioned in connection with my early years in the Career Development Office, that time also introduced me to the regular FS evaluation and promotion process (IDIs had a separate evaluation form and process, linked to their training status). FS evaluations were managed in the same branch as the Career Development program and were evolving rapidly in the mid 1980s with the FS Act and new requirements around career tenure, commissioning and promotion into the Senior Foreign Service (SFS), low ranking and potential selection out of the FS.

My study of Health Officer evaluation files suggested that many FSOs could engage with the evaluation and promotion system more productively and help not only their career but their whole cadre. Some evaluations were filled with technical jargon so that the impact of the work was hard for a non-health person like me (and some promotion board members) to evaluate; I thought some other backstops were doing a better job in that regard. Also, the required employee personal statements frequently were disjointed, dry and filled with jargon.

While reading all the evaluation files in the Health backstop, I charted individual career progression and figured out the average time between each level of promotions for Health Officers. I did a presentation to the CDO team and handed out a worksheet I had developed to chart promotion interval; one of my colleagues said I should feel free to do his backstops as he didn't have time for a project like that, and so in the end I figured promotion interval for all backstops (I didn't read non-Health eval files at that point, just looked at dates of promotions) and then compared the interval within each backstop grouping (e.g. health/ag/engineering, etc, Program Support backstops (Exos, Controllers, Contract/Commodity Management Officers) and Program/Project Development Officers). Foreign Service secretaries were blocked from promotion above a certain class, and most were at that top level so I didn't look at them.

What I found was marked variations in average promotion interval between backstops and I wondered if those accurately reflected value to the agency and program needs. Something new to study, I was so pleased.

In looking at Health Officer promotion intervals, I also looked at the make-up of promotion boards and noticed how few of them actually included a Health Officer. I met with the head of the Health/Pop bureau (a frighteningly remote and important personage) and suggested that his team identify appropriate senior FSOs to be on selection panels so that the Health/Pop Officers had someone who more clearly understood their work reviewing it at least some of the time. This was not well received; his Health/Pop Officers were busy, and he couldn't spare them to do a bunch of HR work. I kept pressing because there was a huge amount of money going into health programs, big responsibilities for Health Officers and yet lagging promotion intervals. I suggested that in time there would be more attrition out of Health/Pop into other backstops or out of the FS. Ultimately more Health Officers began to be on promotion panels.

Information on average promotion intervals was also useful when an individual FSO came to me with concerns about their own career progression; of course, everyone who wasn't promoted in the last year or so felt they were overdue for the next promotion, but some people needed to hear that they were lagging behind the average interval while others were moving ahead much more quickly than average. The quicker than average list seemed to me to be a good place to begin to look for officers who might be ready for training or experiences to prepare them for leadership roles. The slower than average individuals might benefit from some changed career approaches. For example, on average promotions seemed to come more quickly connected to overseas service – in some instances it was time for a move to the field!

For a while there was also a time in class aspect to FS careers, where individuals who were not promoted for a set (relatively long) number of years and were retirement eligible were mandatorily retired and this was something that was initially not well understood.

Another component of CDO work with promotion panels was the ranking system, new at the time I got involved. Promotion panels at that time were tasked with agreeing to specific criteria for success and a weighting system for the criteria and then reviewed all the evaluation files for employees in their area of responsibility. Employees were divided into category A, recommend for promotion, category B, doing fine but no promotion, category C, slipping or in trouble, and category D, recommended for selection out of the FS. It was an intricate system and there were nuances I don't remember clearly. For example, I'm not sure that employees in category D were actually selected out immediately (e.g. fired) if they were not retirement eligible, but I do recall that in the earliest years of this system there were a significant number of FSOs leaving the service via selection out. Promotion panels sent cautionary letters to employees in category C and D, and briefed CDOs exhaustively on those in category C and perhaps some others of special interest or concern.

CDOs were responsible for personally notifying employees in C and D, which was grim, and also as a little reward got to contact and congratulate employees being promoted before the actual promotion notice was promulgated. Employees also got a report card showing their category and sometimes including comments from the promotion board. Not all category A employees were promoted; there was a number of promotions in each cluster of backstops and at each rank agreed on ahead of time and sealed in a special secured envelope until after the boards finalized their lists, so that board could not pinpoint where the promotions would end on their rank ordered list.

CDOs were heavily involved in all of these activities, as well as training sessions for promotion boards (and this continued up to the time of my retirement at least) and were available to consult with promotion boards when there were questions and special issues, as well as participating in the final debrief for HR leadership and attending the "line drawing" where the envelopes with the number of available promotions in each group were opened and an actual line was drawn on each list to show where promotions stopped. There was also a process to review each category of employees and determine if there was an underrepresented group (race/gender) and "drop down" below the cutoff point a certain number of spaces to pick up employees for promotion who would increase the diversity of the service in that category.

Preparation for notifying C and D list employees was exhaustive, with practice notifications working with the social worker. There was a story, perhaps apocryphal, that a State FSO had attempted suicide after being low ranked and that terrified us.

As time went on the ranking system was adjusted and modified so that actual selection out required multiple D rankings in a 5 year period, in theory making it less likely that one or two bad years could end a career. But for the first few years it was pretty draconian and there were many FSOs selected out.

Q: So, when an employee was low ranked but not selected out you could work with missions to try to help them pull up their socks if they needed it?

PITAS: Involving the mission or Washington bureau was a hot topic; an original founding precept of the evaluation feedback system for employees was confidentiality. So how can the mission or supervisor be involved by HR? On the other hand, the mission or supervisor could be of great assistance and support to an employee having difficulties, especially if there were skills building assignments or training possible, always assuming that they were motivated to assist (because FS employees usually move on in 2 to 4 years, unless the performance issue was easily addressable there might be a tendency to simply wait for the employee to leave). In general, I thought that confidentiality would be gone once low-ranking status was shared beyond the employee; it would be challenging for many supervisors to resist passing on the information if asked for a reference in connection with the employee's onward assignment, for example.

