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DENISE ROLLINS

Interviewed by: Carol Peasley
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INTERVIEW

Q: Today is June 22, 2023, and this is Carol Peasley doing interview number one with Denise Rollins.

So, Denise, first, we are delighted that you are participating in the oral history program and wonder if you could start out by telling us where you were born and about your childhood and family. Anything you want to tell us about your origins.

Childhood, Family, Education, and Early Background

ROLLINS: Yes, yes, yes, yes. Well, you know, I was born in Detroit, Michigan. One of two children. My brother, Mike, is nearly ten years older than I am. Our working-class parents divorced when I was young, and our mother remarried when I was about four years old to a high school friend who was divorced and had four children -- three girls and a boy. So, I was raised by my mother and stepfather, Jonathan. His daughters lived across the street from us with their paternal grandmother and babysat me regularly.

I lived in a predominantly black neighborhood for the first twelve years and attended Roosevelt Elementary and Durfee Junior High Schools. We moved in 1964, in the middle of the academic year when my parents bought a home in a predominantly Jewish neighborhood. I struggled to blend in with the Jewish and Black students at Schultz Jr. High School because the schoolwork was more advanced than I was used to. Academically, I was behind at Schultz Jr. High at the beginning, although I was at the top

of my class at Roosevelt. My Schultz seventh grade class was reading War and Peace by Leo Tolstoy. I had never read such a deep and complex story like that. It took me a while to catch up, but I got it together by the end of the semester. With the Black kids, I was an outsider and unfamiliar with the more middle-class culture. I was bullied for a while until I was finally accepted into the fold.

Q: So, you saw the difference in public schools.

ROLLINS: Absolutely, I saw the difference. My mother was an avid reader. We had books everywhere. They were stashed all over, in the bathrooms, in the kitchen. (Laughs) My mother read every single day. I belonged to the Book of the Month Club and always read. As a result, I was able to catch up with the more challenging curriculum by the end of the seventh grade. It was difficult, but I persevered.

Q: Did your mother work, by the way?

ROLLINS: Yes. My mother worked as a dietetic assistant in the cafeteria at Women's Hospital, and she did that for thirty years or so. My stepfather worked on the line at Ford Motor Company. With both parents working, the dual income allowed us to buy our first home. Moving, at twelve years old, to this new neighborhood in northwest Detroit, I began to see another world out here.

Q: Yes — and that's a difficult age, anyway, to make a move. Adding to that, you had the challenges of a different curriculum and different kids.

ROLLINS: Yes. The first few semesters were challenging because I moved in the middle of the year. Preteen is always an exciting time, but when you couple it with different educational expectations, along with making friends with both Jewish and Black kids, life becomes a dance trying to fit in. I had to catch up socially because that is when you start forming alliances, and I had to catch up academically.

Q: Was there any overt prejudice that you had to deal with when the family moved to the new neighborhood or were you oblivious to it if it was there?

ROLLINS: I had more challenges with the black students because, back then, skin color separated the various social groups. I was often called 'high yellow' or 'redbone'. (Laughs) It was tough. It was tough because I did not have what was considered "good hair" (hair that is naturally straight or soft curls). I was light in complexion, but I had woolly hair. Colorism was alive and well then and used to separate social groups. This concept was a precursor to college admissions, which, at the Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs), used the paper bag test – meaning they preferred girls lighter than a paper bag. I avoided that socialization and decided to befriend a few girls who were not socially advanced, and we remained friends through high school. I was not in the 'in crowd.' Many of the Jewish students moved away during high school, and the Jewish Community Center, which featured a swimming pool, began to ban non-Jews

from using the center. Given that the center was only a block from my house, it was difficult, at the time, to understand why that happened.

Q: Did you have any other challenges?

ROLLINS: In fifth grade, I wanted to run for editor of the Roosevelt newspaper. My competitor was a classmate well-liked by everyone; she was smart and an A+ student. I was a good student, about A-, but not as popular as she. I talked to my mother, who said, "Look. Do you want this? Do you want to be editor?" "Yes, Mom, I want it." And she said, "Okay, so what must you do to get it?" "We have to give speeches, and then there would be voting," My mother encouraged me to work on my speech and helped prepare me to deliver it by reading it repeatedly. I remember entering the classroom that day. Madelyn Davis, my challenger, gave her speech, and I gave mine. And I just knew this was going to be the end for me. But what happened is, I got elected. (Peasley laughs)

Q: Congratulations.

ROLLINS: So, I was the school student editor of the newspaper for the fifth and sixth grades. And so, that gave me a little self-confidence that I could overcome whatever you're going to put in front of me, and I guess that was my mother's spirit too because my mother had sat in at the lunch counters in Michigan that didn't want to serve Black people after World War II. She worked in the car factories during the war and could not eat at the food counter at Kresge's Five and Dime. And this is in Detroit, not Mississippi. Her determination to be served and acknowledged is where my drive comes from. And so, my mother had a drive and a spunk about her that she instilled in me.

Q: Was she from Detroit? Had she been born in Detroit and grew up there or had she grown up somewhere else and gone to Detroit?

ROLLINS: My mother, Mary Kirk, was born in Downingtown, Pennsylvania. My grandmother, Geneva, moved to Detroit to work as a domestic during the booming car industry years in the 1930s. My mother was seven years old, and her sister, Martha, five when my grandmother brought them to Detroit in the late 30s.

Downingtown is outside of Philly, and I have a long line of relatives there. My family's last name, which goes back generations, is Kirk. My grandmother, mother, and aunt were all Kirks, as are my cousins here in Maryland who were also born in Downingtown. The family folklore says that one of our ancestors came up from the south on the Underground Railroad.

Q: Underground Railroad and stayed while en route?

ROLLINS: And that's how they got—and stayed, but we don't know when that was or any of that information. But we can trace the family back, I know, great, great, great, you know, grandparents. And I have a cousin who's working on that now. (Laughs) And so, that's where she was from. I have a small nuclear family with my grandmother, mother,

aunt, and my brother. Also, my father only had a sister. That's it. (Laughs). My grandmother brought them to Michigan when my mother was around seven, and my grandmother was a domestic and worked for a wealthy car executive. I think she worked for someone from the Dodge family from the car industry because Black women couldn't get a job outside of being domestic.

Q: Right.

ROLLINS: Until the early fifties, my grandmother got a job at the City-County building as one of the first Black elevator operators. This was the first time black women could get a job outside of domesticity. My family was very proud of her because it allowed her to buy a house in the 1950s despite the banks and government redlining.

Q:. Okay, I asked because you mentioned the treatment your mother received at lunch counters in Detroit. I was wondering if she'd had any experience in the South or only in the North.

ROLLINS: No. The black community knew what was going on in the country, but no, she didn't have any direct experience in the South. My father, who I eventually became close to before he passed, was from St. Louis. His father sent him to Detroit to live with his mother (my paternal grandmother, Mildred Scott(when he was about nine or ten years old, so he did not have much experience in the South either.

Q: Right. And obviously, education was important to her. You said she loved to read and so that was valued very highly.

ROLLINS: Oh, yeah. I remember I belonged to the Children's Book of the Month Club. (Laughs) And, from about five years old, there were just books everywhere. Even when my mother passed away, we found books in the basement and garage, although she had started checking out books at the library. (laughs). But reading was essential to her. As a result, my brother and I are both very avid readers.

Q: That's great. So, you moved up to the other neighborhood and you said that it was challenging because you saw the differentiated educational opportunities between sections of Detroit. What was your experience in high school?

ROLLINS: I went to Mumford High School, just down the street from Schultz Jr. High School. The school was diverse at the time. It was predominantly Jewish, some white and some black. I was in the Advanced College Curriculum track, but my mother always made me take a typing class. She said that I could earn some income on the side by typing other students' papers. (Laughs) I charged 10 cents a page. I was more in tune with science, so math and science were probably my best subjects. As an avid reader, I began to want answers to questions; I wanted to understand better why the world is the way it is. So, I preferred concrete subject matter, so to speak. So, that's how I got into pharmacy. I was not a liberal arts major; I preferred science. As a result, I applied to the Wayne State University College of Pharmacy and was accepted into the program.

Q: And Wayne State is in Detroit?

ROLLINS: Yes. In Detroit. I have the 1969 yearbook and review it periodically.

Q: Yep.

ROLLINS: My son was visiting one day, and I opened the yearbook to show him my photo and activities. An acceptance letter from the University of Michigan fell out. I don't even remember getting that letter.

I remember I was also accepted at Wellesley and my mother said, "Oh, no." There was no way she was going to send me off.

Q: You might have been in Hillary Clinton's class. (Both laugh)

ROLLINS: I'm telling you. And you know, I was not an easy teenager, okay? (Laughs) I've never been to prison or anything. (Laughs) But you know, I was rebellious and my partner in crime, so to speak, was a friend who lived across the street. We knew how to have a good time. (Laughs)

Q: So, you applied to a variety of colleges. Were you doing any extracurricular activities in high school as well?

ROLLINS: I was a candy striper and babysitter and worked at Winkelman's women's store on the weekends.

Q: At the hospital where your mother worked?

ROLLINS: No, no, at a hospital near our house. (Laughs)

I was the neighborhood babysitter. My clientele were my next-door neighbors who had six kids and several families down the street. I used to earn good money at the time that helped pay for the movies, and my savings allowed me to buy my first car – a 1964 Oldsmobile F85.

Q: Did you continue with school newspaper work?

ROLLINS: I did not think I had, but when I attended the 50th anniversary of my high school graduation in 2019, there was a photo of me with other students working on the school paper and yearbook. You know how you forget these things. (Laughs)

Q: But you don't remember that, okay. (Laughs)

ROLLINS: I didn't remember it. I remember working at Winkelman's women's clothing store on weekends and, later, at the church. And then, I worked on the soda fountain at

the equivalent of CVS back then, it was called Cunningham's Drug Store. I made sandwiches and milkshakes. (Laughs)

Q: Making cherry Cokes.

ROLLINS: Yes, yes, absolutely. So, you know, because you must have a little money so you can go to the movies and the mall and what have you. So, yeah, I did a variety of things in preparation to earn a little income and go off to university so that I would have a little stash.

I attended Wayne State University in Detroit. But after a year, because I was still seventeen and my mother wanted me to stay at home —I had to be home at 10:00 pm on the weekends, so this was becoming a problem. (Laughs) So, I decided to move into the dormitory. I was in the dormitory for three years. Well, for two and a half years and then got an apartment with my roommate. I studied pharmacy at Wayne State University for four years. It was a six-year program. I worked as a pharmacy intern at Cunningham's. I had a strange experience at the drugstore. The pharmacist was having an affair with one of the cashiers. He was white, she was black. And so, I would come in after class, let's say in the afternoon if I got there around 3:00 or 4:00. He would take off, and they would be gone, more than an hour, hour and a half or sometimes two hours, which was really illegal because as an intern, you're supposed to be there with the pharmacist and the regulations say that. (Laughs) But he would take off. Eventually, he got in—I don't know what, how this happened because it was all in the newspaper and everything, but he—one of the women he was dealing with was apparently involved in drugs or either her ex-boyfriend was selling drugs or what have you. Anyway, this ex-boyfriend came into the house and attempted to kill everybody in the house. He stabbed them. Everybody, including four children, died except Roger, the pharmacist. He slit Roger's throat, but Roger survived somehow. From then on, it was like, oh, my God. I later learned that Roger was selling class two narcotics out of the drugstore. So, this was a hit.

Q: Wow.

ROLLINS: I don't know how this happened, but it just scared the bejesus out of me. And by that time, pharmacy didn't seem like the career I wanted. Also, there was a methadone clinic down the street, so a lot of the customers were coming for methadone. And I mean, do I want to live my life doing this? (Laughs)

Q: Yes, you were seeing a whole other side of the world there.

ROLLINS: Yeah, yeah. It was terrifying. So, I dropped out of Wayne State, and, of course, my parents were distraught that I was dropping out of college. However, I had a girlfriend, Sally Rich, who came to me and said, "I think I'm going to drive to San Francisco." This was in 1972. She had met a young man out there the year before, and she wanted to see if this relationship would work out. So, she decided she was going to drive from Detroit to San Francisco, and she just happened to say to me, "So, do you want me to drop you somewhere?" When I think about this today, I mean, if my son had

ever told me that, I would have hit the roof, right? But I told her, "Yeah." And she says, "Where do you want to go?" I said, "I want to go to Washington, DC."

So, we drove, she drove to Washington, DC, and I checked into the YWCA (laughs), and at first, I enrolled at the Howard University School of Pharmacy, but I knew it just wasn't going to work for me. So, I got a job as a hostess at Blackie's House of Beef.

Q: Oh, yes, I remember it. I might have been there sometime when you were the hostess. (Both laugh)

ROLLINS: Oh, God. So, while I was there at Blackie's, well, one of the servers said, "Oh, well, you have an education." I mean, I hadn't completed my education. But she says, "You have an education. Why are you working here?" And I said, "Well, you know, I just got here." I didn't know DC. And she said, "Well, you should be working on the Hill. Have you been up to see your member of Congress?" And I said, "No, who's that?" You know, I knew nothing about politics at the time. And she said, "Well, you know, if you go up on the Hill, they'll let you know who your representative is, and you might be able to get a job there." Okay. So, on my off day I walked from, I think it was like Sixteenth and K up to the Hill because I was afraid to take the buses because I didn't know where I was going, right? And you know, there was no Metro at the time. So, I walked up to the Capitol, about five miles, and I found out who my representative was, which was Congressman John Conyers, and so, I walked into his office, it was around lunchtime, and a gentleman was sitting there and he said, "May I help you?" And I said, "Yes, I'm Denise Rollins." And I had a little, you know, piece of a resumé, I'll call it, and said, "Well, I'm from Detroit. I'm looking, you know, I'm wondering if there are any opportunities here," et cetera, et cetera. And he said, "Okay. Well, leave your resume, and it has your phone number?" "Yes, the phone number's there." He says, "And I'll have somebody will call you." And two days later, I get a call from his administrative assistant asking me to come in for an interview. And I interviewed got the job immediately.

At first, I was given a patronage job. So, back in the day, the patronage jobs, the highly valued ones, were elevator operators, okay? Because I was twenty-two, twenty-three years old, and had a six-hour shift on those old-style elevators you've got to wind up and manually operate. I was assigned to a member's only elevator. So, that was exciting because shortly after I joined, the Nixon impeachment process started, and Congressman Conyers was the first to call for his impeachment and his resignation. So, lawyers were everywhere, and everybody was talking in the elevators. There was all this chatter about what was going to happen next. And it was just exciting. And I didn't know then how important all of that was, but the members would get in the elevator, and they didn't see me, right? And so, they were talking about everything. It was an interesting time.

After about nine months or so, the Congressman's AA asked me to come into the office, and he gave me a position as a caseworker. And that involved working on constituent services such as Social Security and other government benefits. I worked for Congressman Conyers for about two and a half years and then was offered a job with Congressman Paul Simon from Southern Illinois. I became a legislative assistant for his

office and focused more on pneumoconiosis, which is Black Lung disease, and other health issues.

I worked for Congressman Simon also for about two and a half years. So, I had about five years total up on the Hill. And then, one day a friend in another congressman's office called and said, "You know, we have a group of Nigerian governors coming in for a briefing and a tour. Can you help me conduct the briefing and tour?" And I said, "Oh, of course, I'd be happy to." I go over to the office, and there were nineteen governors, okay.

Q: By this time, this is now the late seventies?

ROLLINS: Seventy-six, 1976.

So, we conducted the briefing and took them on the tour of Statuary Hall, the whole thing. And they said, "Well, we're getting ready to go have lunch. Would you two like to join us?" Yeah, of course, yes, indeed. So, we went. I had forgotten the name, but it was an expensive restaurant. We had lunch with them, and as we left to go back to the Hill, they invited us to party at the Watergate. "Would you like to join us? We'd love for you to join us for the party." Okay. So, Francis and I walked over to the Watergate that evening, when Nigerians were rolling in oil money, petrodollars. It had just started. So, they had money, just tons of money. I had never heard of Dom Perignon, right? (Laughs) And they had cases of this stuff. Oh, God, you know, the champagne was flowing.

And it was during that evening that they started talking about FESTAC. Now, I don't know if you remember FESTAC, the African Art Festival. And it was held every two years in an African country. It had been in Senegal, so 1977 was when it would be held in Nigeria. And it's kind of like the Olympics in the sense that it's held all over the country, you know, it's not just concentrated in one city. Black people from all over the world would go to this festival, and the State Department sponsored two plane loads of American black artists to attend the festival wherever it occurred.

So, they said, "Oh, would you like to come to FESTAC?" Well, yeah, okay. But you know, I'm not—Nigeria? I had never been out of the country except to Canada, which is 10 minutes from Detroit, but FESTAC? I'd never been anywhere. (Laughs) And I said, "Yeah, okay." And they said, "Okay, well, we are serious." And I said, "Yeah, right, okay. Great." So, they kept in touch, and about six months later, I got a phone call informing me that someone was coming from Nigeria to take me back. What? (Laughs) They said, "All you have to do is get a passport." Okay, so I did apply for a passport. And they said, "Well, the person who is coming with you, coming to get you, would take you to the embassy and get your visa." Okay. And that's what happened.

Q: But now, your friend Frances, she didn't come along on this?

ROLLINS: No, Francis was a male friend/colleague.

Q: Okay.

ROLLINS: Right, that's all. Because he worked for Charles Diggs, Congressman Diggs.

So, no, he didn't come. The Nigerians sent somebody for me, the aide-de-camp. This is when I first found out what an aide-de-camp is. (Laughs) And went through London and arrived in Lagos and spent the next two weeks traveling around the country, going to the different performances. And just, you know, it was one—where am I? You know, how did I—it was just amazing. And you know, I just thought I had died and gone to heaven, right? It was just amazing. They had money and power. I had my own separate cottages wherever I traveled. I had house staff who would draw my bath for me. And of course, the Dom Perignon was flowing all over the country. (Laughs) I spent two weeks there, you know, going to Kano, going to, you know, different places and learning about the diaspora.

While I was there, I was asked by a friend of one of the governors who brought me there if I was interested in a job. They told me they were opening an office, a London buying office. And so, they wanted to know if—his name was Salé Jambo, and he wanted to know if I'd be interested in working in London. I had never thought of working in another country. They said they wanted to interact more with African Americans and start coming to the States, and because this oil money flowed, they wanted partnerships and business arrangements. So, Salé asked me if I would move to London and open their London buying office. Uh, okay. (Laughs)

Oh, God. So, I returned to DC, resigned from Congressman Simon's office, and passed through Detroit to say goodbye to my family.

Q: Okay, what did your mother think about all this? (Laughs)

ROLLINS: My mother didn't know what to do. My family didn't know what to do with me, you know. (Laughs) Because my stepfather's family was Pentecostal, right? Church of God in Christ. Those are the holy rollers, right? And they could not imagine a young woman leaving her home country and moving to a strange land.