The approach agreed upon was that low ranked employees were offered help from the CDO to discuss with the relevant mission or supervisor ways to improve performance

and thus next year's evaluation. Unfortunately, by the time performance panel results were ready to share with employees a good chunk of the next evaluation year was already past so that point was a bit moot. As it turned out, what we found was that most employees emphatically did not want their supervisor or the mission to know about their low ranking.

I found the whole area of improving performance while maintaining confidentiality to be very unsatisfying. Given the huge amount of staff time devoted to writing evaluations, promotion panels, etc., the system seemed cumbersome and not as organizationally useful as it could have been. On the other hand, there were a lot of interested parties to be satisfied, and perhaps that explains the tendency to over complicate the system which continued for my whole career.

Q: So, did you stay on that career development side, or did you end up moving to another side?
Because you kept getting promoted, taking on more responsibilities.

I was very fortunate in my supervisors and mentors throughout my career, starting with Shirley Marino. I was a GS 7 when I moved to the Training Division in the late 1970s, and my predecessor in the recruitment/selection job had been a GS 12. Shirley decided to re-write that job as a career ladder to a GS 12, but in order to be considered for it I had to be willing to move back to a GS 5 because it was not in the Writer/Editor series I started in. Once I got into the position however I was able to be promoted pretty much annually until I got to the GS 12 level. Shirley also encouraged me to think about her job when she retired. Training Division colleagues told me I was crazy at the beginning to agree to being "downgraded" but the work sounded interesting and I was tired of looking for writer/editor work. In the end the gamble certainly paid off.

When I moved over to the Career Development Office it was a couple years before I got promoted again, in part because there was no Civil Service position series analogous to what I was doing. However, by then I had added more backstops to my portfolio, including Food Aid and Education.

Q: So, did you stay in career development, or did you end up moving to another area of HR?

PITAS: Somewhat contrary to the received wisdom on moving ahead in the CS, I stayed in career development until the combination of CS and FS operations at the end of the 1990s. By then I was the head of the Career Development Branch in FSP, with 6 FS Career Development Officers, an IDI program manager and 3 other CS staff (including the PMI program manager) reporting to me. Even then I didn't stop doing career development, I simply added the supervision of other HR work to my portfolio. That stayed the same until I retired from the Civil Service and began working as a contractor in HR, still at that point doing career development work.

Q: So, we're now in the mid 1990s and the RIF was ablaze.

PITAS: I was in Foreign Service Personnel Career Development Branch from1984 until 1996 when the RIF happened: twelve years. At some point about 9 years in I became Career Development branch chief, in part because of informal support from AFSA (American Foreign Service Association). By then the FS evaluation process had been moved into a stand-alone office instead of being part of Career Development, which had pluses and minuses from my perspective.

Back to AFSA's involvement in my promotion to Career Development branch chief, initially when the Career Development program was established most of the CDOs including the Branch Chief were FSO-01, so after a rotation assignment there they retired or went back overseas. By the time the fourth FS Career Development chief departed, I was the deputy chief, supervising the GS staff while the Branch chief supervised only the FSOs. The HR Deputy Director told me she would like to see me assigned to the Career Development chief position, but AFSA would never stand for it. I said "OK, fair enough, it should be an FSO anyway". I did think I could do well in the chief job, but I understood the issues.

Then the USAID AFSA rep at the time came to talk to me and asked if I was going to apply for the branch chief job, and I said no, I think that job should be an FSO. He said he thought I SHOULD apply for it, and I said thank you, that means a lot to me, I'm very touched. He actually discussed his views with the HR Director, and in the end I applied for the job, and got it.

As it turned out there were advantages to being outside the FS: I was nobody's competition; I was never going to be ranked for promotion ahead of a client or get an assignment clients were bidding on.

To close the loop on my personal association with AFSA, while I was a HR branch chief 4 USAID AFSA Vice Presidents/AID Representatives were FSOs who had previously worked with me as CDOs!

Q: Well obviously you had proven to the Foreign Service that you cared so you'd broken down the distinction between Civil Service and Foreign Service.

PITAS: Or they thought that I would be somebody that it would be easy to pull the wool over. Joke, I don't really think that.

Q: No, I don't think that was it! So, back to the RIF!

PITAS: Back to the mid-1990s, the RIF came along and that was an awful year full of (in my view) terrible leadership decisions and their after-effects. I was tasked with leading the FS side of the RIF, which I did not want to do at all, but decided I had to because if it was going to happen it had to be scrupulously administered. I was able to do some minor positive things in connection with the FS RIF, including streamlining notifications of RIF'ed officers and individual meetings with each RIF'ed FSO to review the materials

and points that lead to their being separated from the FS. Also, I was able to advocate for and get in place a contract with a team of outside placement specialists, social workers and housing experts to ease the transition back to the U.S. for RIF'ed FSOs and their families who were returned from overseas posts.

And then, as if the RIF was not dreadful enough, the FSO Foreign Service Personnel division chief decided to advocate combining Civil Service and Foreign Service personnel processing, merging FS Personnel and CS personnel divisions.

Q: You're talking about the head of HR?

PITAS: No, the head of Foreign Service Personnel, an FSO 1 who reported to the head of HR.

I thought at the time (and still think) that it was a mistake on many levels. There were two distinct pools of Civil Service Personnel Specialists who had expertise in personnel processing for FS and CS and no overlapping experience. The two personnel systems establish laws and regulations and operationally have distinct processing requirements; extensive training would be needed to bring each group up to speed in the system they weren't familiar with.

One rationale was that there would be cost savings, but in real life training is expensive and results in down time. The expense was avoided by doing none of the outside training normally provided to employees starting with CS processing (usually by OPM): instead there were in-house training sessions with experienced CS staffers training and coaching FS staffers and vice versa. Unfortunately since none of these people were experienced with training or coaching, these efforts burned up a lot of time, created ill will and were largely ineffective.

Also, FS processing is much more labor intensive and FS staffers were managing smaller client loads. A quick illustration: as a CS employee my staffer had to handle my file when I got a within grade increase, a promotion or a new job, so usually one maybe 2 routine processes annually, if that. FS staffing required multiple varied actions, including within grade increases and promotions, transfers, preparation of travel orders, the medical clearance process for traveling families, overseas position classification and much more. On the CS side the separate General Schedule position classification unit was eliminated, and the idea was that each staffer would be responsible for CS position classification, a highly technical activity that would have ideally required a great deal of specialized training.

So this merger went forward, based on organizations, with teams set up to do all CS and FS staffing for designated regional and Washington bureaus.

The CDO team was broken up with an FS CDO assigned to each team with a regional bureau, based on the (erroneous, in my view) theory that FSOs assigned to AFR had

more in common career wise with each other than they did with FSOs in their backstop. Some CDOs transferred out immediately, others decided to stay with HR for a while.

I was assigned as the chief of the team that supported AFR Bureau, GC and a couple smaller Washington offices, and was also the team lead for a functional team responsible for CDO work across organizations.

I was not optimistic – to me the question was who is the client, an organizational unit management or individual employees? I believed (and still believe) that balance was needed and that the system of focusing the logistics skills (Staffing) on organizational support and employee support (traditionally Career Development) on individuals made the most sense. I didn't think the approach was going to be workable or helpful to the FS generally, but having said so publicly, I was stuck trying to make it work, and I tried.

Q: That's an interesting observation. You said that the Foreign Service and Civil Service support was combined, but was it later split out again? What happened?

PITAS: After a period of making great efforts to get a lot of square pegs into round holes there was a decision made that some activities are indeed uniquely Foreign Service and others Civil Service.

Just one more example, in USAID one inherently FS activity is language training, since language competency is required for some overseas positions and for FS tenure and was not required for CS jobs in USAID.

Going back at least to the 1970s, language training was managed in the Training Division (TD), with the then Foreign Service Personnel staffers handling the paperwork of enrollment and passing it to TD for liaison with FSI or a contract school. The TD/IDI team handled testing for IDIs, usually scheduled as early as possible in the initial classroom training, so that we knew what we had to work with in identifying overseas assignments. When FS and CS operations were combined after the RIF, language training was moved from the Training Division along with the CS staffer who had been an assistant in the TD language office, which at one point was 3 people (there had been retirements and other attrition). She was assigned to my team and was supposed to be cross trained to do CS and FS staffing, working toward being responsible for a regular staffing client pool, while supporting her colleagues across all the teams in language training and enrollment. In real life she had no interest in or facility for staffing - she knew the mechanics of language testing and enrollment and that's all she wanted to do. Meanwhile even the experienced FS staffers on the other teams hadn't done a lot with language training and the CS staffers had never been exposed to it; unsurprisingly language training was seen as being an unwelcome additive workload at a time when they were all trying to learn myriad new skills.

Since it had been three and then two people's full-time jobs managing language training before the merger, it was not tenable for the least knowledgeable of the original 3 (and not an assertive or ambitious personality) to learn a complicated new job, train

unmotivated new colleagues and keep things going with language training. There were client complaints, FSI was not happy to have a bunch of new contacts vs one that knew what to do, and morale around language training in the Division was not great. And that's just one example of many.

Then there was the recruitment of new FS employees, which was totally different operationally from CS recruitment and hiring. For one thing, CS hiring is done against a specific job and FS hiring is for a career that is intended to span many assignments. Recruitment was still a separate office, but they were not doing FS selection, orientation, etc., and needed input on what types of FS candidates to recruit. Pre RIF and merger, FS recruitment and selection (then still IDI) was done on the Career Development Branch, of which I was the chief. With the combination the idea was that there would be an operational vs organizational team with members from each organizational branch doing FS selection as well as regular staffing. Again, this wasn't feasible; both activities required a depth of knowledge and time commitments that did not mesh well. There was very little FS hiring immediately post-RIF, but that couldn't be expected to last. Also, there was a longer term plan to evolve the IDI program into a different vehicle to hire more experienced FSOs, but still on a group basis with training required vs the CS model of hiring against individual positions. That would require a lot of policy writing and negotiation and ultimately became the New Entry Professional program. Again, not a regionally or organizationally specific activity.

FS assignments was another activity that was untenable on an organizational basis; finally, each organizational branch was tasked with pulling a list of available assignments together and passing it to a sub-team to administer. The people on the sub-team had to do assignments full time, which disrupted their organizational workload. It was a mess.

Q: So, the organization began to appear not to make sense?

PITAS: Exactly, it became more and more clear that adjustments were needed.

A separate non-organizational team was set up to do FS new entry selection, placements and training, other mainly FS activities that were not organizationally specific: language training, new entry, assignments and career development. Career Development had been one of the most complicated tasks under the "all organizational" set up. The initial thinking was that each organizational team would have an FS CDO assigned who would provide CD support to all the FS employees in that region or AID/W organization. This assumed that one FS CDO, recruited for the job in part because of expertise as a Program Officer or a Controller or what have you, would be able to effectively advise every FSO in a region, as if every FSO in AFR had more in common career-wise with each other than with the FSOs worldwide in their backstop. Besides being illogical this ran counter to the FS Act requirement of FS worldwide availability and ignored the desire of many FSOs to experience assignments in different regions. It also made recruiting FS CDOs to work in the division very difficult.