For the first ten years or so, I attended that church. But they were very strict. Women had to cover their elbows and knees. No jewelry, no makeup. Very, very conservative. Women are not allowed to speak in church. The man is the head of the house. But you know, my mother had this streak about her, this independence; she managed our family finances and was more liberal. When we moved when I was 12 to northwest Detroit, we started attending a Congregational church 180 degrees from the Pentecostals. (laughs) A much more liberal church doctrine, along with a reasonably liberal mother, allowed me to be adventurous and curious about life. But my mother still couldn't understand why I wanted to leave the country. Remember, we did not have cell phones, computers, or the Internet.

Anyway, I got on the plane, and I moved to London. (Laughs) The company, Jambo Holdings, had an apartment for me in Earl's Court, a lovely apartment, as a matter of fact.

Q: With a lot of Australian neighbors, right?

ROLLINS: Well, not so much then.
This is the seventies. Now there are a ton of them. But back then, not so much.

Q: Okay.

ROLLINS: And so, I, I don't know how I did it because I had to learn the British way of doing everything. First, I didn't understand a word of British English, okay? I had to communicate with the working-class folks who spoke a different English language, but I had to buy furniture and get phones and Telex machines installed and pay bills. (Laughs) And so, oh, God, the first six months, oh, just trying to understand. So, if you called somebody and I said, "Can you repeat that? I'm sorry, can you say that again?" Just—and we had a driver who was Cockney. I just never understood him —okay, Harry, okay, Harry. (Laughs) That's all I could say. Oh, God. So, it was quite an experience. But I got the office up and running. We got the phones and the telex and the furniture and all we needed to start operating.

Chairman Jambo would fly from Nigeria to London periodically, maybe every three or four months. He owned several companies in Nigeria – medical and laboratory supplies, rural electrification equipment, construction and safety equipment, industrial kitchens, and aviation to fly Muslims to Hajj. His Nigerian companies purchased primarily European equipment through a British-owned buying company. Salé decided to start his own buying company, Jambo Holdings, rather than pay the British company a commission. I opened the office so he could get out of the contract with the British company.

Q: So, you were buying the stuff and then shipping it?

ROLLINS: Yes. Buying in Europe and shipping to Nigeria.

Q: Wow. So, you must have learned a lot about procurement and business in that position? Did you have to hire a lot of people as well to do the work?

ROLLINS: No, it was just three—it was four of us total. We did not need a big London staff because I could communicate with European companies by Telex and phone, and the companies usually directly shipped from their ports.

So, it was just invoicing and all. I did not know until I went to graduate school at Johns Hopkins and learned about capital flight in an international finance class. However, that is what I was doing unknowingly. We would increase contracts and invoices by twenty percent. When the payment is sent to London, we paid the supplier and banked the twenty percent.

Q: That's amazing. Amazing. And how long did you do that?

ROLLINS: For three years.

Q: Did you make trips to Nigeria as well?

ROLLINS: Oh, yeah. And I remember going to the World Cup in Luxemburg. (Laughs) With Salé and his entire retinue, right? He never traveled by himself. He'd bring people from Nigeria then, of course, and he knew folks because he had a house in Paddington, London. There were other Nigerians, right, that had bought all these houses because of all this money they were making from the Nigerian government, selling fighter jets and equipment. Salé knew a lot of folks. And even, you know, there were a couple of occasions when he would come to the office and ask "Well, where should we go to dinner?" I'm thinking of someplace in London, right? And no, "Let's go to Paris." Hop on a plane, go to Paris overnight. Stayed at the five-star Four Season George V Hotel.

Q: With your Dom Perignon. (Laughs)

ROLLINS: Oh, God. Yes. Then we'd return the following day and get back to work and do what we had to do. So, it was quite an adventure. But at the time that you're doing it. I was still in my twenties, you know? So, I'm just trying to figure out where I am and what I will do.

And then, finally, I kept thinking that I didn't have my degree, right? I tried to find a degree program in the UK. I tried to take classes, like evening classes. And I discovered that the British rarely return to school after leaving. You take your O and A-levels, and you get into a university; if you go to university, your education is over. No one had heard of adult education. In my late twenties, I felt I needed to be rooted and couldn't do this job forever. So, I decided to return to Washington, DC, at the end of 1979 or early 1980, and I saw a job in the paper for a program manager at the African American Institute (AAI). I applied and got the job, and it was for the performing arts program. AAI had a performing arts program funded by the Rockefeller Foundation, and we would bring African performing artists to the States and send American performing artists to Africa.

I was with AAI for six and a half years. After about three years, funding for the performing arts program started to dwindle. The last and biggest group we brought over was the National Dance Theater of Zaire, with a thirty-five-member company consisting of musicians, dancers, and choreographers. We raised money to complement the Rockefeller grant, and the group performed in six U.S. cities. Fortunately, many U.S. companies with operations in Zaire, such as Ford Motor Company, Goodyear Tire, and Maurice Templesman, a diamond merchant, were very generous in funding the group's U.S. tour.

Q: Yes, right, Maurice Tempelsman who was involved with mining.

ROLLINS: He had a big operation, so raising the money for the tour was easy. The group performed in Kent, Ohio; Detroit; Lincoln University in Oxford, Pennsylvania; Atlanta; and New York City. In every city, the group would conduct master classes in the morning and perform in auditoriums at night. What was exciting about that was that—and every, every place we stopped, we made sure that there were opportunities for American and Zairian artists to learn from each other, right? One of the most exciting workshops/master classes was in New York at the Merce Cunningham company, and he was there. The group also conducted a master class with Paul Taylor and his dancers. So, that was doggone exciting. (Both laugh) The AAI Program Director, Andy Gilboy, managed the overall tour, and my role was to take care of the dancers and musicians – ensuring they were on time and had three meals a day. I had to arrange the restaurants for breakfast, lunch, and dinner in each city. It was challenging to find restaurants that were open at 11:00 pm after a performance that included thirty-five Zairians, two staff, two French interpreters, and various hangers-on from AAI headquarters. I don't know if you remember Ambassador Don Easum, who had been an ambassador in Nigeria and, I think, Burkina Faso at another time, was the AAI President. And so, he would join us or someone else from the staff. You're looking at forty to forty-four people you must feed before midnight.

Q: You were with the arts side of AAI, but I know they did other things as well.

ROLLINS: After three years, the art side dwindled. We had no money, so I switched to the AAI international visitor program.

Q: Was Vivian Lowery Derryk at AAI during the period you were there?

ROLLINS: No. No, she came later. While I was there, Ambassador Don Easum was President, and Ambassador Walter Carrington followed him.

Q: Okay. Well, the arts work was really exciting and fit in with your initial introduction to Nigeria as well.

ROLLINS: Yes. Working with the Zairians on the tour inspired me to start taking dance classes. I started Brazilian dance classes in Adams Morgan in DC. After about a year or so, I was introduced to Dance Place, across the street from the Brazilian studio, and began taking African and Jazz dance classes as a hobby. I continued to work at AAI, enrolled at Howard University to complete my B.A. degree, and performed at Dance Place. It was a busy time, but I persevered. After Howard, I attended Johns Hopkins University's School of Advanced International Studies and completed a master's degree in 1987. I joined the Foreign Service that same year. I performed in the evenings and on weekends. I have so many great photos from that era of my life. It was so much fun, and I met life-long friends who are still close friends today. We travel together regularly every year.

Q: That's great.

So, when you moved over to the other part of AAI, the international visitors program, this would have now been in the early 1980s.

Q: Were there any South Africans in the exchange programs at that point?

ROLLINS: I don't remember South Africans specifically, that was a tumultuous time for U.S. relations with South Africa. There were numerous other Africans who were recipients of the program. I don't remember programming any South Africans, frankly.

Q: Were those programs funded by USAID? And, if so, was that then your initial exposure to USAID ?

ROLLINS: It was all USAID, all USAID money.

But I did not know who USAID was because it was the State Department that managed it. So, I had heard of USAID, but it didn't mean anything to me because the person I dealt with was at State was in the cultural affairs office.

Q: In the international visitors' program.

ROLLINS: Yes. I didn't know anything about USAID then. Even though, as it turned out, one of the friends that I met through Andy, the director of the AAI program, worked for USAID. He was a civil servant, Ralph, and he often told me about USAID's activities. Ralph and I have remained close over these years, but I didn't know what he did at USAID. (Laughs) USAID had no meaning for me at the time.

Q: Okay.

ROLLINS: At Howard, I enrolled in their University Without Walls program, which was designed for working adults. I thought it was going to be easy. It was a challenging and difficult program. While we could apply for academic credit for some work experience, extensive research and writing were required to prove that you had learned the theory and principles of a particular subject matter. If, for example, you wanted to earn four credits in Political Science 101, you had to conduct extensive research on the class and write a paper that ties your experience and expertise to all of the elements of that class. And that was only Political Science 101. (Laughs) Then, Political Science 102. You know what I mean. Some classes were taken independently with the professor's approval of your requirements, and other classes were in person.

When we needed to take an independent class, we could negotiate a learning contract with a professor, allowing us to learn the academic material without attending the class. It sounds easy, but the Learning Contracts also required much research and writing, again, to demonstrate that you had acquired the needed academic knowledge of that course. And you had to be able to take the exams. When I had to take a course in person, such as Statistics, I rode my bike and used to zip over to Howard in between meetings at AAI, which was in Dupont Circle. Then, I would rush back before I was missed. (laughs), I'd

pedal like a fool, get over there, carry the bike into the room, and sit down. Most classes were 50 minutes, so I could often say I had been at lunch. I had a Filipino secretary, Virginia, who used to cover for me. So, when I was in class, she would say, "Oh, she's gone to a meeting over at State," or "She's at lunch with so-and-so." She did that for two years. (Both laugh)

Q: That's a good assistant.

ROLLINS: Yes, yes. After two years, I earned my B.A. in Economics with a minor in French. Howard awarded me most of my Wayne State academic credits in other subjects. However, since I was no longer in the Pharmacy program, I had to choose another major and minor.

When I was at AAI early on, I decided I wanted to learn French. So, from 1980 to 1981, I started taking classes at Alliance Française off of Connecticut Avenue for the first two years. I wanted a total immersion program to learn the language better. Andy, at AAI, said, "Well, I've got friends in Senegal." And he said, " Why don't you go to Senegal? Why don't you go to Dakar." Okay. So, AAI gave me a round-trip ticket, and I spent four months in Dakar, taking classes at the University of Dakar studying French. (Laughs)

Q: Wow. That's fantastic.

ROLLINS: Oh, yes. So, I came back, and that's when I decided to get my degree. That is when I enrolled at Howard.

Q: And how did you decide on economics, just out of curiosity? Were you thinking of a career with USAID at that point?

ROLLINS: No. No. At first, I had thought of sociology, and Andy asked me, "What are you going to do with a degree in sociology?" (Laughs) I said, "I don't know. I like sociology." He said, "You can read about sociology on your own time. You need a degree in something that is going to help you get a job." So, I'm just looking through—(laughs).

Q: Okay. So, there wasn't a strong reason for it.

ROLLINS: There wasn't a strong reason, but, like I told you, I always gravitated toward math and science. Economics seemed like a natural subject for me. I wanted to understand better how the world worked. My experience in Nigeria and London exposed me to other cultures and economies, and I wondered how each differed from the U.S. After graduating from Howard, I began asking friends about SAIS (School of Advanced International Studies). I used to walk by the building regularly, and it piqued my interest.

Q: Right here in Dupont Circle?

ROLLINS: Yeah. And I started taking evening classes initially because I could walk over from AAI. And then, after I had taken maybe about four or five evening courses over the

course of a year or so, I said, "You know, I just need to—I want to knock this out of the way. I don't know how much longer it will take me, you know, just doing one course here and there." So, I decided to leave AAI, and since —well, I had three months of vacation coming to me because they had a very generous leave policy, and I had not taken a vacation since I had been there. So, I said, "Okay, well, I can do this, and I left AAI in October of 1986, and I said, "Okay, so that will carry me through December and then maybe I can go on unemployment." So, that's what I did. I enrolled in SAIS full-time, went on unemployment and it took me another nine months to finish. As I graduated, I'm in the career development office, figuring out my next move. I was going to interviews at different places focusing on my economics background. I applied for a position at Treasury, in the multilateral banks division. I thought this was going to be my dream job. During my master's program at SAIS, I interned at the International Trade Commission. My boss, Lee Tuthill, who's still a good friend, encouraged me to apply to USAID. I was thumbing through the *Economist Magazine* in the SAIS Career Development Office and saw an announcement for USAID jobs. I applied on that Sunday, the day I searched for jobs in the *Washington Post* Want Ads section.

On Sundays, I would go to the Library of Congress Reading Room and draft my introduction letters, along with revising my resume depending on the qualifications and skills required for the job. On Monday, Lee asked me which companies I had applied to on Sunday. I told her I had applied to USAID. "Oh, you'll never get hired at USAID." She said, "I have so many friends; everybody has been trying to work at USAID, and they never get a callback. She suggested that I look at other places and not get my hopes up. I said, "Okay, well, I will apply anyway."

So, I applied, and within a week, I got a call from USAID requesting a US Government 171 Form, which provides much more information than a resume. As a SAIS graduate, I benefited from their Career Development office, which advised on how to prepare impactful resumés and 171 forms, along with effective interviewing. SAIS invited a New York bank president to come down to DC and spend a day advising graduates on how to get the job they want. I was able to get an l/2-hour session with him where he reviewed my resume, which was five pages, and showed me how to identify the most critical elements of my background and get it on one sheet of paper.

Q: And a very interesting resumé.

ROLLINS: On the five-page resumé, he told me, "Nobody's going to read this." (Laughs) He said, "The most effective resumés are one-page." He said, "The only person I know who has two pages is Henry Kissinger." He said, "Because the second page is all of his publications." And he said—he went through my resumé and eliminated so much of what I had thought was important. So, my resumé was tight.

I submitted my SF 171 to USAID HR. The following week I get a—so this is August of '87. I get a call telling me they want me to come in for an interview. I'm like, "Oh, okay." But I have no idea what USAID does. You know, I mean, I talked to my friend Ralph, who worked there, but you know, it just didn't resonate with me at the time. And I have

had two interviews with the Treasury Department so far. That's the job I wanted. I decided, "Well, okay, I'm going to go to this interview. The interviewees included Patty Buckles, along with four other interviewers. They put me through the wringer as they are supposed to do. And I did okay because that was on a Thursday. Friday I get a call telling me to stop by the office to pick up the security forms that needed to be completed by Monday. That weekend, I spent hours completing those security forms, and I took them in on Monday, and they said, "We'll be back in touch." It took three months to get the Top-Secret Security Clearance, and on November 2nd, 1987, I was sworn in as a US Foreign Service Officer.

USAID, International Development Intern Class, 1987

Q: Wow. And were you hired as an IDI, an International Development Intern in November 1987?

ROLLINS: Yes. November 2, 1987.

Q: Was there a class? Was there a group of you who came in at the same time?

ROLLINS: Yes. I had the class photo that I can't seem to find now, but there were about 25 to 30 people in our IDI class. I remember Bob Posner was in my class—did you know Bob Posner?

Q: Yes.

ROLLINS: He was in my class. I can't remember—there are a lot of other folks I can't remember now.

Q: What was the gender composition? Close to 50-50 by that point in time?

ROLLINS: I don't know if it was half and half. But there were quite a few women, yeah, maybe, you know—

And very few people of color. (Laughs) There may have been one or two others.

Q: Did you have a country assignment when you came in?

ROLLINS: No.

Q: And you came in as a project development officer, as an economist or program officer?

ROLLINS: No, PDO (Project Development Officer).

Gail Spence was in the class before me. So, I joined in November. I think she joined in July/August. And she was very proactive in getting African American senior Foreign Service Officers to have lunch with us, our little junior FSO group. We combined our two classes, which totaled about ten black IDIs and several Black SFSOs spent an hour or so with us at lunch to give us advice on how to manage our USAID careers.

Q: Who were some of—do you remember who some of those folks were?

ROLLINS: Yes, Aaron Williams, Philip Michael Gary, Myron Golden and Keith Brown.

I think Valerie, Valerie Dixon-Horton also came over. And Lucretia Taylor.

John—John was the AA (Assistant Administrator) for Africa.

Q: John Hicks.

ROLLINS: Hicks. Yes.

Q: Okay. so that's great that that was happening. I hope you will mention things that the Agency has done to support its diversity objectives and to help people succeed. This effort by Gail sounds like one of those things that was very valuable, to have more senior folks take the time to talk to you all.

ROLLINS: Oh, absolutely. Because, you know, they used—I remember Myron Golden. He would always say, "Look. One thing you must learn in USAID. You must manage your career. You can't depend on anybody else to help you. You've got to figure out how to learn the ropes and do that as quickly as possible." I remember he said—because our agency communicated through cables then. Myron told us to read those stacks of cables that come across our desks even if we thought they were not relevant to our jobs. You'd get that stack of cables, you know, once or a week or whatever. He said, "Read everything that comes across your desk because you might not think it's important to you now, but there will be some information in there that you can use later." So, you know, he was very helpful. But I remember Myron because Myron was emphatic about things, too. And just learning the agency and rules and regulations was critical because in the Black community, we often talk about 'you've got to be twice as good to get to the same spot as someone else.'

What really benefited me, though, was the fact that Aaron Williams selected me to work in his office. Aaron was then the Director of the Private Sector office in the Latin America Bureau. If you recall, private sector development was the big thing then.

Q: Yes, right. This was the end of the end of the Reagan Administration, right?

So, you still didn't have a country of assignment but you were an IDI and you went into the Latin American bureau?

ROLLINS: Yes, because I had to do a, you know, a year in USAID and then, because I had studied French, I had to take several weeks of French language at the Foreign Service Institute to reach a two/two, so to pass the test. I immediately worked for Aaron in the private sector office—it was such a big, you know, focus for the agency. Aaron was traveling. Dwight Ink, the Assistant Administrator, was traveling all over Latin America. So, we had to write numerous speeches and briefing papers. I'd be in the office until 8:00, 9:00 at night, the first few months. And the thing is, I remember that Patty Buckles was the head of the program office. Terry Brown was the head of the Office Program and Project Development, but she was the head of the PDOs under Terry Brown. So, she used to complain to Terry that I'm supposed to be in her office because that's my backstop. But Aaron wanted me in his office. So, for the first six months, I worked with Aaron, and it was beautiful.

You know, I learned so much. My writing improved. I was busy and engaged.

And then Aaron is a very nice guy.

Q: Yes. It's interesting you mentioned writing when you talk about skills because particularly in those days writing skills were, I suspect even more important than they are today. In those days, it was a lot of memo writing. Now, there is a lot more shorthand via text and email.

ROLLINS: Yeah. Lots of writing. We did not have text and email then. Also, that was the time of the big country strategy reviews and I had to write the Issues Papers.

Q: But good that you had a focus on that early in your career and that those skills were strong.

So, you worked with Aaron and then, did you move into the Office of Project Development to develop those skills?

ROLLINS: Yes. So, then I moved to Patty—

Q: Patty Buckles?

ROLLINS: Patty. Because you know what happened? I just had a flash because it was Dawn Thomas. Do you remember Dawn Thomas?

Q: Yes.