So the envisioned 100% combined GS and FS operation became a hybrid, with a group of organizational teams and one team, called Special Programs, supporting the mainly FS activities that were cross regional. I was the Special Programs branch chief.

Q: Okay, so the Foreign Service side of it became rationalized?

PITAS: It was certainly better rationalized although the first year after FS activities were consolidated was quite complicated. Special Programs was assigned activities that really didn't fit well anywhere, including the newly mandated drug testing program, which was more of a CS activity because despite a big push to make it worldwide it simply was not possible in most USAID missions.

Q: For the Foreign Service was the drug testing done just as a part of the physical?

PITAS: No. Understand that the overarching drug testing mandate came from outside USAID and was supposedly tailored to USAID needs in another part of HR. The Special Programs Branch was handed it to implement, and it was a headache from the start.

The original vision was that all direct hires, e.g. FS and CS, were to be included in the periodic randomly produced list of testing subjects. I asked how employees overseas, FS or CS on TDY, would be tested, since the policy required that everyone on the list had to be notified within a very short time period with urine collected and tested by an qualified facility the same day that the list was released to increase the accuracy of the test – the answer was that I needed to figure out how to do it. Of course it simply wasn't feasible; by the time my team had the list in hand missions in Asia would be closing. Also many USAID posts were not located in a city with a lab and collection facility, and if they were such a facility it would not be certified by any U.S. based group.

Also, when I checked with MED they confirmed my doubts about the next idea from the program designers, that the medical unit at each post would do the collection and testing. I certainly had not been to each or indeed many overseas missions, but I had just gotten back from Mali and I was sure that the medical unit there, which I had visited, didn't have that capacity. Also State MED was not willing to participate in random drug testing overseas. The third proposal was to do the testing for FSOs on a given random selection list in conjunction with home leave. However, that could be up to 24 months after a name was randomly selected, which sounded like a record keeping and enforcement nightmare. Would travel orders be withheld until testing and results were completed? Who would ensure that? State/MED did confirm that in some limited instances drug use would surface in medical clearance testing, although that some types of drug use have no effect on clearance for some posts.

This tedious back and forth went on for months and could have been prevented if someone with familiarity with USAID overseas conditions had been involved in the policy development and program design. Drug testing was not the only program design that suffered from a tendency to design and attempt to implement programs that ignored the overseas two-thirds of USAID's workforce.

Q: Okay, so it was done as random tests.

PITAS: Right. There was a random number type program run by the HR IT folks that produced a list early on each drug testing day and notices were sent to the Washington based FS and CS employees on the list with copies to their AMS. Employees on approved leave or TDY were dropped from the list when their AMS confirmed that was the case. Employees who were available to be tested were directed to report to the Reagan Building medical unit and a contract group of lab workers collected specimens from them there. Test results came back in a couple days.

Operating the drug testing days took at least 2 administrative people from my team full time on those days, as well as a substantial number of hours throughout the month, establishing and managing the contract with the group actually collecting and testing specimens, meeting with non-USAID oversight groups, etc. Over the life of the program very few USAID employees (and almost no FSOs) were ever identified for further action, unlike some other agencies, so I personally did not see the practical utility of the whole program, which was I believed to be politically motivated rather than out of a concern for the welfare of USAID employees.

Q: Right. Speaking of selection, when they recreated this Foreign Service team and began FS hiring again, was this for what they called the New Entry Program (NEP), were you responsible for recruitment?

PITAS: Yes, by the time the NEP program replaced the IDI program I was in charge of the Special Programs Branch in Personnel Operations, the combined CS and FS operations division. Special Programs responsibilities included all Foreign Service only activities, the CDOs, the psychiatric social worker (Martha Rees at that point), odd bits like drug testing and language training, and so on. We developed the NEP policy, and worked with the recruitment office, although all the advertisement, response to applicants, interviews and so on were handled by employees in Special Programs. It was a chance to adjust things that had started to work less well with the IDI program while keeping things that did work or were necessary.

Q: There were issues with some of the NEPs who came in, but I think it was less the program than the difficulty of recruiting and assimilating mid-level hires versus younger, less experienced people. Any thoughts about the complexity of recruitment, selection, training, and integration of these people into the agency?

PITAS: I could probably think of employees hired every way who had issues over the years, as well as many who were very successful.

But, yes, many things about the development of the NEP program required adjustments, especially after so many years of concentrating FS entry at the FS-05 and 06 level. In theory junior hiring sweetened by 1 or 2 promotions in 2 or 3 years had been a hard line, but it had started to erode with vacancies that were not being filled appropriately by new

IDI graduates, and no one liked the "one off" type mid-level hiring we were seeing. There were ongoing Civil Service to Foreign Service programs, as I mentioned earlier in the PMI/PMF context, the idea being you could take a GS-13, 14, 15, and convert them to the Foreign Service. GS to FS conversions still had to get tenured in the FS after 3 to 5 years, which was a safety net for individuals who turned out to not be able to work effectively overseas.

With the NEP program, initially one school of thought was to continue to limit the hiring at the more junior 05 and 06 level (so essentially a name change from IDI to NEP), but in reality such junior hiring had started to be problematic years before, with the pressure to shrink overseas missions so that there were very few actual second positions overseas for IDI graduates to move into.

Understandably, there was still resentment from FSOs who had entered at the 06 or 05 and felt they had taken a backward career step to join USAID (there were stories about "most" IDIs taking salary cuts to enter the FS but a review of reported salary levels on applications didn't support that except in a very few cases). In many cases graduate IDIs who were now 04s or 03s felt that GS to FS conversions and outside hires at the 03 and 02 levels were moving in ahead of them in the FS. Understandable, although time in class for promotion eligibility meant in fact that extremely few "mid-level" NEP hires would be promoted before graduate IDIs, except in the cases of those who were not progressing in the FS.

However, organizations have the right and responsibility to hire to accomplish the mission; USAID does not exist to provide upward mobility for all earlier hires.

Thus, the FS hiring system needed flexibility but there was also pressure to have a specific mechanism including need planning and projections vs ad hoc hiring.

Q: Just in general on the recruitment side, are the expectations of new hires different today than in the past? People talk a lot about the expectations of people now to rise very quickly through the system. If you were to compare what it was like to start with IDIs in the 1970s to what it was like in the 2000s…

PITAS: Remember, I retired in 2008 from the Civil Service and then I worked as a contractor until 2016 so my comments are not current by any means in 2024! I'm really out of date about current workforce expectations.

It would be fascinating to see some data on the speed of upward movement for various cadres of hires.

Certainly, we were hiring people with less experience in my early IDI days (and of course none of those people are in the FS today!). Missions were also usually much larger so it was more possible to absorb junior officers overseas.

Going way back to when Vietnam collapsed there was an IDI class that was all Foreign Service Limited working in Vietnam (maybe thirty people). FS Limited (FSL) is a hiring mechanism included in the FS Act to allow hiring for a limited time of FS who are not on a career or tenure track. It was used in Vietnam and again extensively in Critical Priority Countries (Afghanistan, Iraq, Pakistan and Sudan). In the case of the post-Vietnam group, they came on before I started with the IDI team. I looked at what was done about their salary and as I recall in general they did not have salary cuts, but were sometimes moved to a higher step of a lower class. At any rate, that was a one off until the pressure to fill CPC positions.

Q: Right because in the 2000s you were hiring people at different levels and so that created more tensions. So that period in the 2000s again, on the HR front, probably one of the biggest challenges that HR faced was recruitment for Afghanistan and Iraq. Were you involved at all with that?

PITAS: Yes, I was the branch chief with everything that had to do with the Foreign Service under my supervision, including recruitment for CPCs, as I mentioned above in the FSL context.

Initially recruitment for Afghanistan, Iraq and later Pakistan was in house, including a good bit of GS to FS conversion. Later, especially with one-year tours, it became less and less feasible to rely solely on USAID direct hire employees. There was one FSO CDO dedicated exclusively to Critical Priority Countries, initially Afghanistan and Iraq, but everyone worked on various CPC issues, he was the point person.

Q: Were you involved with the identification of incentives to get people to bid on Iraq and Afghanistan? Did you help to define what the incentives would be?

PITAS: Oh yes. The challenge was to come up with incentives that worked to recruit the right people. There was required bidding; each bidding FSO in an assignment process had to file at least one CPC, and since the automated program couldn't be programed to reject "throw-away" bids (like a Health Officer bidding on a Controller position to fill the CPC bid requirement) bids had to be individually checked and rejected as needed and the bidders counseled. That was sort of a negative incentive. The differentials and special financial add ons were considerable and that certainly helped, as did the 12 month tours with mandatory R&Rs. Money, and later real and perceived promotion requirements (the belief that one could not hope to be promoted to or within SFS without a CPC assignment) encouraged CPC assignments. Still, there was no getting around the fact that it was an assignment in a war zone with very basic housing, no dependents, and food that was aimed at 20-year-old soldiers, not 40+ year old FSOs, and so on.

There was also the reality that an employee serving a truly forced assignment may not be a good addition to a mission. For example, there was discussion of identifying FSOs within 2 years of retirement eligibility and assigning them to a CPC with the threat of separation for refusal to accept an assignment (which in the FS Act is a justification for separation from the service). The challenge of managing a mission made up of such

unwilling FSOs would be daunting and that type of putative assignments were not pursued once the implications were pointed out.

Instead there were FS-Limited assignments These were used mainly to appoint those with significant USAID contractor experience but with the authority and so on of a FS employee. FSLs could apply to be converted to untenured FS and then in time be eligible for tenure, and some excellent people joined the career service that way. We also contacted and arranged to recall the FS employees who had left for various reasons but who still had pertinent USAID expertise and who had the option after a CPC year of completing a USAID career and receiving an enhanced FS pension.

There were always ways to fill positions – and CPC assignments were filled first, with repeated bidding rounds to make it clear that it was going to be harder and harder to evade a CPC assignment.

Another issue was unsuitable volunteers, or those who bid for back-to-back CPC assignments. I had concerns that after a while we were doing the employees, the CPCs and USAID generally a disservice if we were filling too many CPC positions with less suitable volunteers. A volunteer pool that might….

Q: May not be the best people for the job.

PITAS: As we staffed CPCs, I was continually conscious that no matter one's personal attitude toward USAID missions in war zones, we were also sending someone out there to be the Mission Director. They too were in a warzone, managing a different type of mission staffed by perhaps less willing FSOs, GS to FS conversions and other FS Limited employees, dealing in an unprecedented number of ways with the military, huge budgets and pressure to move money quickly; we owed them a solid mission team and the best possible support in all ways, including people who could really do the job.

Q: One of the other things that emerged over time was the issues when people stayed too long in difficult posts. I know there suddenly became concerns about PTSD (Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder) and—

PITAS: Substance abuse, and other health issues that crop up with people in an unfamiliar and stressful environment.

Q: And those kinds of issues. Did HR recognize it would need to up its game in trying to address some of these concerns?