ROLLINS: She was in my class. And it was—and Bob Posner. He was in my class. So, the three of us were in the PDO shop simultaneously, with Patty as supervisor. So, we were working with Patty and then—and I remember the very first kind of big-ticket item we worked on was the Caribbean Regional Strategy. And I don't know if you—I know you remember back in the day those strategy development sessions, oh, they were painful. Jesus Christ. Because you'd have—it was like a thousand people around a table.

You'd have the mission and mission deputy, the economists, the PDO, the program—and then you had, it seems like everybody in Washington would be there. (Laughs) If they weren't around the table they were sitting on the sideline.

Q: Room 2248 in the old State Department building. (Both laugh)

ROLLINS: Yes. Oh, my God. So, we did the—and I think—it was Marilyn Zack was the deputy regional—deputy director of the regional program. And oh, it was a brother who was the director. I forgot his name now. But anyway, so they had to defend, you know—

Q: And this was the regional office that was based in Barbados?

ROLLINS: No, the Latin American Caribbean Office in Washington strategy—it was for the whole Caribbean region.

So, it was Jamaica—

Q: Oh, so it wasn't just the Eastern Caribbean regional?

ROLLINS: No, not just the Eastern Caribbean. It was the whole—they were doing a regional strategy.

Q: Okay. So, it was probably being led by the Washington office of Caribbean Affairs?

ROLLINS: Yes. Marilyn Zack was the deputy director. So, I had to write—I had to prepare the issues paper. And you know, those issues papers went on interminably. Because everybody had to get their dig in, you know. (Laughs) It would go on and on and on. Oh, God. It was, oh, God, that was tough, you know, trying to get every single office because the entire agency, you know, had a little piece of it. So, that was kind of the big ticket—and so, I mean, I really got immersed in all—

Q: While there was a lot of work put into the approval process, some perhaps unnecessary, it was a learning tool for people working on the issues paper. I can't think of a better way to learn.

ROLLINS: Oh, absolutely.

Absolutely. I mean, when you're going through it, it's like, damn. (Laughs) This is punishment. But you know, to be a good PDO, which is what I wanted to be, then you know, and so I did it.

And there were many more like that over the six months with Aaron, first, in the LAC Private Sector Office and then six months with Patty. And then, I did three months with Peter Kim in RHUDO.

Q: Over in the Office of Housing?

ROLLINS: In Housing. Yes. And then, I went into language training.

Q: Okay. Did you have your assignment yet to Jamaica or—you did know.

ROLLINS: Yes, by that time, I knew I was going to Jamaica.

As a matter of fact, that next year I even took a vacation down there with a girlfriend of mine. We went to Kingston and met folks in the mission, just so I would have a sense of who was there. So, I completed six weeks of language training, then moved to Jamaica.

Q: Okay. But you did the language so you would complete your tenure requirement before you went overseas, right?

ROLLINS: Yes.

USAID/Jamaica, Project Development Officer (PDO) /Program Officer, 1988 - 1992

Q: So, when did you finally then make it to Jamaica?

ROLLINS: October 1988.

Q: October 1988. Okay. And you went into the project development office in the mission?

ROLLINS: Yeah. It was the—

Q: And who was the mission director then?

ROLLINS: Bill Joslin—he was a political appointment —he wasn't a Foreign Service officer.

He was out of New Hampshire.

Marilyn Zack was his deputy, though. She—

Q: And then, you were in the project development office?

ROLLINS: Yeah. Nancy—Nancy, not Hogan, Hoffman, I believe. Nancy—I'm trying to remember. She was the—no, no. Oh, you know who it was? Because the offices were separated because it was program and project development.

Q: Yeah, right.

ROLLINS: And it was Pat—oh, God. She moved to France when she retired. Pat—

Q: Oh, Lerner? Not to worry.

ROLLINS: She was a hellion too. Boy. (Laughs) But she was—she ran the PDO shop.

Q: But it was separate offices, the program office and the project development office. Okay.

ROLLINS: Yes.

Q: I had been in the Latin American bureau a few years before that, in the assistant director job for project development for a year, in 1984-1985. And as I recall, the Jamaica mission was doing a lot of privatization work and policy reform work. Was that the case when you were there?

ROLLINS: Yes, that and export development, agricultural export development. Yes, that was very big, you know, because Jamaica has always had a predominantly agricultural economy. But the big thing was the Caribbean Community (CARICOM), an organization of 15 member states and five associate member states in the Caribbean, focus on manufacturing. Remember, we had, what did we call it? Because a lot of—

Q: The Caribbean Basin Initiative?

ROLLINS: Yes, the Caribbean Basin Initiative.

And so, many different clothing manufacturers had set up operations there, so that was part of it. And then, of course—because their biggest export at that time was bauxite, you know, and aluminum. But that was about it. And their agriculture sector had really died. And most of them, they call them the higglers, these are the ladies who go—they would fly to Miami and buy fruits and vegetables and fly back, and they would sell those in the market because Jamaica's produce was considered undesirable. And there were tiny, tiny onions, et cetera, so they'd come to Miami, the higglers, and fill up the plane with all lots of produce for the markets at home. (Laughs).

So, I did two years as project development officer and then Nancy, I think Nancy Hoffman, was transferring out and Marilyn Zak, our deputy mission director, asked me, "You know, we need a program officer."

I did not know any of the program officer's responsibilities. But Marilyn said, "But you can learn it." So, because I think I was an FS-04? FS-03 maybe. It's probably a four. And she asked me to take over. So, that was baptism by fire (laughs), learning the program office and the budget. The first six months as a program officer were challenging. But, I got it.

Q: I assume there was a strong FSN (Foreign Service National) staff handling much of the budget work. Was that the case in Jamaica or did a lot of it rely upon you?

ROLLINS: We did. Oh, yeah, because they'd been there for, you know, 100 years, and they know the tasks that have to get done. But I had to—they had to teach me. (Laughs)

So, I could figure out what's, you know, what we're doing, what's right, what's wrong, all that stuff. So, they did. I did that, and then, in the meantime, I got married and had a baby. I married a Jamaican; he was an FSN.

He was an FSN at the embassy. When it came time for my next assignment, I was contacted by Lucretia Taylor, who was trying to get me to Cameroon, but then Dawn Liberi entered my life. (Laughs) And she started sending me cables. And I didn't know what to do but I talked to Myron Golden back in Washington, and he said, "Go to Ghana." So, that's what I did.

Q: Okay. Before we leave Jamaica, you were there for four years then, and so two years learning project development work and then two years learning and leading the program office.

ROLLINS: Mm-hm.

Q: Was that a good place for a first tour officer to go? Was it the size program and the kind of program that was good for a first-year officer?

ROLLINS: It was because, first, you know, when I tell people, when I have a couple of USAID mentees and, you know, Jamaica had twenty-one direct hires back then.

Q: Wow.

ROLLINS: I think they have three now, four. There were a lot of people there. I've always been the curious type so I'm always asking questions. I like learning, whatever it is. So, there were a lot of folks, old-timers who I could learn from. I would go and sit in their offices, and I was smoking then, so when you smoke—and you could smoke in the office at that time. We'd sit there and have a cigarette (laughs) and I would learn about agricultural development. I mean, what the heck do I know about agriculture? I don't know anything about agriculture. I don't know anything about family planning. I know I use it, but I don't know everything about it. When I talk to, let's say relatives or friends here, we assume everything just sprouted up perfectly. You'd have a department of Health, you'd have hospitals, you have schools; we don't know what it takes to get them started and to make them prosper and thrive. But that's what we do in development, right? We help countries figure out— how to create a functioning school, hospital, etc. So, learning what it takes to develop systems in a country was thrilling. I remember in Jamaica, like, the first, maybe my second year there, everybody in the Agriculture Office went on home leave that summer.

I was there, and we had this big agricultural export project in the analysis stage to help design a big project. We had a massive team of farming experts from universities arrive in Jamaica, and they analyzed what it would take for Jamaica to make progress, given the

challenges. When they delivered their report, I was the only person to meet them. So, I was sitting as they presented this big paper. I don't know how many pages—it could have been 100 or 150. What in the hell am I reading? And I remember it didn't have an executive summary either.

Q: (Laughs)

ROLLINS: So, I am listening to these guys, and they're speaking in a very academic language, which did not mean much to me. And they're droning on about the soil, water, fertilizer, etc. And it was painful. And I remember I didn't—I told them I had to wait until the adults returned (laughs) before we could approve it. But when the Ag Office Director returned, I told him "You know, I don't know—how do you decipher a paper like this?" I said, "You know, there's no executive summary, and it's not broken down into digestible pieces." And I remember talking to whoever the Program Office Director, John Tennant? And I went to John, and I said, "John, you know. I don't understand the analysis." And he says, "Well, that's your role." He says, "Because these experts often write for themselves. They don't write for the average person." He said, "And this stuff has to go back to Washington, and it's not only going to be agriculture people reading it. It has to speak to other people who will be reading this analysis, and they need to understand it." And he said, "So, take the document, and you break it down the way you think the headings should be." So, that was very beneficial because the academics, like I said, it was just a lot of gobbledygook. I had to go to the dictionary to figure out much of the language. (Laughs) But John was very good at getting me to tackle complex documents—if I don't understand then it means somebody else will not understand it.

So, I began to see my job making technical and complex documents readable to non-technical people —that's the role of a project development officer. Also, by then, the Agency was combining program and project development offices. So, John Tennant, he was an excellent mentor.

Bob Queener was the mission director by then.

But it was Bill Joslin who was before that, and then Bob Queener brought in John Tennant.

Q: Right. They both had been in Thailand much earlier.

ROLLINS: Yes.

Q: Yes, okay. And just one other question on Jamaica. Did you have much contact with the embassy and see interagency relationships in action? Did you see much of that at that early stage of your career that might have influenced you as you went on with your career?

ROLLINS: Well, during the Reagan era, we had a political appointee ambassador who was best friends with the president. He lived near Reagan in California—and his wife

was best friends with Nancy. Glen Holden was the President of the American Resources Life Insurance Company and was very wealthy. He was also a world-class polo player. His wife used to pride herself on the fact that—they were well into their sixties at this stage, but she prided herself on the fact that she was still the same size as she was in high school. So, there was a lot of fluff as a result. (Laughs) They brought in designers from California to redesign the residence, brought in new furniture and textiles from California. Everything had to go, including the drapes and carpeting. These designers arrived with loads of fabrics and materials to replace the pedestrian State Department accouterments. The Holdens were wealthy and tended to associate only with wealthy Jamaicans. For example, as a polo player, he socialized with other champion polo players who had numerous horses, like the Royal Family. I never felt as though he related to anyone else.

Q: Yes. There wasn't much connection with what you all were doing.

ROLLINS: Uh-huh, uh-huh. No, it was more for show. And he used to talk all the time about how close—he always talked about Reagan and how they were best friends and they did this together, and they did that together, and their ranches are close. You know, all of that. So, it was just a lot of—so that didn't mean much to me. It wasn't until I got to Ghana that I had a great relationship with the Embassy, the ambassador, and the ambassador's wife. Ambassador Ken Brown and his wife, Bonnie, were terrific. Very warm, involved in Ghanaian culture and close with the Ghana government. I talked to him three weeks ago. (Laughs)

Q: Okay. So, it's 1992 now. And at this point, there was a formal bidding process, right? But you'd been contacted by Dawn Liberi. Was she the deputy mission director then in Ghana?

ROLLINS: Yes. Under Joe Goodwin.

Q: And so, she was contacting you to bid on Ghana?

ROLLINS: Yes.

Q: Did you know her before or—?

ROLLINS: I did not.

Q: You did not. But you obviously had a good reputation if she was trying to attract you.

ROLLINS: I had promised Lucretia Taylor that I would go to Cameroon because that was my first offer. Lucretia sent me an encouragement to bid on her position. And I said, "Yes, I'd be happy to go to Cameroon," because I'm thinking, okay, so I can get my French up to speed and perfect my French simultaneously. And like I said, I'm married and have a child by this time. However, Myron told me to go to Ghana which he felt had a more interesting portfolio. I had to write to Lucretia and apologize for backing out of

that position. She was not happy, but Dawn put on the big sell so I decided to go to Accra.

Do you remember Floyd Spears? So, he was the EXO (Executive Officer) in Jamaica and had been there for four years along with me. He and his wife were more interested in Ghana, so his family and mine arrived in Accra and stayed there for six years. He had married a Jamaican, as had I. He had already bid on Ghana and been accepted. So, when Myron told me to go to Ghana, and Dawn contacted me, it was a no-brainer to move to Accra.

USAID/Ghana, Program and PDO Officer and Office Director, 1992 - 1998

Q: Okay. And what position did you go into when you went to Ghana?

ROLLINS: Program Officer.

Q: To the program office. Were you heading up the program office?

ROLLINS: No. Stafford Baker was—

Q: Okay. Was it a combined program/project development office?

ROLLINS: Yes, so, he was initially, maybe the first two years he was director, and then I became director.

Q: Right. And can you say a bit about what the Ghana program was like in those days? Because it was, as I recall, an increasing program during that period.

ROLLINS: Well, it took a while so—because remember, I was there six years total.

But when I got there, Jerry John Rawlings was president. And he had just agreed to elections, the first time in over twenty-five years. So, we didn't have much of a DG (Democracy, Human Rights, and Governance) program because there was no DG, frankly. Rawlings' focus was on socialism and primarily agriculture. I remember seeing him in old photos, where he was in the rural areas, planting crops and digging trenches and wells. He expected everybody to do that. Of course, the economy was just—it was nothing. We would travel to Lomé, Togo, to buy meats, cheeses, bread, fruits, and vegetables because there was little or nothing you could buy in Ghana or was of poor quality.

Q: When you first got there in 1992.

ROLLINS: When I first got there. It was rough. We had a commissary, but it was sparse. There were two British stores, but they had old, expired British items such as marmite, which tasted like an old shoe. (Laughs) Or they'd have cornflakes, which had expired a

year ago. So, it was really, it was pitiful. But you know, the thing about the Ghanaians is that they're just such wonderful people. And it was easy to get to know them and they invited us to their homes regularly. Also, we had a fabulous Mission Director -- Joe Goodwin. I probably learned the most from him. He was—he is, and I'm Facebook friends with him and his wife, Hope. He believed that everybody in the mission, the U.S. mission, should know their counterparts in the Ghanaian government, academia, private sector, local government and NGOs, and should have relationships with them. And he and his wife gave luncheons and dinners, I mean, in a week, sometimes five days a week he'd have luncheons, and then he would have dinners, two or three times a week. And they always had Ghanaians in the room. And so, it would be, you know, the minister of finance, the minister of—and others, you know, that we should know and be able to talk to help the country prosper and understand their concerns. I know Joe and Hope spent lots of money on bringing people together to get to know each other better. They spent thousands and thousands of their own money, because USAID's budget for representation is small.

Joe and Hope, his wife, loved to entertain to bring people together. He always had an agenda to get people talking, including on the economy, on elections, on family planning. One of the things that—one of the programs that we—I think it was with Nathan and Associates, who were contractors focused on economic policy. I was still pretty junior, but sometimes Joe would take me along, sometimes he would take somebody else, you know, it would depend on the topic. But to get Ghana to focus on what their needs were and how to develop and put in place policies now that impact the future.

So, this Nathan's project looked at the Ghana GDP, what that was composed of, and I think it was like pineapples and some other things, right, not a lot of anything at that—you know, there was gold, obviously, but for the average person not much. But in twenty years, Nathan projected Ghana's population would increase from 25 million to 35 million in 20 years due to the 6.2 fertility rate. Unsustainable. Nathan provided the mission and government with analyses demonstrating how much more housing, schools, hospitals, jobs, and the like would be needed if Ghana continued this population growth track. Joe commissioned these analyses that tied in the whole development picture for Ghana. That process tied everything together for me in terms of you've got to look at the future in perspective and conduct the analysis to give you the data you can act on. Where does this country want to be in twenty years? So, you've got to look at where you are now and how you will get there. So, one of the big things was family planning. (Peasley laughs) And others as well, right? You must look at the schools, all of that stuff. But do you still want to grow your population, a poor population you can't care for now, and what will it look like in twenty years? Dawn was instrumental in this because she was a Health Officer before becoming Deputy Mission Director. She began a campaign with local and international partners to reduce the fertility rate from 6.2 to 4.0 through family planning.

Q: Yes, right.

ROLLINS: Talking to the president, President Rawlings, and getting his take on family planning was key. Because the churches were against any form of family planning.

The churches relied on the Bible to reject family planning; according to them, you take what God gives you. Rawlings only had four kids and became an effective spokesperson for family planning. I don't care what topic he was discussing, the last ten minutes of his speech, You can't take care of the ones you have, he would say; you don't need any more than four, and he just went on. I mean, this went on almost the entire time I was there. He talked to the pastors, he talked to the people, and he said, "You don't need any more children. If you want to educate your kids, if we want to take Ghana to the next level," He was dogged about it.

Q: So, this came out of the model that Joe was looking at, the RAPID model, which was being used a lot by the AID/W Office of Population in those days?

ROLLINS: Yeah.

It was amazing because by that time, Dawn had taken it to the next level as we began developing new family planning programs for Ghana. Charles Llewellyn was the Health Office Director, and Pam Wolfe was the Senior Advisor seconded from the CDC.

They worked diligently with the Ministry of Health, making sure the new FP Program was focused primarily on short-term FP methods. Dawn said to me, "Okay, Denise, you've got to pull out your project development skills and I want you to draft a new program for reproductive health and family planning." And you know, I'm looking at "couple years of protection", what does that mean? (Laughs) And long-term and short-term FP and again, and you know, what happened is Dawn, Pam, and I, spent every weekend for six months we would go into the office on Saturdays and Sundays to draft a new FP & RH program based on a series of analysis prepared by a group of consultants Dawn is a stickler for things. It's funny, when friends knew I was going to the Ghana mission and working with Dawn, they kept asking me "Are you sure?" Of course, I said. I didn't know what they were talking about, I didn't know who she was. And people asked her, if she knew me. Both of us have strong personalities, let's say. And so, the folks who knew me and knew her would ask her, they'd say, "Well, you know, we don't know if the two of you will get along, there might be clash here." When I met her, that was it, you know. And she met me. We got along famously and I learned so much from her. So, for six months we were, every weekend, drafting this project document. Pam's husband, Doug, would bring us lunch on Saturdays. But we were writing and analyzing and synthesizing all of the analytical work. After drafting the Project Identification Document, we had to start drafting the Project Paper. So, it took time. But I didn't mind because I kept saying, "Okay, I don't understand that. What does that mean?" And they'd say, "Okay, if you don't understand, okay, we've got to rewrite this." So, then we would rewrite it so that it—it was in common English, you know, it wasn't in the overly technical language the analysis was written in. So, that's where I learned. I said, "Oh, this is fascinating." As a result of our FP and RH programs, Ghana's fertility rate dropped. By the time I left in 1998 it had dropped to four.

Q: That's an amazingly quick reduction.

ROLLINS: Can you imagine? And I think it's 3.8 or something like that now. Amazing.