PITAS: Oh yes, that was a front burner concern with CPCs all along. First of all, we (and USAID generally) were fortunate to have a Vietnam military veteran CDO coordinating CPC activities, and a very skilled, tough and experienced psychiatric social worker on the Special Programs team keeping these issues before HR and USAID leadership generally. There was a group associated with State/MED running mandatory debriefings for returning CPC assignees. But there were frightening cases. I can remember a senior FSO

in Afghanistan who went back to post assignment after assignment, and I was enormously concerned about him. He would call me in my office to discuss next bids and so on, and be rambling and disconnected when it was the middle of the night there. I pulled in Martha Rees, the psychiatric social worker, and State/MED, and we had an informal list of CPC employees of special concern. One answer was that the military was there and used to dealing with PTSD, etc. Unconvincing!

Certainly, there was great military health care available. But I knew, from participating in a cross-agency group including military health care, that the focus understandably was on care for military members who were wounded, not 50-year-old FSOs who were perhaps going back to their shipping container housing, drinking too much and calling Cecilia on the phone.

Where military health care excelled was cases like a USAID FSO who was recalled to the service, passed all the medicals and so on, and after some months in country had a potentially calamitous heart attack. Totally out of left field, she was very fit. To complicate matters she wasn't even in Kabul, she was in the sticks somewhere. The military got her on a plane out of Kabul, worked on her in the air and operated on her again in Germany where she was hospitalized.

Q: Saved her life presumably?

PITAS: No question, she's fine, hikes to the bottom of the Grand Canyon every other year to have Christmas dinner. Thank God for military medical care, but it wasn't the answer for some of the issues we saw in CPCs.

Q: So, AID was aware of this being an issue and was doing what it could on its front but probably could have been doing a bit more?

PITAS: I'm sure we weren't doing everything we could, there were all kinds of constraints, financial, workload, etc. Could USAID have done better overall? Absolutely. There was always pressure to take the volunteer who was perhaps too stressed but who was clamoring to go back for another year.

Q: It's very tempting.

PITAS: I (and others) were very troubled.

Q: Do you know to the extent that these issues were discussed with the head of HR? Were any of the AID Administrators involved with discussions about the need for Agency attention to the issues?

PITAS: Certainly, I was talking to the head of HR about employee wear and tear in difficult posts and related issues – I can't complain about access to HR or USAID leadership in that regard, they were very receptive. But they had the same pressures everyone else did.

Generally, medical issues are one of the differences between CS and FS employees, pressure, access to care at some posts, and the responsibility of the Agency and the Department to safeguard the well-being of FSOs and dependents not just in CPCs but everywhere.

As a CDO and later branch chief I tried to stay in touch with the head of mental health services at State/MED, as did the staff psychiatric social worker. MED had two or three absolutely fabulous psychiatrists in that role over the years. There was also State/MED/ECS (Employee Consultation Service), made up of social workers and mental health professionals, separate from the USAID social worker in FSP but available to USAID employees. We constantly consulted back and forth over the years. But HR quite rightly did not have access to any medical records other than the fact of medical clearance (or lack thereof), nothing else unless an employee volunteered information.

Q: Yeah. One other thing I'm just going to mention because I think it would be interesting to be on the record. I know of at least one case where I think the agency did a fantastic job in helping a person overcome a drinking issue. The person was pulled from post, went for treatment, and was not hurt professionally. The person ended up in very high-level positions. Could you generically say anything about how the agency handled these situations, maintaining privacy as needed?

PITAS: I can assure you there were many more than one such employee! Frequently these cases are well known at post; I think that a lot of missions if you had given the senior management truth serum and said give me a list of who on your staff drinks too much, they would be able to give you a pretty accurate list and it might have their own name on it. The trick is to take the next steps to assist employees.

Q: Right. But for people who had treatment and overcame the issue, it was not held against them in their career.

PITAS: Absolutely, there were no official repercussions for successful treatment of any illness including alcoholism.

I'm sure there were instances where a colleague from an employee's time of trouble recalled poor performance and had a negative impression, but the FS in general is a sophisticated bunch with a good understanding of the realities of overseas work including substance abuse. FSOs overseas are away from home, familiar recreation outlets may not be available, the culture involves a lot of entertaining and some host country cultures involve different approaches to drinking. Certainly State/MED takes a close look at liver functions at medical clearance time! One of the functions of the social worker in FS Personnel and later was working with employees with substance abuse problems. There was also training for CDOs in that area.

Note also that employees who were in State MED sponsored rehabilitation lost medical clearance and had to be re-cleared to return overseas. USAID HR verified medical clearance but beyond that could not engage in that kind of health issue.

Q: No, I think it's an important responsibility of HR to be concerned about it.

PITAS: One of my stock questions for FSOs visiting on home leave was around substance abuse – were there concerns at post. Sometimes I got more than I bargained for, like an officer who launched into a complaint about how restrictive the commissary in his very isolated post was about alcohol sales – this was a country without much in the way of a local market. I did the math and said that if 2 adults in a household were consuming up to the weekly purchase limit he mentioned that was 7 or 8 drinks a day, surely that wasn't an unreasonable restriction? He said I didn't know what I was talking about and left. A couple years later he visited again and mentioned that he had been pretty angry about what I said and repeated it to his wife who suggested that he talk to someone about his drinking, and ultimately, he went into treatment. That experience reinforced my willingness to look stupid or offensive if needed to assist an employee in trouble. I remember another case of an FSO with an office at State and the support staff in his office were expressing concern about his habit of closing his office door and drinking, bottles in the trash and so on. I asked the State/MED substance abuse person and the FS Personnel social worker what to do and ultimately the social worker walked over and said come on, going to a meeting. And they went to an AA (Alcoholics Anonymous) meeting that day and daily for a month. Ultimately, he went into State's residential treatment program and was able to go overseas and complete his career, which was looking pretty iffy for a while.

Q: Interesting.

PITAS: Not everyone had that resource on hand.

Q: Good. It's just another important part of the HR project.

PITAS: Others surfaced in required medical clearance exams, which were actually a great benefit as far as catching problems early, as unenjoyable as they no doubt were. I knew other FS who had totally different medical issues that surfaced only because of the in-depth State MED exams where cancers were caught and treated very early. Nobody loved those medical clearance exams but sometimes they paid off.

Q: You said you retired in 2008 and then you did various roles on a contractual basis for the next…

PITAS: Eight years; I retired for real in 2016.

Q: Eight years. Because I remember hearing jokes that the personnel system would have fallen apart unless you were there to make it work. But did you pretty much play that role up until 2008 on the Foreign Service side?

PITAS: Up until 2008 I was the branch chief for Special Programs in the Personnel Operations branch, which included NEP selection, training and placement, the FS assignment system and other FS only programs, GS to FS conversion programs and so on. I also was the Career Development Officer for various backstops, usually including health.

Q: And that was up until you retired from the Civil Service. And then when you came back and did contractual work was that on a part-time basis doing different specific things for HR?

PITAS: By that time most of the CDOs were retired FSOs so my being retired was not exceptional. I also did special projects as requested by the HR Director as well as working on the assignment process with individual employees, missions and regions, briefing promotion boards, new entrants; the full slate of CDO activities, minus the supervision and involvement in other activities like drug testing and supervision I did pre-retirement. I was also asked to be available to subsequent Special Programs branch chiefs as an advisor – there were several over the years, including 2 from outside USAID with no FS exposure, so a pretty steep learning curve.

Q: Another question I meant to ask you as well, and perhaps you had no involvement in it, but another part of the AID workforce are the Foreign Service Nationals overseas.

PITAS: FSNs are an enormously important part of the USAID workforce and are invisible to many Washington based staff.

Q: And I'm wondering, to what degree did you have involvement with that side of Human Resources?

PITAS: From a work perspective I didn't have as much involvement as I would have liked since FSN issues were handled in another part of HR – Policy usually. On a personal level Foreign Service Nationals were an enormous support and help to me almost from the very beginning of my work with IDIs and throughout my career. I tried to make sure I was acquainted with an FSN in the EXO office and perhaps also in the Director's office at most posts, someone that I could contact for help when I didn't know what was going on at post or where to start with some project. Those connections were one of the great things about traveling to a mission, as were the programs that brought Foreign Service Nationals to AID/W for short term assignments or even just the annual awards ceremony. I always tried to get to meet them and have lunch or coffee – so informative and rewarding and a chance to express my appreciation for the support of the whole FSN cadre in my own career. One of the very destructive things that I saw happen over my career was the State driven policy to switch Foreign Service Nationals from direct hire to contract workers because then HR and USAID management had so little control or ability to assist. Even minimal things like outplacement assistance when missions closed (which we were able to do in some cases via the social worker on the Special Programs team) were an uphill battle. I just always felt that we could do more.

And this debacle with Afghanistan FSNs. Bill Carter, who was a CDO and then the AFSA rep for years, and then back in CDO work, worked with many FSNs over his long career and he has been influential in trying to expand assistance to FSNs, right down to recent former Afghanistan FSNs.

Q: Okay. I'm trying to look at your career over the years. You started in 1977 working with Shirley Marino on the IDI program.

PITAS: And that was just dumb luck.

Q: And then you worked until 2017. So, we're talking forty years?

PITAS: Good grief! No wonder it seems like a long time.

Q: Forty years of HR work in the agency. How did you see it change over this period? Any thoughts about that four decades.

PITAS: Of course, lots of changes - the increased automation and the ability to be in touch with people instantly. When I first started in Career Development after I left the Training Division, I was so thrilled to learn I could phone people virtually anywhere if it was critical (because it was still expensive!). The mountains of letters and postcards we sent out in the IDI selection process (and even that was innovative, staying in touch through the process instead of once at the interview or a rejection letter at the end) vs the automated application process now with on-line applications, web portals to stay in touch, etc. The gradual automation of the assignment process and the agony of working with designers on the first "paperless" process.

Mission changes, more isolated vs the instant contacts taken for granted now. The move from direct hire Foreign Service Nationals (FSNs) to contractors that gutted the senior cadre of FSNs that were such a resource in learning about a post at the beginning.

Q: I would think that technological advances would make work in HR much more satisfying because you can be in more direct contact with people.

PITAS: Absolutely. The people were always the best part for me, yes. Also the ability to communicate from anywhere, getting up and seeing email right away vs having to trek into the office to find out what had happened overnight. But some things got very much more difficult, things like not having an office. That was ridiculous.

Q: What do you mean?

PITAS: In the Reagan Building. Most of the time in the Reagan building the Career Development Officers didn't have an office, they had a cubicle. I had a cubicle, for that matter.

Q: That's right, HR had the worst office space in the Reagan Building.

PITAS: It was abusive and made it hard to recruit suitable FSOs to work as CDOs, unfortunately. Even the psychiatric social worker was supposed to work out of a cube. That sent us a really clear message about how very very little leadership valued the human contact part of the work, and no one missed that point!

Back to changes I observed over the years, there was also my changing perspective as I moved up in HR. For example, the teams I worked on early in my HR tenure were made up exclusively of highly motivated dedicated people. It was a shock later on when I had a couple supervision experiences with individuals and even groups that were less focused on getting the work done and unsympathetic to our clients.
On a more positive note, I learned so much over the years from associations with colleagues all over the world.