Q: Yes. I had not known that the USAID mission had such an important role in that. That's fantastic.

ROLLINS: Well, it was Joe's way of managing. And it's because we got to know each other. The Ghanaians got to know us, we got to know them. We could pick up the phone, call, ask questions, and we began—we trusted each other. Because that's the key, isn't it?

It's trusting that you are—you want the best for them. And that you're willing to do, you know, the necessary to make sure that happens. So, when MEASURE, a USAID Project that collects Demographic and Health data, completed their annual surveys, we ensured that they presented the data to Ghana's Ministry of Health to help them understand where the health challenges existed in the country. Ensuring that the country government, at all levels, had sufficient data to make strategic decisions to impact the future was the ke to Joe Godwin's leadership.

The other area that Ghana has benefitted from is elections. When I arrived in late October 1992, the first elections were held after 25 years of military leadership. Rawlings won the election but the opposition called it the stolen verdict. They wrote a book about it. We brought in IFES (International Foundation for Electoral System) to begin working with the election commission.

Q: So, when the next election in 1996 took place, there'd be better preparation for it.

ROLLINS: Yes. We brought in IFES to work with the Ghana Election Commission. We had a seasoned election chief-of-party, Joe Baxter, who was fabulous. He sat with Dr. Afari-Gyan, a university professor, who was the head of the election commission, and they strategized on how to clean the voting rolls, produce the paper for the ballots, and purchase the voting machines; it took time. However, the most crucial part, in addition to the mechanics of an election, was the involvement of the political parties. Ghana's democracy started with some twenty-five political parties. Everybody wanted to get in the game. And then, what Joe and Dr. Afari-Gyan said was, "Okay, so let's—what we need to start doing to make this whole process transparent is we need to start having monthly meetings with all of the political parties." That had never been done. Once a month, a representative of all the political parties began to meet at the EC. I think it was probably about twenty in the end and now, it's only about three. Dr. Afari-Gyan led these meetings and explained to everybody what was going on in terms of the election mechanics, the ballots, the ballot boxes, and the strategy behind the mechanics of elections. And I think maybe it was two years when the president's party decided to withdraw from the meetings because they could not get their way. Dr. Afari-Gyan was transparent and open to the process and continued to hold meetings with the other parties until the election took place in 1996. Dr. A-G would find the answer and report back to

everyone if he didn't. So, big room with, you know, a lot of people, but it began the process of talking, you know, and sharing—

Q: And transparency.

ROLLINS: Transparency, sharing information. The parties always had a series of questions about every aspect of the elections and campaigning. Dr. Afari-Gyan would get back to them as soon as he had a decision from his colleagues on the EC. The most contentious part of the political party discussions concerned the president's visibility versus the other presidential candidates. Rawlings was on TV and the news daily too obviously, already can go on television all the time, right? He is flying all over the country at groundbreakings, openings of new buildings, and dedications. However, the other political parties did not have an opportunity to go on. So, it was the biggest issue for the other candidates: would they also have equal time on television? And of course, the main party was, oh, no, the president has a right to showcase his policies and governance. About nine months before the election, Rawlings' party walked out and refused to attend any more meetings. The others stayed, though and we continued. Dr. Afari-Gyan continued holding these meetings, coming up with a schedule for the candidates to have twenty-minute speeches on television or on the radio. Many candidates had dropped out by this time. Those remaining needed time to organize themselves and learn how to speak to the people. It is not easy for the first couple of times. Rawlings was a professional. Rawlings' party came back at the very end of the election season, about two months before the election. His party objected to many of the new election procedures, but by the time they returned to the meetings, it was too late for changes. Rawlings won the election again, but it became clear that it wasn't stolen.

Q: Yes. So, there was trust in the process?

ROLLINS: There was trust in the process. And everybody, just like we do here in the U.S., our political parties, you can stand at the polling station and make sure that this person is who they say they are and all of that. So, we just—we kind of—we modeled it, you know, on the U.S.

Q: I had heard through the grapevine from someone at one point that a large part of this IFES effort was, as you'd mentioned, registration and cleaning up the voter rolls and that there were some people in Washington who were critical of that. But that ultimately, after that election took place, there was a better appreciation for the way the mission did it.

ROLLINS: Yes. There was opposition in the US because they did not understand what we were doing. When people don't understand something this big and monumental, it always starts out messy, right?

Because you've got to bring everybody on board, you've got to figure out what you're trying to do, and then you have to ensure everybody else understands it. So, it's just—it's messy until people start to realize, okay, this makes sense, and I trust you.
Okay? That is critically important, that trust.

Q: Yes. And I assume that there was very close coordination with the embassy on all of this DG work.

ROLLINS: Oh, yes. And Washington. But you know, Joe Baxter had been the elections commissioner in New Orleans for ten years, and he had been election commissioner in DC for fifteen years. So, he had—and somewhere else. And he had worked all over the world.

So, he was just—he was a Southern boy, you know, with that Southern charm —

Q: Charm. (Laughs)

ROLLINS: Charm and he was just easy, very easy. And he didn't get upset about anything. Nothing bothered him. And so, he just trusted the process, trust the process.

Q: Right. That's great. Maintaining those meetings with everyone there and transparency are important lessons.

ROLLINS: Oh, absolutely. So, they didn't win that time, the opposition, but they won the next time.

And the president now, who I knew back then because he was a lawyer then, Nana Akufo-Addo, and this is his third term. He was in opposition to the Rawlings regime.

Q: Yes; what's evolved, I think, is probably one of the stronger democracies certainly in Africa and maybe globally these days. Democracies aren't doing so well. (Laughs)

ROLLINS: I know because in so many places, it seems like they're on the right path and then suddenly start backtracking. And I think USAID, USAID needs to pat itself on the back for this one because we stuck with it and the Ghanaians, and when people ask me "Well, you know, if we put all this money, why isn't it better?" And I'm always saying, "You have to have political will." People have got—we can come in and work with people who want change. I have friends who have been contractors, and they'll complain about USAID: "Well, you know, we're not doing this, and we're not doing that—" and it's like, development is complicated. You can come in with all the ideas you want, but again, it's building that symmetry, and people have got to want to make it happen. And with Ghana, out of all the countries I worked in because I worked in six, well, not including the UK, and they were really, you know—the other thing was with the economy —they wanted the economy to get better —even Rawlings—

Q: Yes. They turned it around. At the same time, I think the aid was instrumental with its policy reform dialogue.

ROLLINS: Oh, absolutely. Because even President Rawlings understood the country was not on the right path.

And I remember the first time I arrived in Ghana, they had these old Lada vehicles from Russia and these claptrap wooden trucks called tro tros. There was nothing modern in Ghana at the time. I remember, it was around 1995 when I had gone into a dress shop with some girlfriends and we came out and we looked to the left; there was a powder blue convertible Mercedes. (Peasley laughs) It was—we just stood there; our mouths open. Where in the hell did this come from? There was nothing like it there. Nothing. And it's powder blue? Oh, my God, that was the first sign that the economy was changing. Because we began to see American or German cars on the street and fanciful cars. You know, I had an old Land Rover, but those have been around a long time. Most of us had that kind of vehicle but not something cute. (Laugh) Like this convertible. It was around 1995.

USAID had a big export development project that put Ghana on the map. What's disappointing is that they have significant financial issues, and in 2023, they had to take out an IMF loan to bail out the country. While Ghana has grown by leaps and bounds, it has not managed its economy effectively.

I returned to Ghana in 2015 when I was Senior Coordinator for the Africa Ebola Unit, I stopped in Accra for a conference, I didn't even recognize the place anymore.

Q: Yes. It's one of the economic success stories. And again, I think USAID, through its policy reform work, was instrumental, and particularly Joe Goodwin, especially in creating mechanisms for government and the private sector to talk.

ROLLINS: Yeah, well, that was Joe. I'm telling you, that's what he did.

Joe Goodwin, he was one of a kind. He was one of a kind and I learned a lot from him as a result.

Q: A couple of other things I wanted to ask about Ghana. Weren't you also doing some work related to tourism as part of your economic growth strategy?
Is there any of that that you'd like to tell us about?

ROLLINS: Sure because I was the project manager for that. (Laughs)

Q: Okay. (Laughs)

ROLLINS: It was in the program office, and I managed that. We organized a project, a consortium of five organizations. So, let's see, I'm trying to remember when it started. Maybe it started in '94? I can't remember the exact date. It could have been '92. But early on, the mission had done some work on—with the government of Ghana about restoring two slave castles -- Elmina and Cape Coast, which were in terrible disarray because they were right on the ocean, right? The castles were built in 1492. Saltwater erodes everything. So, the USAID mission issued an Annual Program Statement to get ideas on restoring them and making them a tourist destination. The primary organization,

Midwest Universities Consortium for International Affairs, was called MUCIA. it was a consortium of—

Q: Was that the Midwestern Universities Consortium?

ROLLINS: Yes, that's it, Midwestern University Consortium for International Studies. That was—thank you, thank you. God, this is—do you know, this is so much to remember. Jesus. Okay.

MUCIA came up with the proposal that included four other organizations -- the Smithsonian to install museums, Conservation International to create the park and local community involvement, the University of Minnesota Tourism Department to develop the tourism strategy, and MUCIA managing the project. The deal was that both castles would be restored, and collections established to tell the history of slavery. And when I say restored, I mean they're old and big and suffering from erosion. We restored as much as we could, given that both castles are directly on the Atlantic coast. Our program was designed to help them fight against the weather and erosion and create a sustainable cultural and historical exhibition and record of the slave trade.

Q: Probably it was a local firm maybe.

ROLLINS: No because—no, it was an American organization.

I just can't—you know, these things keep popping in my head at various times. (Laughs) MUCIA and the team came in, and during the first five years of the grant, they made tremendous progress. The Smithsonian team installed a fantastic historic exhibition regarding Ghanaian artifacts of slavery and the Middle Passage. When you descend into the slave quarters, you are overcome with grief, fear, and redemption. Telling the Ghanaian story of these slave castles was heartbreaking and demonstrated the resilience of the African people. The University of Minnesota trained the docents and others so that they could tell the story. It was just remarkable how they helped restore these two facilities and created a historical presence for slavery.

At the same time, Conservation International focused on creating Ghana's first national park, Kakum National Park, located close to Cape Coast. This was a natural habitat but had been degraded due to human expansion and reliance on the habitat's resources such as firewood, animals for food, etc. CI established it as a national forest, and the chief-of-party oversaw the construction of the canopy walkway, which is the only one in Africa. The 350-meter-long bridge (walkway) connects seven treetops constructed of wire rope, aluminum ladders, wooden planks, and safety netting. To protect the trees, no nails or bolts pierce the bark. Up in the canopy, you may see species of birds and insects that are almost impossible to find on the ground level. Canadians, overseen by CI, constructed the walkway.

To keep the park and the two castles operational, we set up a trust, a trust fund. Some of the money generated from those facilities would go into this trust fund. Around 1997 or

1996, the agency came out with this new policy that we could dollar-denominate trust funds. I don't know if you remember that. Because usually trust funds had to be funded by local currency. It was a local organization, you had to use local currency. Well, this new policy said that you could use dollar-denominated funds, but the fund would have to be located in the States with an American judiciary.

Q: So, this was like an endowment fund?

ROLLINS: Endowment, yeah. A dollar-denominated endowment.

So, we reviewed the guidance, and Chuck Hutchinson, the CI Chief-of-Party, drafted a proposal to be eligible for a local organization's first dollar-denominated trust fund.

We both went to Washington to present and defend our proposal. We made the case, and the Agency approved the very first dollar-denominated endowment. We established the endowment fund and appointed an international board of directors. Price Waterhouse oversaw the creation of the local endowment and provided consultancy services. I had dinner not too long ago with one of the former board members and she confirmed that the endowment was still in operation.

Q: Yeah, I'm sure it is. So, again, you built something sustainable that is still working today.

ROLLINS: Yes. And the park is still going strong. Now, thousands of tourists visit Kakum and the canopy walkway. The Canadians who installed the walkway return every couple of years for safety checks and to tighten the ropes to ensure that nobody falls.

After five years of the grant to MUCIA, we recompeted it, and CI won the award. CI managed the project more effectively and had a better relationship with the other grant members. CI had an excellent management process that focused on working with local communities to support the park and castles by offering homestays for tourists. CI-trained community members and helped them set up accounts to collect fees and engage with foreign and domestic tourists. CI set up the entire system still operating today.

Q: Yes, I know. I know someone who worked in Ghana who was so impressed by the work there that they have made Conservation International their number one charity for contributions.

ROLLINS: Oh, wow. That is wonderful to hear, wonderful to hear, yeah.

Q: I'm glad that you've talked about that.

There are two other questions. One is whether you were in Ghana when President Clinton made his first trip to Africa; his first stop was in Ghana. Were you there when that took place?

ROLLINS: I certainly was.

Q: And could you tell a little bit about the planning and what it was like?

ROLLINS: Oh, yeah. A vast number of Washington security personnel descended on Accra to work with the country team on developing the President's program. USAID was front and center because both Clintons were interested in seeing developing projects. Plus, the Peace Corps was celebrating its 30th anniversary and Ghana was the first PC country.

And so, that was—I'm trying—was that twenty years?

Q: No, it would have been thirty—no, it would have been thirty-five or something, thirty-five or something.

ROLLINS: Twenty-five years? Maybe twenty-five.

Q: Because the first Peace Corps volunteers were in 1961 or 1962, I think.

ROLLINS: So, this was a big to-do. Working with CI, we devised a way to recreate our castles and park project in Accra since the President did not have the time to visit Cape Coast. Chuck Hutchinson of CI is a landscape architect. He found a location in Accra surrounded on four sides with a concrete wall. He had painters from Cape Coast come and paint a forest on the walls, along with a picture of the walkway and animals. It was amazing. Beautiful. Chuck had Cape Coast community members come to Accra and recreate their activities, including a replica of the Castles. It was impressive, and the President and First Lady loved it.

In addition to the USAID project, the Peace Corps organized a program for her and to speak in honor of the anniversary. She was magnificent. The entire U.S. mission attended the PC program and ceremony. Very impressive.

Q: Yes, it was just a half-day. He arrived in the morning.

ROLLINS: Yeah, it was a long day.

Q: And the crowd surged forward and—

ROLLINS: Because he decided to do the rope line. The Secret Service told him, "Don't do it, sir." And he said, "No," you know. He was Bill Clinton, right? So, he got out there and he loved pressing the flesh.

Q: They almost lost him. (Laughs)

ROLLINS: Yes, yes. Because they were just so happy to see him, and the visit was just a feather in the cap for Rawlings, you know, President Rawlings; it was just amazing and

was very, very well received. Cape Coast and Elmina, the castles and the park we couldn't take him there, so we had to get a compound. And I don't know how we found this compound. There was a big one that had walls around it. And we recreated the village in that compound. Organizing that CI project was intense because the Secret Service and other security personnel had to assess every aspect of security, including safety and the massive motorcade. Accra's streets were mostly dirt roads back then, with many ruts and holes. It was not easy to maneuver around town. Trying to figure out which roads to take to get the motorcade in and out safely was complicated. Also, one of the most memorable scenes was Clinton's appearance on stage in Black Star Square with President Rawlings. The stage/platform was exposed to the whole city, and after speaking, Clinton decided to do the rope line. Hundreds of Ghanaians approached the stage and swarmed him to shake his hand. The Secret Service was apoplectic, but it worked out well. Rawlings bestowed a gorgeous kente cloth on Clinton and wrapped it around him. It was a beautiful site.

Hillary peeled off from the project to give her PC speech. This is the first time I had heard her speak. And we were like, whoa. This lady is brilliant. We were so impressed with her because she spoke without written speech. She gave a twenty-minute speech with nothing in front of her. She was very prepared and an excellent orator. Right on point. It was perfect.

And then, it was time to get—we had to rush back and meet President Clinton at the Embassy to get him to the airport for departure. The embassy staff was invited to the airport. He congratulated us for an excellent program, for our professionalism and commitment as public servants. And then they left. But it was—yeah, it was really very, very special. Very special.

You're bringing back all these memories for me, girl. (Laughs)

Q: Yes.

We've spoken for some time, but I would like to ask you a bit about how important it was to have spent six years at post. You were there a long time—and also in a place that really focused on relationships and a closeness with host country officials. How important were those experiences for the rest of your career? How did they impact your thinking about what USAID now refers to as "localization?" We can come back to it again later, but I would think that those early experiences had an impact on how the rest of your career evolved.

ROLLINS: No question about it. No question about it. Because you could just see how important it was for people to want to go down this path with you, and it changed my perspective entirely because in Jamaica, the front office had the relationships, right? And we would have some interactions with Jamaicans but at very low levels. In Jamaica, it was more to get the work done, not so much in dialoguing and talking and getting to know each other. Joe Goodwin helped me understand how meaningful relationships are. And if you want to reach a common understanding about whatever it is you're trying to

do, you've got to have integrity, you've got to be transparent, and you've got to build trust. Joe helped me understand that our job is to support the people in the country in accomplishing their goals and objectives. When I arrived in other countries, that's what I tried to do, is to build those relationships so they could understand how best to accomplish common objectives and not just try to push what I think they should do, but let's come to a common understanding about it first of all, what is the problem we can both address. Okay?

Q: Yeah, right.

ROLLINS: If we can't define the problem properly, we cannot develop a solution. Now, let's be clear-eyed about what the problem is, then when— so let's analyze the situation, develop an analytical agenda. You know, when I became deputy director and when I became mission director, okay, we've got to have an analytical agenda because we have to understand this better and we have to make sure that they're a part of developing this analytical agenda and that when our consultants come in to start doing the work, they have to meet with them first so they understand we're in this together and we're trying to, you know, to deal with this problem that you all have identified.

Our analysis says yes, that's right, but some other elements need to be addressed. Development is challenging. There's no cookie cutter.

There's no cookie cutter.

Q: Yes. That's good and I hope we can come back to this theme as we go on in your career.

Do you think it's more difficult in today's world for staff? I always hear about people being captured by their computers and by email, that there's much more internal focus than external focus.

ROLLINS: Well, I think that's the environment that they are in. For example, when Raj arrived as administrator, he brought many ideas that overwhelmed the staff. It seemed like every other day there was a new mandate. Raj brought in McKinsey & Co to help create some of the mandates or provide analyses. This was a heavy workload.

I don't know if McKinsey is—(laughs)—

But he kept talking about data-driven, data-driven, data-driven, and that's—that's the only way you can solve a problem, you know, is having the data that tells you exactly what the problem is and then what is possible—then you can come up with some potential solutions to it. And so, there was a heavy focus on it when he was there. And of course, there have been other issues as well. Administrator Natsios also focused on data, but I didn't work with Natsios; I was in the field then. However, I worked directly with Raj. Under the Obama Administration, the new initiatives placed a heavy workload on staff - Feed the Future, Climate Change, and Global Health Initiatives, to name a few. -

There was a lot of work to do, and you couldn't just do it by rote. You couldn't just say, "Well, this is what we've always done, and we're going to continue doing it." You couldn't do that anymore. My understanding is that, in terms of going back to localization, we've been trying to work directly with local organizations since I joined the agency in 1987. It is tough for USAID to provide direct funding to local organizations which often do not have the necessary systems in place to manage USG funds.

Samantha Power, the current Administrator, has acknowledged that her efforts to achieve 30 percent in local funding are challenging and not new. We have been trying for decades.

Q: Right. No, I was focused less on analysis per se — it was how the analysis was done in partnership with local people and it was the relationship side that I was more focused on in my question.

ROLLINS: Oh, okay.

Q: And is it more difficult to do that in today's world where there's so much pressure in general.

ROLLINS: Well, you know, you've got to have— you know the expression, a fish rots from the head, okay. (Laughs) It starts there. So, if you don't have leadership focused on holding people accountable, then you won't have it. Whatever the incentives are in, you know, in an organization at a given time, that's what people do.

Q: Right. And so, if you don't have incentives, then you're much more internally focused. Got you.

ROLLINS: And I also think, one of the issues, you know, we've got—our agency is so young now in terms of staff because folks who could retire did, particularly in terms of the Foreign Service, so if you look at, all these new numbers that are coming in, I mean, we were around 1,500 FSOs for a long time and now, they've reached the 1,850 cap authorized by Congress I understand the Agency has been approved to increase FSO numbers to 2,500; we are about at 1,900 now. It means we have young staff in the Agency. They don't have the experience and if you don't have experienced people in the end, the mission directors, deputy mission directors, et cetera, what do they do? What do they do? And it's a big issue because with the mentoring program, the UAA (USAID Alumni Association) mentoring program, we've held meetings with USAID, including the counselor. He has had a couple of calls with us recently. And you know, the big issue is mission deputy directors.

They are in a freefall. And the agency recognizes now that it's a big problem. The mission directors and the deputy directors are not working well together, often because the mission directors don't know what to do with a deputy.

Because we don't have the experienced FSOs, as in the past, the Agency is assigning less experienced FSOs to senior positions because the positions need to be filled. I heard one conversation about placing an FS-04 in an office director position.

Q: Yes, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to get quite so distracted. (Laughs)

ROLLINS: Yeah, no, sorry, but that's my, you know, that's kind of my latest focus, is on mentoring FSOs in the field.

Q: Right, and importantly so.

Let me just, one last question on Ghana because you alluded to it earlier, and that's just in general the relationships with the embassy. You all had such a close relationship with Ghanaian officials at all levels and how all that fit in with the broader relationship with the embassy. And any lessons learned on how that sort of teamwork is created?

ROLLINS: Well, you know, Ambassador Brown and his wife, Bonnie, they were like Joe and Hope in the sense that they opened up the embassy to Ghanaians and to Americans. They were always—they had cookouts, they had all kinds of, you know, social events and that they would invite folks to their home. And they asked, you know, the staff and everybody. Also, you know, both are—Africanists, okay? And so, and they had—as a matter of fact, the Amb. Brown and Bonnie adopted a child from South Africa, which had been their previous post, she's grown up now and made them grandparents. Also, the Browns collected tons of incredible African art and donated to museums here in the States. So, the Brown's affection for the continent played out in their daily life.
Joe often invited the Browns to his meetings and social events. Joe would have cookouts at his house, invite the Peace Corps—he'd have the—the Peace Corps volunteers would come in on a Saturday so they could get a shower and some air conditioning before they went back to their posts. And the ambassador would be right there. So, you didn't feel like you were going to see the king when you went to the ambassador's residence because I've been in missions where it's like, oh, you can't disturb the ambassador. You know, it's like they're on high. Ken Brown was not like that at all. Bonnie helped start the Ghana Bead Society, which is still in operation today. And so, their commitment to the people, to—you know, and Ghana has many official cultural activities in which to participate. They have this, they call it enstooling, installing a new king or queen mother, so there was a lot going on. Ken and Bonnie attended all those ceremonies, so they'd be in the most remote villages. So, people got to know him and her, and it just facilitated the relationship between the embassy and country because we were always together, you know, doing things together. The ambassador encouraged it, and of course, Joe encouraged it. And then, we were constantly meeting with Ghanaian officials. And the NGO and the private sector and the academics, they were always invited, you know, to their homes. So, it was a straightforward relationship, very easy. That was probably—that was the best—that was the best embassy relationship I've ever had.

Q: Yes. It sounds like an idyllic assignment. I can see why you would have stayed almost six years. (Laughs)

ROLLINS: Oh, yeah. Yeah, it was.

Q: Well, I'm going to suggest we maybe wrap up for today.

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Q: Today is June 29, 2023, and this is interview number two with Denise Rollins.

And Denise, last time we spoke at some length about your six years in Ghana and I'm wondering if you have any final thoughts on Ghana before we move onto your next assignment.

ROLLINS: Well, I just—I think my final thoughts are that I—Ghana was my favorite post. And I learned so much about the agency, about development, because as I said earlier, you know, I talked about Joe Goodwin and his influence on me and my professional development. But also, you know, Dawn Liberi, who was the deputy mission director for two years when I got there, and the one thing about her was that she was very—she had a strong analytical background. I learned how to appreciate analysis and data, look dispassionately at issues, focus and get the work done, and ultimately, how to work with the government. Dawn had been a health officer, and the health sector has robust data they've collected worldwide for decades. And so, being able to look at that and see what trajectory a country was on concerning health and other indicators was significant to me because that helped me form the foundation of how I needed to approach development. And so, that was very, very helpful to me. Joe Goodwin is kind of a big, strategic thinker who also engaged with everybody to ensure everybody's part of the process. Now that I am retired, I volunteer with an organization, Washington Performing Arts, and the founder has a motto, "Everybody and Nobody Out," and that was—Joe and Ken's mantra

Q: And that was Joe. (Laughs)

ROLLINS: That was Joe, "Everybody In and Nobody Out." I would say that Ghana was the foundation of my professional and career development. And so, I was sad to leave, but it was time to move on. (Laughs)

Q: Right. Well, that's a great summary of what a first tour should, in fact, be. It should provide those opportunities to everyone.

So, you moved onto Uganda and I think when we last spoke you mentioned that Dawn Liberi had something to do with attracting you to go to Uganda. She was then the deputy director in Uganda?

ROLLINS: No, she was the director.

Q: And so, in 1998 you go off to Uganda. Can you tell us a bit about the program there and what you were doing?

USAID/Uganda, Program/PDO Office Director, 1998 - 2000

ROLLINS: Yeah. So, but first, I want to say, you know, Dawn recruited me. I get a call when I'm in Ghana trying to decide where I'm going to go next, and Dawn said, "I want you. You must come here." And I had some other things that I was—other countries, but I went and I'm happy that I did.

So, I was only in Uganda for two years, and that's because my husband joined the Foreign Service, State Department, so he was no longer a PSC, a Personal Services Contractor, but now an employee, so that's why I left early, to join him in Nigeria. But in Uganda, Uganda became the first Heavily Indebted Poor Countries (HIPC). We played a pivotal role in helping prepare the Ugandan government to meet all the requirements and complete the analyses required. I had a terrific—I was the head of the program office, and I had an excellent economist, Jerre Manarolla, who could make an economic analysis sound like you could talk to a five-year-old. He just knew how to make it accessible for everybody. That was key because a lot of data had to be collected. We had to work with the World Bank and the IMF (International Monetary Fund), and bring Uganda into the fold. Jerre did much of the work. But it was a joint effort, and Dawn Liberi, the mission director, was focused on this. And as I said earlier, Dawn is a data-driven person. It took a little time to do the analysis together, and it opened up a whole new arena for me because we were focused on the economy and how to make it more productive.

Uganda wanted to become an exporter to earn higher revenue. Organic coffee and ornamental flowers became one of the items we worked on with them. It was the beginning of the organic farming craze, and Uganda began growing organic vegetables and coffee beans so we could put them on the market and sell them for fair trade prices. My office was involved in that and working with organizations and others that were on the ground.

The other thing that we, based on our analysis, was that flowers were a big thing that they could get involved in. And they had beautiful roses, incredible roses. Our focus was on getting Uganda to introduce itself to the world and begin exporting these kinds of ornamental flowers. And it worked. (Peasley laughs) It worked. And so, they were selling most of the—you know, obviously, most of their products went to Europe, but it was very successful in getting—I mean, their roses and they also began later, after I had left, they began doing other cut flowers. But you know, getting the shipments off to Europe, and making sure they're packed correctly and that the farmers were key to our earning high incomes from this highly valued commodity.

Q: So, the program was very much focused on economic policies in both of those areas. Were you seeing a country make a real transformation in its own approaches to development?

ROLLINS: The other area, which people would probably raise their eyebrows now, was with democracy and governance.

Q: Yes. I was going to ask you about that. President Museveni by this time had been there for a while and clearly wasn't going anywhere. (Laughs)

ROLLINS: Museveni, the Ugandan President, had been in power for maybe fifteen to twenty years. It was clear he wasn't going anywhere.

However, because of the HIPC initiative, there had to be a governance process in place. So, Museveni created an anti-corruption commission led by a Ugandan female judge who—I forgot her name. Anyway, she headed up the commission, so I focused on working with her. And we came up with an anti-corruption strategy. It took eighteen months or so to get this done and it had to go before their parliament to be approved and it was. Of course, in hindsight, when we look back today (laughs) and say, "Well, what difference did it make?" But at the time, we were all very focused, and Museveni and his government gave everyone the impression that this would be a focal point of his administration. So, you know, I worked a lot with parliament, with the ministry, with her—it wasn't a ministry, it was la commission.

We brought in a lot of expertise to help them design the commission and create policies to prevent corruption and improve governance in the country.

Q: Now, I think it's important to note that back at this point in 1997 to 1999, there were people writing about the African renaissance. Leaders like Museveni, Meles, Isaias and Kagame and others were seen as this new generation of leaders that were going to turn around Africa.

ROLLINS: That's right.

Q: And so, there was a very positive view by most people of them and some evolved in ways that are probably not completely desirable. (Both laugh)

ROLLINS: Yeah. I mean, because, oh, God, I think Museveni—the other thing also was that Uganda at that point, I believe, had the highest HIV-AIDS infection rates.

Q: Right, yes.

ROLLINS: So, that was another issue. And because their soldiers had gone to Cuba, Cuba expelled them. They came back home, and it was a fire, an HIV fire in the country. So many parents dropped dead and so, you had these grandparents, these grandmothers, who were in their seventies and eighties taking care of two- and three-year-olds. So, that was also a big issue at the time.

Q: Right. And I believe that Uganda in the early days was doing some of the best work on testing and some of the other prevention activities.

ROLLINS: Yes.

Q: And was quite successful, although I think over time some of that changed.

ROLLINS: Yeah, it eroded over time. But at the time—because see, this was before PEPFAR (United States President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief).

So, PEPFAR started as I was leaving because that was in 2000-2001, that was as I was going on my way to Nigeria. But yeah, no, it was a bad scene. So, with the testing and prevention, you know, condoms, prevention, that was the focus of the program. But it was tough because getting people to acknowledge that they have the virus or getting tested, was a big deal at the time. Because we didn't have ARVs, the antiretrovirals; they were just coming to market.

Q: I think at that point in time we were not doing ARVs because they were too expensive. It was all prevention and—

ROLLINS: It was all prevention, testing and prevention, that was about it.

So, that was the other focus of our program and of course, you know, I was working with the health team on getting that done.

Q: And I don't know if it had started then or not, but later, Mrs. Museveni, who is very religious, raised issues about the degree to which prevention strategies focused on condom distribution. I think this also affected government support for family planning at some point. Did you see any of that while you were there or did that all kind of evolve later?

ROLLINS: Well, I mean, you know, he and she, Museveni and Mrs. Museveni, are highly religious, as we can see today because they've got, you know, they've just passed these bills to criminalize the LGBT community. And even then, American evangelicals spurred on a lot of this. And even then, there were American groups that were, church groups that were coming in and encouraging the government to clamp down on LGBT groups. And for a while, everybody tried to ignore that it existed, but of course, then when you've got all these deaths occurring and people getting sick and nobody knowing how to deal with it and there's no cure, after a while, the government had to act. However, it took a while because USAID, the World Bank, and other donors had to encourage Museveni to allow the testing. It wasn't an easy thing to do, but his military was depleted because of this.

Q: Right. I've heard Dawn tell stories about meetings with Museveni and I'm wondering if you were ever involved in any meetings with him. If so, could you tell us what those meetings were like?

ROLLINS: Well, I only have a couple, very few. The biggest issue with him is that he is never on time. And when I say he's not on time, we're talking about four, five, six hours you wait. (Laughs) So, it's not the kind of thing you're going to take staff along to that often because Dawn and the ambassador both knew this was par for the course. You know, your whole day is shot. Even if they say the meeting is at 9:00 or at 10:00, you have no idea when it will start.

And he's a very amenable kind of person, you know. Very friendly once he gets there, right? He's a big farmer who always talks about his cattle. And he eventually gets around to the subject matter. But it's not easy, you know. He'll agree with you and all of that and then—but you know that nothing's going to happen. (Laughs) Of course, he won't change because that's just how he is. I mean, he has stayed in power, let's see, since the eighties, right?

Q: I can't remember exactly when.

ROLLINS: I think 1986 or something like that he came to power, so that's a long time.

That is a long time. And you know, he fights, he makes sure any opposition doesn't stick around long, you know. Either they get exiled, or they're imprisoned or you know, what have you. So, yeah, that's the—that's all I remember about him. I just remember the long, long wait times.

Q: I believe that President Clinton went on his trip to Africa, his first trip to Africa was in 1998 and Uganda was one of the stops. Did that happen while you were there or was that—

ROLLINS: No, it happened when I was in Ghana.

Q: Oh, that's right. We had talked about his visit to Ghana.

Q: And his next stop was Uganda but that was before you arrived.

ROLLINS: Yeah, that was—I wasn't in Uganda at that point.

Q: Could you perhaps say a word or two about the embassy and interagency collaboration, as it sounds like it was quite good in Uganda?

ROLLINS: No.

Q: No. Oh, it wasn't. (Both laugh) Okay.

ROLLINS: No. So, the ambassador, Nancy Powell, was very controlling. And, oh, God, it was a very tense relationship between her and Dawn. She didn't want Dawn to meet with ministers without her or somebody from the embassy attending. She gave regular barbecues at her house, right, for staff. And she really liked junior staff. So, she would

have events for the junior staff, both embassy and USAID, right? And she used to pump them for information. And she would—somebody would make an offhand remark, "Oh, you know, I talked to a contractor and he told me that he's having a hard time with," whatever it was. So, then she, the ambassador, would get very upset to hear whatever it was and she would call Dawn and she would yell at her. I don't know if—am I supposed to be saying this?

Q: It is probably okay.

ROLLINS: (Laughs) Okay. Because it was really, really difficult because it's like everything we did was wrong. And I was in Dawn's office several times when the ambassador would call, and Dawn would have to hold the phone like this. She couldn't put it up to her ear because the ambassador was yelling so much about whatever she heard—you know, it was stuff that, I mean, if she had just asked us, we could have explained what the situation was. But she didn't give us a chance. So, you know, Dawn was called on the carpet several times by the ambassador. So, it wasn't, you know, it was very uncomfortable.

Q: Did that filter down more generally to other staff? Because like on HIPC you must have had to work closely with the economic section—

ROLLINS: We worked with the economists.

Q: But were those relationships negatively affected?

ROLLINS: Yeah, we could work on a one-to-one basis with, you know, our embassy counterparts. We could do that but, you know, the ambassador had her finger on everything so as soon as she heard something on the phone, you know, she picked up the phone.

And then, I hate to say, I'm not going to mention any names, but we had one member of our staff who spent a lot of time with the ambassador. And so, everything that went on at USAID, because we were, you know, we were, hmm, fifteen minutes away from the embassy, the buildings, this person would go back and tell the ambassador what was going on. So, if anything was happening within the mission, staff disgruntlement or anything like that, this person—because my husband at the time was working in the consular section and he used to see this person come over every single day, spending hours instead of being back doing her work at USAID. And that kind of fueled this thing. And it was very uncomfortable.

Q: Yes; it's very difficult when something like that happens.

ROLLINS: So, you know, I mean, again, it was a great learning environment on economic policy, but in terms of—you know, and it was such a—it was 180 from Ghana where we had just a terrific ambassador, his wife, you know, they were just immersed in Ghanaian culture and loved Ghanaians and all of that. Until this one, you know, it was

just—and I think Uganda was a different place to work, also. I don't want to generalize, right, but I find that West Africa is much livelier, right? And the culture, everything. And people reach out to you, and even when you're in the markets, there's, "Ah, madam, madam, come please." They want to talk to you and all of that. And then, we get to Uganda and there's no interaction whatsoever. We went—I remember the first time my husband and I went into the market; we were buying bananas and other things, and we went up to the lady's stall, and she told us how much they were, and I said, "Oh," you know, and in West Africa, you haggle over everything, right? You're in the market, the tomatoes are one price, oh, I'll give you, and you'd go half price and then you'd go back and forth until you settle on something. In Kampala, we'd go into this market and the bananas, whatever it was, and the lady gave us a price and we said, "Oh, we'll give you," you know, thinking what we did in Ghana was going to work. The woman got up and left. (Laughs) So, we looked at the lady in the next stall, and we said, "What happened?" She said, "Oh, she won't sell to you." Because there the price is the price. That's it. No haggling.

Q: Yeah, that's an interesting cultural example.

ROLLINS: Oh, my God. And so, we really didn't—we weren't invited to Ugandan houses. You know, we had a couple of dinner parties, but they weren't—nothing was reciprocated. The closest we got, there was a Ghanaian judge in Uganda and he and his wife, when they found out we had just come from Ghana they used to invite us for dinner all the time. So, we used to spend time with them. But in terms of with Ugandans, yeah.

Q: Interesting. That's a very interesting comparison.

ROLLINS: Yeah. So, my two years there, you know, were interesting —that was enough. I mean, our son was able to—you know, he was a Cub Scout, so I got to be a den mother. I was on the school board. So, I was able to do family things, so that was nice, that kind of rounded out my experience there.

Q: No, that's good. And you said that your husband was working in the embassy there. At what point did he become a State Foreign Service officer?

ROLLINS: The first—so, when we were in Ghana the GSO (General Services Officer) at the embassy told him, told my husband who was the USAID PSC General Services Officer (GSO), he said, "You know, he said, "You ought to apply to the State Department. They're going to have a big recruitment process for specialists," that's what they call them there. So, it came out, we got the paperwork and all and we worked on, you know, the paperwork and submitted it all. And that was while we were in Ghana. Then we go to—we get to Uganda and then—and what was interesting about that was that—so maybe we're a year into Uganda, nine months, ten months, something like that, and he gets a call stating that they're sorry you didn't make the cut. So, when I got home from work he said, "You know, they called and told me I didn't make the cut." And I said, "We spent a lot of time on your application." I said, "I can't believe that they wouldn't at least call you in for an interview." And he says, "Well, the lady said that I didn't make it." And I

said, "You need to call them back and find out what was missing, why didn't you get over the threshold." So, he resisted for a while, for a couple of days and I said, "Call them." So, he called the lady back and she said, "Well, give us a chance. We'll review your application, and we'll get back to you." Two days later, she calls, and she says, "Oh, we're so sorry. You're an excellent candidate. We'd like you to come in for an interview."