Based on all those years, you won't be surprised to learn that I have strong views about USAID HR management in general.

First, in my view it was inappropriate to ever have anybody who didn't have Foreign Service experience heading HR. It's a Foreign Service agency; someone needs to be in a position to speak knowledgeably about FS work and circumstances. I also thought that the person in charge of the Foreign Service personnel office (however it was configured) should be FS. Ideally there would be a FSO director and a CS deputy for continuity. It was when there were log gaps between FS assignments and FS both of HR and Foreign Service personnel, who seemed less focused on the immediate work and more on the next assignment that we ran into trouble.

As workforce planning became more in vogue in government generally, another (erroneous, in my view) assumption was the FS in USAID and State were the same. Thus, in this theory, if the rank profile for the State Department was bottom heavy, with many more officers at the 06, 05, 04 and 03, fewer 02 and fewer still 01s, then USAID's rank profile should be the same. That was one of the foundational assumptions of the 1990s RIF design leading to a focus on FS-01s, that USAID had "too many" FS-01s and was thus top heavy.

In reality, USAID hires technical experts in many more fields than does State, and most missions have only one or maybe two FSOs in each backstop. State tends to have a larger FSO population at each post, and be concentrated in far fewer areas of expertise. .

Q: And that was appropriate because of a larger group at the mid-level management level?

PITAS: No, I don't think it was appropriate at all. USAID mission portfolios and staffing drove the need for a very different profile that the State FS.

From the late ‘70s to the ‘90s budget and position ceiling constraints imposed by State meant USAID missions had fewer and fewer FSOs to the point that almost every FSO was an office director and the only direct hire in their technical area. This wasn’t true in the largest missions, Egypt, El Salvador, Kenya, but they became less and less typical and the majority of missions were quite small. At the same time, in these small missions there was one FSO per backstop, each managing a big dollar program. It wasn’t usually prudent or realistic for this lone FSO to be a FS-03 with 5 years of experience. Thus USAID needed more FS-01s than State.

Q: Yes. What kinds of recommendations would you have for someone coming in to be the director of HR or, as it is called today, HCTM (Human Capital Training and Management)?

Well, first of all I would hope this hypothetical person would be coming into HCTM as a part of their Foreign Service career rather than a CS expert from outside USAID.

Second I would recommend in-depth examination of the regulations and systems as they exist before envisioning sweeping changes. Yes, some things will always need reform, change, but others are in place because they work, or are required by rules USAID can’t readily change, such as the FS Act that I have mentioned many times today.

It's also important for the HCTM/HR director to be able to see the Agency as a system as well as a group of individuals. Some of the HCTM/HR directors I enjoyed the most had great difficulty in embracing the need for a demonstrably equitable system for many functions. When hiring or making assignments, someone who seems perfect can’t be placed without considering other eligible candidates, as tempting and expedient as that may be. At some point someone, frequently the HCTM Director, has to be able to say and demonstrate that we were fair and equitable and followed established procedures.

Q: You can’t make a rule and then intentionally break it.

PITAS: Exactly. And that sounds really bureaucratic and sometimes is time consuming and ends up with the original preferred candidate, but there are always people watching for what looks like cheating or preferential treatment by HCTM/HR officials.

Q: Yes. Because the system doesn’t work if it’s not seen by everyone to be fair.

PITAS: Exactly.

Third, I’d find out what the essential work is and what kind of staff time it requires. Many of my superiors got tired of me responding to a new priority by saying “what are we going to stop doing to take care of the new priority?” One of my personal failings over the years was that I like to be systematic, I like to be organized, I like to do things quickly, and I didn’t mind at certain life stages doing things for ten hours a day instead of eight. But the trouble is then the organization gets used to ten hour’s worth of effort and production on a routine basis, and that isn’t sustainable.

Finally, most USAID FS naturally have very limited if any exposure to Civil Service regulations and issues and have to depend on advice from CS HCTM/HR managers. I worked for one Director who frequently commented (disparagingly rather than flatteringly!) that CS staff were the FSNs of Washington (he should have been so lucky!) when in fact CS staff are fenced in by rules and regulations that need careful management.

Q: Absolutely. Well, I must say that, as I mentioned before we started, I've interviewed a number of people who have thanked you in their oral history interviews for your support and for your efforts on their behalf, whether it was on tandem assignments or difficulties with other family issues that dictated assignments such as pregnancy and where the child could be born.

PITAS: A FS career demands a lot of many more players than the actual FSO. So frequently considering family needs such as tandem assignments, schooling, medical issues fall by the wayside when decisions are being made.

HR policies are not always examined from the family perspective, either. I mentioned support for the families of FSOs RIF'ed at overseas posts who were collateral damage when FSOs lost their jobs, children who had to move before school was out, spouses who lost their jobs too. I learned from the contractor supporting these families that one group really being hit hard were the high school seniors who weren't going to graduate with their friends at post because they were going to be back in the U.S. instead. Not only that, because overseas schools did not have a class called "US Government" some DC area school systems were ruling that these kids weren't even eligible to graduate from high school at all. I was able to address that particular issue through a contact in the Fairfax County school system, who identified a correspondence type civics test that the schools would recognize to meet graduation requirements, and we were able to graduate all the senior children of RIF'd FSOs. Organizationally that was a minor point, but to the families involved it sure wasn't!

All these things take time and energy that needs to be factored into HR's role!

Q: The main point being that a lot of people have appreciated all the support you've given them over the years. So, any final thoughts before we conclude on your career?

PITAS: I've probably talked myself out unbelievably.

Q: Well again, thank you very much for doing this and why don't we stop for now.

PITAS: Sure, it's been fun.

End of interview