Q: (Laughs) Wow. That's a good lesson learned. (Laughs)

ROLLINS: Yeah. Yeah. Because—and she said to him, she said, "You know, we brought in, they brought in retirees," because they had thousands and thousands of applications because it was for GSO, it was for all the other specialist areas they had, so it was tons of applications. And she said, "You know, you don't know if the person was tired after lunch or sometimes people, they just go through and throw it in a box and don't really spend time reviewing it." But I knew we had crossed every T and dotted every I. I knew this was a good application because there were several essays you had to complete—I think five short essays had to be written, all this different stuff, and I just knew it was a great application. And sure enough. So, he went in, he flew back to the States, to DC, and had his interview and he was hired on the spot.

Q: (Laughs) That's great. And then, his first assignment was going to be to—

ROLLINS: Nigeria.

Q: —Nigeria. Okay.

ROLLINS: Well, at first, they were offering him Guadalajara, Mexico, Beijing, China, all these different places. And the great, Cecilia Pittas in HR, knew how to move through the morass, right? And so, I called Cecilia, and I said, "Cecilia, they're offering him all these places where we—there was only one where there was a USAID mission and that was in Amman, Jordan, but they didn't have a position for me. And so, Cecilia went to bat and discovered that there was a position for him in Nigeria.

Our mission had been closed in Nigeria because of Sani Abacha for about seven years at that point. Of course, Abacha died, and Obasanjo came back, because he had been the military president, now he's the civilian president of Nigeria. And so, we're going to reopen the Nigerian mission because they had been—their budget had been about $5 million a year for women's organizations and reproductive health organizations but that was it. And then, all of a sudden, we got $100 million in, what was that, 2000.

So, Cecilia helped me get the assignment in Nigeria so we could be together. Now, we started off in Lagos, that's where the embassy was located, but of course, Nigeria had changed its capital to the middle of the country, to Abuja, and they had done that in the nineties, but nobody moved at that point. But when the new government came in, they said, "Okay, everything's going to move up to Abuja." So, that was the worst two years of my life. They were awful.

USAID/Nigeria, Program/PDO Office Director, 2000 - 2004

Q: So, you arrived in Nigeria in 2000, presumably the summer of 2000.

ROLLINS: Yes.

Q: And you go to Lagos and then a decision is made that everyone is moving to Abuja?

ROLLINS: Everybody's moving to Abuja. So, we have to get—and the thing is, you know, we don't have a staff, right? Because I think there were like five FSNs who were around for seven, eight years, but we didn't have a controller, we didn't have a lawyer, we didn't have a—so we had a program—Sherry Suggs was the program officer and acting deputy mission director. Tom Hobgood was the mission director. We finally got Lynn Gordon to be head of the Health Office. But we had only five direct hires, but here we have $100 million that's got to get programmed. And we've got to move. And we've got to find housing in Abuja for FSOs and FSNs. Not only do you have to find an office building but you've got to find housing for everybody. So, that, you know (laughs), it was really, really challenging.

Q: And I know this was really a high priority for the Africa bureau in Washington. The Assistant Administrator knew Obasanjo well and, I suspect, was on the phone to you all frequently.

ROLLINS: Absolutely.

So, you talk about pressure. And you know, finding the place—first, finding a building. I mean, we moved into a mall in Abuja, and we found a place that had great space and everything, but of course, it's got to be designed now. And then the other thing was housing for the direct hires, and then we had to get approval from Washington to house the FSNs we had in a hotel for ninety days, which eventually went to 180 days so that they could find housing for their families. So, it was just massive—first, we're trying to hire staff, FSNs. You know, we went from five FSNs—by the time I left four years later, we had 125 FSNs. But you can imagine what it took to bring all those people onboard and get them trained. And then, we had hired a good portion of them in Lagos and had to move them and their families up to Abuja into hotels, so we had to get contracts with hotels and all. And we didn't—we had a PSC EXO who knew his business, you know, so he was able to get in there. But it was just grueling.

Q: But just a question on the FSN side: how much discussion was there around the issue of supporting the moves of the staff from Lagos to Abuja? Because I could imagine some people saying, "Well, you just let all those folks go who are in Lagos and you hire new people in Abuja." Was that controversial at all? Did you all have to fight to do that?

ROLLINS: The system supported it after, we got—yes, we had to make the case. But because you know, Abuja was empty at the time. There weren't a lot of people there. And

if we wanted folks who had experience in health, agriculture, economics, all of that, you had to get educated people, and Abuja was where we had to be. It is totally different now, but at the time nothing was going on there. So, we had to have—we had to hire people—and because we had national recruitment going on. And we received thousands and thousands and thousands of applications and you've got to go through—so we hired eight secretaries at one time, and then we had to hire the agriculture staff and economic staff and you know, all—it was amazing.

Q: So, you were doing national recruitment of FSNs to come to Abuja.

ROLLINS: Yeah.

Q: Just another question because I know that Nigeria has faced ethnic challenges throughout its history.

ROLLINS: Right.

Q: Was that a factor when you were recruiting? Did you try to get as much of a representative sample in the mission as possible?

ROLLINS: Yeah, because most of the staff there was Yorubas in Lagos in the south. So, we didn't have a representative—we had one, we had one health person from the north. I've forgotten his name now, but otherwise, it was primarily Yorubas. And we all recognized that we needed to diversify the staff. And if you're moving up to the middle of the country you should be able to do that, if people make the decision that they're willing to move because that was just, like I said, there was hardly anything going on there. But yeah, that was a big challenge.

Because the building we were in in Lagos was also the funkiest building I've ever seen. It was old, and it had been built maybe in the early fifties, but nothing had been done to it since then. Here we are 2000. And you know, the elevator—we're on the fifth floor, the elevator didn't work most of the time. And this was the worst carpeting I've ever seen in my life. It had been there since the fifties, so you could imagine how dirty and ripped up it was everywhere. And my office was right next to the bathroom, which didn't have water most of the time. So, we had this big tank of water that you had to use and then, we had a—the air conditioner units; we had them all in the windows, so that was a lot of noise. And then, it was just—it was just a nasty, funky building. So, we were happy to move but it was just—it was strenuous, you know, trying to get the work done and to move people up. And then, you have to stagger the movements, right? So, some people are in Abuja, and some are still down in Lagos. And for me, my family, so my husband and son, the embassy moved them up to Abuja before I could leave Lagos. Because see, I'm still trying to get the paperwork done and deal—you know, so we can get the money obligated and—because this was before—now we have two-year money. I think we didn't have two-year money then.

Q: Yes. It was always the fight to get it done by September 30.

ROLLINS: Yeah. So, I had to stay in Lagos. For six months I would fly home to Abuja Friday night, spend the weekend, and then Sunday night I would fly back to Lagos. I did that for six months. And so, I stayed in a hotel in Lagos during the week and then I would fly up. But you know, my son was in school. He was like, all of ten, eleven, so you know, trying to deal with the school stuff as well. (Laughs) It was, like I said, a challenging period.

So, eventually get every—so then, two years, we eventually get everybody up in Abuja and you know we've got more FSNs. And so, I would say the mission—you know, so it took two years to get things sorted out.

Q: A huge job for you all.

There had been a history of reproductive health and women's programs in Nigeria. That was the base of the program when the decision was made to expand it. Do you recall what the priorities were as it expanded?

ROLLINS: Well, economic growth was big. And agriculture, obviously. You know, Nigeria is the largest populated country in Africa. Health was a priority because polio was still present in northern populations. And we had the issue with the northern governors who didn't want inoculation. So, that was really—that was challenging because that went on the entire time I was there, and from what I understand, it continued—

Q: It continued, yes, right.

ROLLINS: Yeah. I mean, it's just, you know, they had had, Nigeria had had this issue with, oh, which one of the pharmaceutical companies regarding polio vaccines?

Q: Pfizer? Was it Pfizer or Merck? I don't know.

ROLLINS: Yeah, I can't—it doesn't ring a bell. But anyway, they had had some issue with one of the pharmaceutical companies, and so they decided they weren't going to do it. So, polio kept sprouting up across the Sahel and of course Nigeria would be affected. We spent a lot of time on creating the PEPFAR program around 2001.

Q: Yeah, I wanted to ask you about how—was Nigeria an early PEPFAR country? Was it one of the initial fourteen?

ROLLINS: Yes.

Q: Okay. I've heard that the startup of PEPFAR, in many countries, was very rocky, as I've heard.

ROLLINS: Oh, yeah.

Q: So, how it worked out in Nigeria would be important to document.

ROLLINS: Oh, it was tense. (Laughs) Because okay, so by this time Dawn is there as Mission Director. (Peasley laughs) And she's a health person, right? So, she wanted USAID to be—to take the lead and be in charge of this new program. Of course, CDC (Centers for Disease Control) showed up. They had had a small cadre of folks there, primarily local staff, but suddenly, now they're going to—they're staffing up, the CDC. So, it became a battle royale. (Laughs) Oh, boy, between, you know, USAID and CDC and who was going to lead and all of that. I mean, the new head came in because—several people came in and out, and then we got one CDC Director who was actually a Nigerian by birth but an American citizen, has American family and all. And okay.

Q: Okay, yeah, he worked in Malawi with me, so I know him.

ROLLINS: Oh, you know. Okay. Well, he's an easy going guy. Once Okey Nyanyanwu arrived for CDC, everything settled down a bit. But I understand afterwards once he left and I don't where—I don't know if he went to Malawi or if he was in Malawi before that, but you know, things got even—they got rough, got very, very rough between the two sides.

Q: Who was the ambassador during this period and was the ambassador involved at all to try to figure out how to bring peace to the PEPFAR family?

ROLLINS: It was Howard Jeter. You know, he tried but you know, he's a very—he's one of the old school diplomats, so he's not going to get his fingers, you know, very dirty. (Laughs) Because by the time I got to South Africa, our ambassador in South Africa, Jendayi Frazier, was not allowing any foolishness. You're going to pay attention to her advice; she was forthright. But you know, Ambassador Jeter was not that style. So, the tension between the two agencies continued. And I even hear that it's still there. (Laughs) So, I don't know.

Q: I believe that people from Washington tried to come out and visit, from the HIV office in Washington, made trips out to try to do peacebuilding as well.

ROLLINS: (Laughs) So, yeah, that was an interesting situation. But—so we had that going on. And then, this was when we were encouraged, missions were encouraged to partner with the private sector. Working with Shell Oil Company was one of our big, significant accomplishments, and we signed a $20 million agreement with them. We would provide $5 million; they would provide $15 million.

Q: This was under the Global, GDA, Global Development Alliance.

ROLLINS: Yes.

That was a big deal because it was working on cassava production in the ten—-southeastern Nigerian states where cassava grows. Cassava, the most widely eaten food in the country, fields were destroyed due to a fungal infection called Cassava Mosaic Disease. The crops were also affected by mildew, and you could lose your entire crop, which was very invasive. So, we worked with—so we set up—I mean, it took time to negotiate all of this, but we signed with Shell to fund research, planting, harvesting and the like in the poorest area of the country, the Niger Delta,

Q: And that's the oil producing area in the Delta; is that correct?

ROLLINS: Yes.

Q: So, an economy that was pretty much dominated by agriculture and then oil, cassava being—

ROLLINS: You know, the economy is dominated by oil production. The people do not benefit from oil.

Q: Right.

ROLLINS: And that's (laughs)—because the oil has, you know, destroyed the land, the agriculture, the crops, all of that, the water, the fish, everything is affected by oil spillage. And the surrounding villages often sabotage production. There's a whole cartel in that area and they steal the oil from the pipelines and sell it to neighboring countries because they can get more money for it next-door than they can in Nigeria.

Q: Was there much discussion of that while you were there, about how the communities didn't benefit sufficiently from the oil production?

ROLLINS: Oh, yeah.

Yeah, and that's why Shell was willing to partner with us because their—well, first of all, their executives were being kidnapped, right? (Both laugh)

Q: Incentive to do something, yes.

ROLLINS: Yeah. And so, they were being kidnapped and roughed up. I don't think anybody died, but they were abducted and roughed up. And we knew about the sabotaging. What was unfortunate is that sabotaging oil is very dangerous, and the pipelines exploded occasionally, and entire areas caught on fire and many people died. So, trying to find a way to reduce sabotaging and provide some benefits to the local communities was the main objective of our partnership. Our Shell agreement also supported school construction, curriculum development, and teacher training.

So, we agreed—so there were a couple of things under this agreement with them. So, it was the farming, it was the schools, and it was also capacitating clinics. For example,

Shell would pay to build the schools and clinics, and our resources were used to make them operational with training, books, medical supplies, midwives, etc. She wanted to burnish their reputation and we saw this as an opportunity to get more resources into this area.

Q: Right, right.

You mentioned the violence in the delta region. Were you all able to travel down there or did you have to take special precautions? Was the embassy security section involved? Were there any restrictions on your ability to travel in Nigeria while you were there?

ROLLINS: No. We rode in armored vehicles, obviously, and we had to alert—the RSO (Regional Security Officer), who would alert local police to let them know that we were coming because we wanted to make sure we weren't attacked. The police would work with the gangs and the cartels to make sure that we were safe. Just recently, in January, in Nigeria, a convoy from the embassy was attacked and we lost two FSNs. They were killed accidentally.

So, it was dangerous. Back then the Niger Delta was the most dangerous area of Nigeria, but —I haven't heard so much about the Niger Delta lately. It's been more in northern Nigeria where you have Boko Haram. In addition to abductions, the gangs would steal your car and leave you on the side of the road with nothing.

Q: Was the mission doing work all over the country, including the north?

ROLLINS: We were pretty much spread all over except, you know, the north and the northeast, which is where Boko Haram has infiltrated. We didn't do so much there, like Maiduguri. But we worked in Kano and the other northern states, particularly on family planning, reproductive health, and polio vaccination. They were not interested in education because they preferred sending to special religious schools and madrasas. We were also involved in agriculture. The U.S. Trade Representative wanted us to fund gum arabic production because Sudan, which produced most of the gum Arabic globally, was at war, and gum Arabic is used in food, soft drinks, and cosmetics. It's an emulsifier. Congress passed a rider on a bill prohibiting American companies from buying gum arabic from Sudan. Although, a lot of it was being smuggled out through Ethiopia and other countries. So, USTR wanted us to design a project to increase gum arabic production in Nigeria. However, Nigeria's gum arabic was low quality and the farmers were not interested in producing it because it takes about three years to get your first crop. — (Laughs) The few farmers who agreed to participate in the project had to be retrained because while there is some gum arabic in the north, it is not a native plant, right? We developed a 3-million-dollar gum arabic project. And it takes three years for it to mature. That was a colossal waste of money. But we did it. It was in the north.

Q: So, it didn't catch on, gum arabic?

ROLLINS: It did not catch on.

Q: So, we're still dependent on Sudan for it. (Laughs)

ROLLINS: Well, at least we were. I don't know if another country has taken it on at this stage, but. (Laughs)

Q: Since the return of democracy and the election of Obasanjo is what prompted the massive increase in the AID program, were you also doing DG (Democracy and Governance) work in the country and if so, can you talk about what you were doing?

ROLLINS: Yes. So, NDI (National Democratic Institute), IRI (International Republican Institute), and IFES were grantees in implementing projects in Nigeria. They strengthen the capacity of state legislatures to develop and implement legislation, conduct research, and create constituency services and training. We couldn't work in all thirty-six states, but certainly in Abuja, Lagos, Kano, Jos, and a couple of states in the delta; I can't remember the exact number. Each of the three organizations received about $5 to $6 million and collaborated on developing skills, teaching state and national legislatures how laws are made, how to draft legislation, and how to review legislation by different committees. There was lots of training.

The most essential DG program during that time was the creation of the anti-corruption commission called the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission. It had teeth and pursued corrupt officials, and it is still in operation. And they are still filing cases against lawmakers.

Q: But that was something that we helped to create at the outset?

ROLLINS: We started it. We started it with the government. Yeah, Obasanjo wanted this because Nigeria is known for corruption; it is like a second name for the country. This commission was designed to root out corruption. And they took on some significant, high-profile cases and won.

Q: Was Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala in the ministry of finance then? Did you all work with her in those early days?

ROLLINS: Absolutely, we worked very closely with her. I'm trying to remember if she was there my first two years or my last two years, and I'm drawing a blank on that. She was Minister of Finance while I was posted to Nigeria. She was very well respected and significantly influenced the president and the country. When she spoke, everyone listened. Nigeria was trying to diversify its economy because many influential people stole oil proceeds. That is how we started with cassava and working with farmers to increase export crop production to earn foreign exchange. There were also efforts to start an apparel industry in the delta, which never got off the ground. There were so many ideas floating around.

Everybody wanted to find ways to increase employment and income. But Nigeria has power issues and outages all the time. Trying to run a factory without reliable electricity is unworkable. Most companies and wealthier households use generators, but generators are expensive. It is costly and inefficient to try to do business there. I am not sure how much impact our economic/agriculture programs had in Nigeria, like in Ghana. In Ghana, we helped farmers export their plentiful and super-sweet pineapples to Europe. Then, they added other fruits and vegetables to their exports, started producing juices and chocolates, and expanded. This has allowed small producers to earn higher incomes. While Nigeria's most significant exports are crude oil, minerals, and the like, the proceeds accrue to the government.

Q: So, was USAID doing a lot on private sector development and economic growth programming then?

ROLLINS: Definitely. Former President Abacha had nearly emptied the national coffers. There was just so much corruption- stealing the oil revenue- that Nigeria was in a bad situation then. So, focusing on the economy was so important.

Q: Right. But it is also important to note that the anti-corruption work that we started with them is continuing today and is probably one of the important contributions of the AID program during that period.

ROLLINS: Yes, absolutely. Absolutely.

Q: When I think of Nigeria I tend to think of a lot of very dynamic women. Were you doing a lot on the gender front as well there? Or do you just have any thoughts about the dynamic women of Nigeria?

ROLLINS: Well, I was going to say market women.

Q: Or even women in government. I mean, Nigeria has—in my little exposure to it I've always been impressed by the number of women who are in prominent positions.

ROLLINS: Oh, absolutely. There was another Nigerian economist who worked for Ngozi and went to the World Bank. I can't remember her name.

Q: Not Ngozi.

ROLLINS: This is Oby, Oby. Not Ngozi. This was another Nigerian woman. [Joy Ogwu?]

Q: Oh, another one. Okay, yes, I believe I have seen her at a World Bank function.

ROLLINS: Yeah. And so, we were sorry to see her leave because she was dynamic. West African women are just incredible in general. But Nigerians, you know, are—they have that bravado and perseverance. The market women, oh, my God. They are a force—they

call them Mama Benz because many drive BMWs. (Both laugh) But they are—they really control a lot of the economy. Our programs helped set up microfinance lending operations. The women contribute to a susu, an informal loan, regularly with the understanding that the women will receive the money in the susu at agreed upon time.

Q: Yes, the group lending microfinance approach.

ROLLINS: The group lending approach. Each country has a different name for it. But yes. So, we designed and implemented a microenterprise development project that set up lending programs and developed business plans for women to increase sustainability. The project operated in Lagos, Abuja, Kano, and a couple—you know, Jos, Kaduna, a couple of places like that. So, that was a big thing too, yeah, microenterprise. In the early 2000s, the focus was on private sector development to increase incomes and jobs and focus on improving women's economic opportunities.

So, private sector development, microfinance, health, DG, and agriculture were the major concentrations of our Nigeria program. We had a small education program, conducting a little teacher training, but not much else.

Q: Okay. Well, it sounds like you were there at a very exciting time, building up a program and creating something that continued to grow and have impact. So, it must have been a very satisfying experience, although it was probably exhausting at times.

ROLLINS: Yeah, when I look back on it, it was my most challenging assignment. My son and I moved to Lagos in April 2000, just before school ended. He was 10 and only in school a couple of weeks before summer break. Helping him adjust was my primary interest. Then, our Lagos office was dirty, old, and smelled. We had about five FSNs and had to go on a hiring spree, only to find out that we had to move to Abuja and move all the FSNs and FSOs to the middle of the country. Abuja was not ready for us or the other missions moving there. Insufficient housing caused us to move all our FSNs into hotels for about six months. Some FSOs stayed in hotels as well. I was based in Lagos for six months. We found office space and housing, but it was very, very difficult. You know, just because there was so much movement and trying to get the program off the ground while recruiting and managing staff and moving.

Finally, you realize, okay, I got through this, even though it was challenging at times, there were times when I was ready to quit, it was that tough at different intervals. But, you stick with it, and you get on the other side, and you say, whew, well, I don't want to go through that again, but if I have to, this is how I would do it, this is how I would do it differently so that it is less stressful on everybody.

And let me tell you. So, you mentioned ethnic conflict there earlier. So, one of the things that I did—so I don't know if you've heard of this group called Landmark Education. Or now it is called Landmark Worldwide. It's an organization focused on personal development, right? And I decided—I had been through some of the courses, like, when I would come home in the summer, and I'd take a course, and they're usually just a couple

of days and it helps you focus on yourself, what you could do to improve the quality of your life and your relationships with people. I decided—I called them and asked them if they could conduct a seminar for USAID/Nigeria, not just individuals, and they said they could. So, I talked to Dawn, and we spoke to the staff about it, and they said, "Oh, we're willing to try it," because we could—there was a lot of conflict, particularly between the Yorubas and Ibos. This hostility went back to the Biafran War. Landmark came to Abuja from San Francisco to conduct a three-day seminar that really focused on pulling the scab off the hostilities, addressing grief and individual responsibility. Landmark's concept of not living in your past but focusing on the future was part of the lessons learned. Not to allow something that happened to you twenty or thirty years ago to continue to influence what you're doing today; that's called living in your past. You need to live into your future. So, they came out and did this for—we did three days with the entire staff. Ah, Carol. It started to come out. It was so emotional.

Q: The Biafran War was still there as an issue?

ROLLINS: Oh, my God. Yes. I overheard several Yoruba FSNs make derogatory comments about Ibo or Hausa FSNs. When we moved to Abuja we were determined to diversify the ethnic composition of the mission. When we were in Lagos, most of our staff were Yorubas. Moving to Abuja allowed us to recruit from around the country.

Q: Right. You had a representative office and you were getting the problems of Nigeria in the office.

ROLLINS: Yes. The three-day seminar was powerful. People, I mean, they broke down crying and talked about how during the War, they—how their families had to go from village to village and how an uncle or an aunt was slaughtered and about how they were starving, and they were brutal—oh, oh my. It was, oh, it was so emotional and so painful to hear this stuff. But people had to get this on the table to start dealing with it. And that's what—and that's what happened. At the end of the seminar, we had to devise a list of new behaviors and actions for everyone to implement. This process opened up communication among staff, and everyone became more respectful and understanding. It was a difficult and intense process but one that was dearly needed. Everyone grew personally from the seminar.

Q: Because there was pain on all sides.

ROLLINS: There's pain on all sides, right, because the Yorubas—

It was—oh, it was emotional. It was very—

Q: Were the Americans just observing most of this?

ROLLINS: No. No, no, no. No, this wasn't observing. This was participation. Everybody had to participate.

Q: Okay.

ROLLINS: Or there was no point in you being there. If you don't want to do it, participate, then go do your work. Don't come here. Everybody participated. But for the Nigerians, since there are more of them than us, they had a lot of pent-up anger. But we were able to get some of our issues on the table, too. Yes, it was an intense three days.

Q: Yes.

ROLLINS: By the way, Clinton White, Counselor to the Agency, organized the first FSN Family picnic in April 2023. He and USAID headquarters staff sent invitations to all FSNs in the DC, Virginia, and Maryland area for a potluck picnic at Ft. Hunt in Alexandria. Over 500 former FSNs attended with their families, and the Nigerians were the largest contingent, next to the Bangladeshis. It was wonderful to see so many of our former staff members who have great jobs, have bought homes, sent their children to universities, and are thriving in the U.S. Several Nigerians told me they remember that seminar and were positively impacted by it, which was in 2003.

Q: Twenty years ago.

ROLLINS: Yeah. So, that was a major activity that had a big impact on our work. Getting people to acknowledge and address their biases is key to a healthy workplace. It impacts your work and how you show up in the workplace.

So, the mission director, Dawn, was there too.

Q: Since AID is doing more and more in very fragile environments in post-conflict situations, would this kind of activity be useful to others? Because I'm sure there's a lot of pain in all of these post-conflict countries.

ROLLINS: Yeah. I mean, you know, it was beneficial in Nigeria. I didn't—you know, by the time I got to South Africa, South Africa was a whole different story, okay.

So, we didn't—I didn't introduce it there. But Nigeria, it was beneficial to everybody, yeah.

Q: Let me ask you another question. AID has not always done well with diversity within its own ranks. Do you think the program that you all did is something that AID itself may need to do in some places to deal with whatever kind of tensions that are there, either because of racial or other diversity questions?

ROLLINS: Well, it certainly has helped me. I've done this program—I've done several—and they have a lot of different classes that they offer. And they offer them all over the world because even—they had a communications course focused on communications within the world around you and what's preventing you from being more effective, let's say. And so, I took—so there are two of those courses offered,

there's a part one and a part two. Part one I did here in Virginia, but when I went to Bangladesh, I wanted to do part two so I took the second part in Bangkok, Thailand.

Yeah. So, they're all over the world. Now, you know, the thing is, since the pandemic, because it was all in person, right, so the pandemic, everything shut down, and so I don't—I haven't been on their website, so I don't know how they're operating now. But I found it immensely helpful to me in helping me understand who I am, how I show up in the world, and when things happen, you know what's your cause in the matter, what part you played in making it happen -- so how did you contribute to that, either positively or negatively, right? Getting a better handle on me, who I am, how I show up and how I interact with others is—

Q: Did you share any of this with HR, with USAID's HR?

ROLLINS: No.

Q: I'm just wondering if it's the kind of program that they need to make available to people.

ROLLINS: Maybe. I have not. Dawn did it, and she took several courses as well in New York City when she returned to the States. Carleene also took the course in Joburg. So, I've gotten friends to do it, but other than Nigeria, that was the only organization that did it.

Q: So, anything else on Nigeria that we need to discuss. You were there for four years. And so, I assume that, again, your husband, with tandem assignments, State Department people don't usually stay four years in a country but he was able to do that.

ROLLINS: Yes. I don't know if you remember, but you played a part in my assignment to South Africa. Also, my husband got into a little trouble at State and was suspended as we were leaving Nigeria on our way to South Africa. So, for two years, he did not work.

Q: Okay.

ROLLINS: But I will tell you what your part of this was. So, that (laughs) during the, okay, the assignment process—

Q: Of 2004.

ROLLINS: In 2004, Connie Newman, the AA (Assistant Administrator) of the Africa Bureau, asked me to apply for the deputy mission director position in South Africa. And so, I did. It turned out it was a battle between Africa and the Global Health Bureaus. So, the Agency had made all the senior leadership assignments by December and January.

Q: I remember this.

ROLLINS: Yes. (Laughs) And the deputy mission director position in South Africa was the only assignment that was not made. Global Health wanted to assign Margaret Neuse to the position, and Africa wanted me. As you know, Connie Newman and the Health AA were political appointees who significantly influenced the Administrator. I understand that HR sent both names to Fred Scheick, the deputy administrator, who then sent both names to Administrator Andrew Natsios. I am told that Natsios refused to accept two names and sent them back to the leadership assignment group. He said, "Oh, no, you're not forcing me to decide. You guys need to make—that's your job, senior management group, to make the decision." Well, it went back and forth and back and forth and back and forth. I would get little cryptic emails from folks in Washington saying, "Well, we think Connie might have the—oh, we don't know, you know." And so, it went on month after month after month. And then, you called me. Do you remember that?

Q: No, I don't remember the call, but I remember the issue.

ROLLINS: Yeah. So, you called me in Abuja and tried to offer me another position as a deputy mission director, and you said, I think it was—I don't know if it was—it was one of the As, Albania, Armenia. (Both laugh) One of those. And I told you, I said, "Well, look, you know, I have a high school student, and I've got to have a high school." And you said, "Well, if I can find you in another country with a high school, will you take it?" I said, "Well, I'll consider it." So, you said you were going to get back to me about whether there were American high schools in Albania or Armenia.

So, that evening, I called Keith Brown, DAA Africa Bureau, in Washington, and I said, "I just got a call from Carol Peasley, and she wants me to—she's encouraged me to—she says that she has another position." Keith said, "Don't do it." He yelled at me. "Don't do it. They're trying to take this position away from the Africa bureau, and we're not going to stand for it." (Both laugh) "Don't do the—don't undermine Connie. You go back and tell them you want this position, and that's that." And so, Global Health felt that the position should go to a health officer due to the large PEPFAR program and the outgoing deputy mission director was a health officer. Eileen Oldwine? Yeah. Yeah. She had been a health officer, so they wanted a health—and Connie said, "Well, we have more than health there. We want somebody who can manage everything." And so, it went back and forth, and it wasn't until May when they decided and was scheduled to leave Nigeria in June for home leave and then—and it was like the middle, end of May I finally get a call that says, "Connie won." (Laughs)

I got the position in South Africa. (Laughs)

Q: Okay, good. Well, I'm glad you did. I remember the controversy, but I don't remember calling you. I suspect that I was trying to find some kind of compromise to please everyone.

So, then, in the summer of 2004, you presumably come to the U.S. on home leave and then you go to South Africa as the deputy mission director. Let's stop here for today.

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Q: Today is July 10, 2023, and this is interview number three with Denise Rollins.

Denise, we were covering Nigeria last time, but would you like to add any final wrap up thoughts about Nigeria and then we'll move on with your career.

ROLLINS: (Laughs) All righty. Yeah, well, you know, I learned so much in Nigeria. And I have to say it probably, well, it was my least favorite post. You know, I don't know if I want to say it's my least favorite, but it was really the most challenging for me. And I just learned so much about management, about leadership, about rules and regulations because we had to set up this mission, which was quite—we had to move the mission that had hardly, you know, any staff and had to hire and train a large number of FSNs -- we went from about five to, as I said, by the time we left we probably—we had about 120, 130 staff. So, it was that whole process of hiring people to staff up a defunct mission and then moving everybody up to Abuja. So, it was just—it was challenging for me professionally and personally because my family was, as I said, was in Abuja, I was in Lagos, and I had to fly up on Friday evenings and return to Lagos on Sunday evenings. So, it was just, it was just very, very challenging. But it made me realize how important, as I said, leadership and management are. And I think that's what—I know our assistant administrator, Connie Newman, came out to Nigeria while I was there, and I was her control officer. So, I spent much time with her in the car, visiting our sites in Kano and other places. And so, she got to know me a little bit. So, as I'm transitioning out of Nigeria, she's the one who, through Keith Brown, asked me to apply for this position in South Africa. That's how I became deputy director of the mission in South Africa.

USAID/South Africa, Deputy Mission Director, 2004 – 2007

South Africa started off interestingly because I was supposed to be Dirk Dijkerman's deputy. I was looking forward to that because he was an iconic executive leader with an excellent reputation. I thought, "Okay, this is a great—first of all, this is a big mission, and he is a wonderful leader." So, when I arrived, though, I discovered that Dirk had left South Africa and was not returning. And so, here I am, I'm being asked to be the mission director, acting mission director of this large program, and I haven't even been a deputy director yet.

In addition to the leadership issue, USAID had a different relationship with the South African government than in other countries. South Africa has the largest economy on the continent, and their economy is expanding and growing. As a result, South Africa considers itself an equal partner to the United States, unlike many other African countries. As a matter of fact, Mbeki, the president at the time, it must have taken him a year before he met with our ambassador. In other countries it's very easy for a mission director and an ambassador to get appointments with the leadership. But in South Africa, it was very, very different. And so, we began this whole process—

Q: Wow. So, you arrived in 2004 and became the acting mission director immediately upon your arrival.

ROLLINS: Yes. I called Washington and said, "You cannot do this to me. I have never been in this position." I was acting as the mission deputy director in Nigeria because the deputy director had left. So, I was acting, but I was still head of the program office; I did not have the authority or anything. But here I get to South Africa, a brand-new country, and the mission director is gone. So, anyway, they—I told Washington, "You cannot do this to me. I need to have a mission director. I need to have an acting MD?" So, they did. And they brought in. First, it was Carole Palmer, who was terrific. I learned so much from her because she was very easy in that she had this robust laugh, and she didn't let anything get her down. So, despite all the challenges in the mission, she always had a very positive attitude. I learned about broader management responsibilities because now, suddenly, I'm managing all these people who had been my peers. And we're all on the same level, all FS-01s, as the office directors. Melissa Williams was the head of the program office. Sarah Wines was the head of DG. It was just—so I had stars on the staff that I now am responsible for managing. So, learning how to do that gracefully (laughs) took me to get used to that role. But Carole was great.

And then, they brought in—so Carole was there for about maybe two, three months then they brought in Mary—she was a controller.

Q: Llewellyn, I think.

ROLLINS: Llewellyn, yes, and she was—she's very focused and detail-oriented as a controller. I learned a lot from her. And again, she had a great attitude. After about six, seven, and eight months with the two of them, Carlene Dei was assigned, and she became the mission director. That was another excellent learning opportunity because everybody loved Carlene. Carlene gave me carte blanche to manage the mission while she was more focused on the program, and I was focused on managing these eight offices, right? The biggest challenge was a localization issue that the agency is grappling with now, but our biggest issue was that we had a massive backlog of unclosed grants. I'm looking at probably over—it was probably close to 2,500 unclosed grants.

Q: And this was from the historical background of a program which before the end of apartheid worked primarily with South African community organizations and South African NGOs.

ROLLINS: Yes, after Mandela became president the mission issued a number of grants—and it seemed like some of these were just people who had a suitcase.

It was just so much money. They poured in more money after Mandela's election. The mission had all of these grants to organizations that no longer existed, so we were getting dinged by Washington because we had all these open awards that were years old. The challenge for me was I had to set up a new unit within the mission to deal with grant

closeouts. The contracting office didn't have enough staff; neither did the controller's office. There was one American CO, and the Controller's office had two Americans. I brought in an American PSC who lived in Pretoria, South Africa and organized a grant closeout division in the CO's office. Their job was to close out all these awards. The Regional Inspector General (RIG) shared office space in the building, and they regularly disapproved audits conducted by local organizations

Q: Right, the inspector general's office.

ROLLINS: They rejected so many old audits in the past, so we had to reopen the audits and reissue them. And it was, oh boy, it was daunting. It was daunting. They had long gone because you couldn't find the boards of directors or the heads of these organizations. We couldn't even find anyone who received the grants.

And then, there were more established organizations, like Bishop Tutu's foundation. He had a lot of undocumented records, no records in some cases, and no records of expenditures. And, of course, he had closed that foundation. So, trying to get information was complex. Then, we discovered that even Mandela's foundation did not have proper audits or records, and we had to issue a bill of collection, which, if not paid, is sent to the Department of Justice for processing. Washington has to send it to the DOJ. Probably the most challenging case was, oh, and it was so sad because—I don't know if you remember the case of the young American woman who went to South Africa, stayed in one of the townships, and was murdered.

Q: Yes. Amy Biehl, and her parents created the Amy Biehl Foundation.

ROLLINS: Amy Biehl Foundation. Oh my God. Ah. Every time I think about that it was just so challenging because Congress was setting aside money in our budget for the Biehl Foundation—so we had to work with them. Her father and mother were running the foundation, and they used to travel back and forth to South Africa and had all kinds of activities. There was Amy Biehl—there was a bakery of Amy Biehl bread. There was a nursery school, Amy Biehl Nursery School. Amy Biehl Bookstore. Amy, you know, it was all these different things that back when everything started, but by this time, they're not really accomplishing anything. And we no longer had the requirement to give them money. So, we had to go in and conduct audits. We sent the team to audit, and they had not kept good records. So, they owed us a couple million dollars.

Q: Ooh.

ROLLINS: It was terrible because, you know, we sent the team down there. Someone, one of the Americans, the deputy contractor—deputy controller used to go down to Joburg when the mother would come to town, and go into the office and interview the staff—and look through the books and records. The controller's office—I had to go back and recreate everything. So, the father was traveling back and forth, right, but there were no records for airplanes, hotels, or any expenses. So, our staff sat down with the Foundation staff and had them go back years to recreate expected costs for expenses such

as airfare, hotels, taxis, etc. They called airlines and hotels and said, "Okay, five years ago, how much was a suite in the hotel?" They called the airlines, "How much was a round-trip ticket from Los Angeles to Joburg?" And that's how detailed this thing was because we knew they didn't have the money and the father had died. So, the mother is now the one making the trips. And Carlene and I had to tell her we flew down one day to Cape Town to have dinner with her, but we had to tell her how much money they owed the U.S. government. It was—that was one of the most difficult conversations because she started crying and was so emotional. We didn't want to have to tell her, but that's—(laughs)—you know, you must do your job. And so, we talked to her, we spent a couple of hours in the restaurant with her, getting her through—because, you know, she was talking about her husband who had passed away unexpectedly and, of course, her daughter.

I don't know if you remember, but the parents eventually went—when they went to Cape Town, they said they wanted to meet the two men who killed their daughter. And they forgave these men for killing her. They had a session with men who were in prison. They went to the prison; they met them. The men accepted responsibility, and the parents forgave them and asked the authorities to release them. So, they released them a little time later. They didn't serve out their complete sentence. But it was just, you know, it was just such an emotional situation. It was tough to do.

Q: Why wasn't more paperwork done during the implementation of the grants? I mean, that sounds like poor project management?

ROLLINS: Yeah. FSOs come in and out, right? Sometimes, staff are not trained to know the rules. All I know is that we had to clean it up. And I had to learn all about auditing and everything because the auditors had, in some cases, there were closeout audits, but they had been rejected. So, I had to understand why there was a rejection. And then, I had to request that the RIG certify some of the auditing companies. And this is when—I didn't realize that like Price Waterhouse, I just thought once they certified Price Waterhouse, all Price Waterhouse offices are certified. That's not the case.

Q: The local office has to be certified.

ROLLINS: Each office. So, the one in Joburg was not certified. The one in Durban was certified. So, you must ensure you're going to the right audit firm. So, that was a learning experience. I sat down with the RIG and figured out what they were looking for and why American accounting standards differ from European ones. All these issues made me a better and more effective leader, I believe, because I understood everyone's role in the mission. But in the three years that I was there we managed to wipe the books of about $15 million. So, and we got down to, I think of the 2,500 awards that needed to be closed out, by the time I left we were down to about 300 that needed audits—

Q: Wow.

ROLLINS: And so, they continued to work on those when I left. But that was a big challenge, you know. Learning how to manage the rest of the audits, senior leaders in the mission and then this closeout process. I also chaired ICASS (International Cooperative Administrative Support Services). (Both laugh)

Q: That was for all sins in your life…

ROLLINS: I know, but you know, I always love a challenge. And you see, I just love learning and understanding things better. I became the chair of ICASS (International Cooperative Administrative Support Services). We had twenty-eight U.S. government agencies in South Africa, so you can imagine, the meetings were exciting. (Laughs) But yeah, because of all of that, I got promoted to the Senior Foreign Service, so it worked out.

Q: Right. Could you talk more about ICASS? That was the joint administrative services for all the agencies.

ROLLINS: Yes.

Q: Was AID an ICASS provider of some services or were we just buying services from others?

ROLLINS: We were buying services from the State Department. We had our own warehouse, so we had General Services operations. The embassy had their own houses. There were other services that we received from State Department.

Q: But we weren't a provider to anyone else?

ROLLINS: No.

Q: Okay. Can we just go back again to the position? There was one deputy director position in the mission. Did regional responsibilities get shifted to the mission during the time you were there?

ROLLINS: Yes, that's, okay, that was the other thing that I was responsible for. So, when Botswana, when the agency decided they wanted to close the mission RCSA—

Q: RCSA, Regional Center for Southern Africa.

ROLLINS: RCSA, yes, right. So, the agency was planning to put a mission director and another mission director in South Africa. And I think the RCSA mission director was going to be Jerry—I can't remember his last name. I think he had been—he was mission director in Zambia. So, he came to South Africa looking for a space to set up a whole other mission. We had a beautiful site in Pretoria because it was a brand-new building, and as a matter of fact, the CDC wanted to construct a building so they could be on the site. It was a nice parcel of land. But Jerry didn't want to be in the same building with the

bilateral program. So, he found a spot in Joburg. He was going to set up regional operations in Joburg. (Laugh) And I remember the—the administrator at the time came to South Africa, and I remember riding with him in the car because I went to pick him up at the airport and to accompany him back to his hotel. And he started asking me questions about the regional mission and what I thought of placing it in Jo'Burg. He asked me if having another full mission in South Africa made sense. And I said, "No, I don't think it does." I said, "It makes sense to have two deputy directors and a mission director." He was talking to other people, and apparently, that position prevailed. So, I prepared the closeout of RCSA and the paperwork to establish two deputy director positions.

Q: Okay, so a second deputy was created in South Africa while you were there?

ROLLINS: Oh, yeah. I did all the paperwork to establish it and then as I was leaving, we were starting to recruit staff into the Pretoria mission to handle regional programs and activities. I recommended Gary Juste for the regional deputy position.

Q: You had been in Nigeria when PEPFAR started. Obviously, PEPFAR was a huge part of the South Africa program as well.

ROLLINS: Massive.

Q: I wonder if you have any observations about how PEPFAR worked in South Africa in comparison to Nigeria.

ROLLINS: Yes. Well, you know, South Africa had much more highly developed organizations and often had their own resources. So, it was different from Nigeria because in Nigeria, we were starting up many of these organizations, helping them get on their feet so they could source and provide ARVs and testing. South Africa, because it had gotten involved in HIV-AIDS programs early on, already had a foundation. They had NGOs and local organizations that were operational. We conducted analyses to determine whether they could accept our money. Many of them could. So, it was easier in the sense that you already had local organizations that could work directly with us. But it was the largest PEPFAR program in the world, and we had a significant health team. And, of course, the CDC was there. However, the program was managed by NIH. He was the ambassador's senior health advisor, overseeing the whole program.

Q: Oh.

ROLLINS: Yeah. Also, Peace Corps and DOD were part of PEPFAR. So, it was five organizations managed by NIH—he's the one who set up the meeting—

Q: So, he was like a PEPFAR coordinator sitting at the embassy.

ROLLINS: Yes, but even higher level because there were other coordinators who were kind of the worker bees, but he was a senior NIH advisor under HHS (Health and Human Services). Gray Handley was his name.

And so, he's the one who managed the whole process. And, of course, when I first got there, the ambassador was—she was Condoleezza Rice's right hand, Jendayi Frazer. She had been at the NSC; she was highly connected to the administration. And when—I know Carlene and I went to talk to her about some decisions Handley made that were concerning to us, she told us, says, "I was in the room when the president and everyone else said USAID could not manage this new program which is why it was given to the State Department. She felt that State was better equipped. She was in the room where it happened and was not about to let USAID upset the apple cart, so to speak. As a result, we reluctantly went along with his decisions.

And she said, "So, you're all, you're just going to have to buck it up." So, she was the first ambassador, and then she left and came back to the States and was working in the State Department with Condoleezza Rice, and then we got another political ambassador, Eric Bost, who loved us to death and was all—he said, "Oh, you guys, you have more money than God. Oh, come on over here and—" you know, I mean, he just—he loved talking to us and loved going out to the projects and all. But it was different because, as I said, the government was not as forthcoming with us and not as open.

Q: Right. If I can digress for a minute to ask about the Government of South Africa views on PEPFAR. President Mbeki was well-known around the world because of his resistance to HIV/AIDS programming.

ROLLINS: And his health minister, Dr. Tshabalala-Msimang. Well, they disagreed with the data that HIV caused AIDS, and they believed that the ARV drugs were harmful, and she said, "All you need to do is to eat African potatoes, onions, beets, and garlic to cure AIDS." She was a medical doctor trained in the Soviet Union and bought into conspiracy theories. And many people did that and died early. I remember a well-known radio personality who announced that he had the virus and would follow the health minister's advice. And you could hear him as he got weaker and weaker and weaker, and then he died. However, many people believed there was a natural way of getting rid of the virus and that the drugs would poison your system. And I remember attending an AIDS conference in Durban with the minister. She was at the airport and asked me to sit next to her, and she told me that her—there was a—I think there was a German nurse who came to South Africa early in the AIDS epidemic, and the nurse told them that the drugs aren't going to work and that it should be this natural method. The minister believed the Germans, and so did Mbeki. A German doctor focused on fringe medicine and used to visit the country and meet with the minister. She believed the Germans but did not prevent us from working with the ministry or civil society. Getting an audience with them was challenging, and they did not go out of their way to help us.

Q: You had mentioned at the outset that the relationship with the government was not good. Was that a major factor, was the disagreements about HIV-AIDS policy?

ROLLINS: It was that but also going back to apartheid when the U.S. government didn't support the freedom fight. That's—

Q: Well, yes, but during the 1990s when Mbeki and Gore had their commission, Mbeki got on quite well with the U.S. government when he was vice president. So, that's why I'm surprised, but I guess maybe he got along because Mandela told him to get along. When he became president, perhaps he decided he didn't want to. (Laughs)

ROLLINS: Yeah, and he had several people in his administration, including the minister of health, who had been revolutionaries, and they had been banished to Tanzania during the apartheid era. The health minister and others were scattered around Africa during the struggle and returned once Mandela was released. So, they resented the United States. And the political returnees who began to influence Mbeki, such as the minister of health, felt they could not trust the United States. And that factored into the relationship, including HIV-AIDS.

Q: Okay. When I interviewed Aaron Williams, the USAID mission director in the early days of the Mandela Administration, he mentioned that the new majority-led government requested an annual review of the USAID program. Was that still happening when you were there? If so, how did it go?

ROLLINS: Yes, we continued it because remember, Carlene Dei, who was now the mission director and had been the head of RHUDO (Regional Housing and Urban Development Office) ten years earlier with Aaron.

So, she had this long history with South Africa, yes, continued the reviews and prepared extensively; they were very scripted. The government was concerned that the PEPFAR program was humongous, right? And it dwarfed the other programs, especially private sector development and economic growth. They wanted more money for local efforts, but AIDS had exploded in the country. Young girls were being infected at a tremendous rate. It was frightening. They were getting pregnant by older men who were preying on them. And then, there was this—this theory that went around that if you had sex with a virgin, it would cure you. So, the girls were getting younger and younger, getting infected and pregnant. So sad that the next generation in any society is the youth, and they are dying. Grandmothers had to take care of the children that were left behind. Some of them were infected, as well. So, it was a struggle with the government's resistance to the PEPFAR program. They wanted more resources to go into other areas and less to HIV/AIDS. There was nothing we could do about the funding situation.

Q: Yes. You said the program was very much dominated by PEPFAR and HIV-AIDS work, but you had mentioned the person who headed up the democracy and governance office. Were you doing much work on that front? Were you doing any anti-corruption programming?

ROLLINS: No, not with an anti-corruption commission. What we were doing was working on local elections and local civil society organizations and mainly, we had a heavy focus on women's groups and *Sesame Street*. (Laughs)

Q: Ah, right.

ROLLINS: I'll talk about *Sesame Street* later. But the women's groups were key to our DG program. I have never seen women beaten like this by their spouses. Alcoholism is huge in South Africa. And in the townships, it's just awful. The men get drunk, they come home, and of course, he has spent all the money, he's angry and he comes home and he starts whipping his woman. And it was at epidemic proportions. We funded a program—we funded a television program that was—it was a serial, like *Days of Our Lives*, to address domestic violence. The series focused on domestic violence and taught community women to help stop the assault when they heard the woman scream by coming out of their homes and beating pots and pans and banging on the culprit's door. In addition to the violence, he often infects his wife with HIV/AIDS.

So, that was a huge part of DG efforts. We also supported women through a legal aid program in several places in the country. The most active program was in Cape Town, and I can't remember the name of the program now, but the program used shipping containers and turned them into offices near the courthouses. Women would arrive to press charges or get restraining orders against their partners. There are certain moments in one's career that are seared in your brain, and I remember walking into one of those containers—it was set up as an office, and it had a waiting room—and I walked in, and I just looked at these women's faces and eyes bruised and battered. It took my breath away to see how these women lived. And they have no place to go. So, they have—they can't just get up and leave. They have no resources in many cases. And so, it was just that human factor in South Africa. I've seen poverty, I've seen horrible living conditions—but it was just the impact on women's lives and children's lives, you know. And girls are not safe there. Because they live in very close quarters in these townships, basically tin roof homes and no indoor plumbing, they must go to—there's a communal toilet often some distance away and if they have to go at night, they're in serious trouble.

So, it was just all of that. That really, it just—whoo.

Q: Yes. Lots of social issues that evolved out of a very tragic history.

ROLLINS: Yeah, and particularly because it's like a Disneyworld in a sense because they've got these beautiful—South Africa, you know, has riches, extreme wealth in many cases. And so, you can go into these neighborhoods and these homes that they've just built, eighteen rooms and twenty-five rooms, and you see the big cars. The highways are spectacular, as you know. And so, you've got this veneer of development and wealth. And the hospitals, oh, the medical care, let me tell you, the medical facilities are incredible, for those who have money.

And the schools. You go to—you look at the building. Oh, my, it's beautiful, like any place in the United States. And then, there's the other side of it, which is predominant in South Africa. In Nigeria, you see incredible poverty and there is some wealth, but not on display as in South Africa. Outsiders often have a complete misunderstanding of what's

happening in South Africa because of that, because of the glitz and the glitter, the big stores and the malls and everything. Then it's this underbelly that's just heartbreaking.

Q: Yes. Absolutely, in many ways a wonderful place to live and work but also an incredibly difficult place to live and work.

ROLLINS: Mm-hm. Absolutely.

Q: You started out by talking about how Carlene, as mission director, focused more on programmatic and you more on management. But I wonder if you want to talk a bit more about the director-deputy director relationship and how that evolved for you over time and prepared you for becoming a mission director.

ROLLINS: Mm-hm. It probably started in Nigeria because, as I said, I was acting mission deputy director with Dawn; that was my third post with her.

So, I got along very well with both. So, when Carlene arrived, she's just a beautiful soul, you know.

Q: Yep. Who left us far too soon.

ROLLINS: Carlene and I both retired in Washington, so we spent a great deal of time together attending concerts, musicals, and all types of performing arts. We went to Jamaica together. She was my friend. In South Africa, we discussed everything. I always checked with her as I steadied my deputy director's training wheels. So, she was calm, very measured, very smart, and a great writer. She gave me full rein, and I reported back to her as I was working with the various office directors. Also, I had gone—I forgot to mention, I attended the FEI training program the summer before arriving in South Africa.

Q: Oh, that was smart on the part of AID.

ROLLINS: Yes. So, what was that, two or three weeks? I can't remember now, down in Charlottesville. And one of the things that they offered me was the opportunity to have a coach. So, I had a coach while I was in South Africa for a year. I would call her every three weeks, and I could work through any issues or concerns I had. Let's say if I wanted to understand better how to approach a touchy subject with the staff. My coach helped me work out what to say and how to say it, so I didn't piss people off, you know, that kind of thing.

Q: Was this someone who had experience with USAID or was it a management/ leadership consultant?

ROLLINS: She was a management leadership consultant, yes.

She had never worked for the government or anything. But it was good for me because I could bounce ideas off her and try to figure out, okay, if I'm going to have this big

meeting on some topics, how do you manage that meeting and the people in it? The head of the DG program was Jeff Bakken. So, as I said, I had stars on my team. And I'm supposed to manage them. So, it was—but they were all good people. Carlene turned me loose and said, "Go for it." As I would identify issues like, for example, the one with the auditing problems, she'd say, "Okay, figure it out; you can do it." And so, she just gave me full rein to do what I needed. And I put together a kind of a leadership trust so I could go to Melissa, I could go to Jeff, I could go to—I forgot who the controller was, but they were all, they had much more experience than I did in their areas, so—and James Watson. James Watson came in as a program officer after Melissa, so, I had a good strong group of people and they helped me learn how to manage them.

Q: Yes. That's an interesting observation. I've never heard it put this way before—but being a deputy mission director you are often a peer of all the office directors. You had a mission with stars, and you had to manage peers in a way that would bring out the best in everyone. An interesting challenge for deputy mission directors.

ROLLINS: Yes. And you know working with Carlene and her experience, and of course, I had a little time with Carole Palma and Mary Lewellen gave me a lot of good advice too, you know, over that eight-month period before Carlene arrived. So, you know, I just had—I've only had one mission director—well, I've had—okay, one mission director who just didn't like me and told me I should leave the agency. (Laughs).

Q: When we're offline you can tell me who that was. (Laughs)

ROLLINS: Yeah. And then, I had one mission director who I adored as a human being, but he just couldn't manage, and I told you about that one.

But I loved him as a person. But the other one who just didn't like—it seemed like she didn't like—she said she didn't like humans; she preferred animals. So, she didn't have—in her house, in the mission director's house, she had nothing but paintings of horses, dogs, and cats and what have you. And she would not take a picture with the staff. If we were out somewhere with the group of mission folks and somebody came with a camera, she would turn her head quickly, so you couldn't take her picture. I mean, it was that severe. So, anyway, I'll tell you about that later. (Laughs) I understand the challenges the agency is facing now because that's a big problem for them. The mission directors and deputy mission directors are not in sync, and even just a month ago, we were talking to the career counselors, and it bubbled up; everybody knows the problem, including the administrator. But I've had terrific leadership, and I learned a great deal. I just—I loved getting into the nitty gritty and understanding better how each of the offices needed to work, each sector, too, so that I could be helpful to folks.

Q: Right. Well, it sounds like you had an incredible three years as the deputy mission director with a lot of quite varied responsibilities in a very high-profile place.

ROLLINS: Yeah, because, you know, we had members of Congress and high-level State Department folks coming on a regular basis—but that was the other thing. We had to set

up a special unit to manage CODELs, Staffdel, and Hillary Clinton, who came several times. Also, she was very keen for us to undertake a new project. This is where you get these special administration requests—I was telling you that in Nigeria, USTR wanted us to do the gum arabic project. Well, —Senator Clinton, who was focused on women in development, right, so she wanted us to undertake a project that was—it was like a small merry-go-round that the children played on. As they played on it going around in a circle, it would pump water from a well. I had my staff go out and check one of these projects, and there were already a couple of those in South Africa. So, I said, "Well, why don't you go out there and check them out and see how they're working?" Well, you know, kids play on stuff for a while, and then they lose interest. But if you're trying to get water for the whole village, they've got to be on these things all day, every day. (Peasley laughs) It made no damn sense. Okay, so I sent comments back to Washington. Of course, that was not appreciated. And $20 million came in the budget for the project which we knew would fail.

Q: This was when she was senator, so this was an earmark.

ROLLINS: It was an earmark. But it was not $20 million for South Africa, but $20 million for the Africa bureau. So, they had to dole it out. We received $5 million. The NGO promoting this thing installed a couple more, but the project never went anywhere because it's dependent on children playing on this thing all day long. When are they going to school?

Q: Yes, right, right.

ROLLINS: (Laughs) Oh, God. So, we've had some doozies. The gum arabic and this project, those were the two—those were the stinkers, boy, and they were all mandated by Washington because somebody thought it was a good idea. But it's not based on reality.

Q: Right. You mentioned Sesame Street a few minutes ago. Do you want to say something about it as well, which is a longstanding South Africa program, I believe.

ROLLINS: Absolutely. And I understand it's still going on now. We graduated from the program in the South African private sector, which has major international corporations, and we felt that South Africans should fund the program after ten years. Takalani Sesame is the program's name, and they use both English and one of South Africa's other ten official languages. It was the first Sesame Street program to introduce an HIV/AIDS orphan on the show. The program is seen all over the country. Everybody loved it.

Q: I think it started during the, yeah, it started, I think Michelle Brent was one of the architects of it in the late nineties, mid to late nineties.

ROLLINS: Yeah. With all the natural resources, gold, diamond, insurance and investment companies, South Africa had domestic resources to support the program.

Q: Right. And this was the period when the Global Development Alliance took off. And I assume some of this was done under that label.

ROLLINS: Yes, in South Africa and in Nigeria with Shell.

Q: Yes, right.

ROLLINS: To transition the program, the parent company, Sesame Workshop in New York, worked with us, Takalani Sesame, and the South African private sector to strategize the transfer. The program was $5 million over five years. The private sector began funding the program and we were able to sunset our funding.

Q: Right. So, this was not an alliance, this was basically selling it to the private sector.

ROLLINS: Right. Takalani Sesame is produced locally with all local characters and on regional topics. Sesame Workshop retains a relationship with them and checks in periodically. *Sesame Street offshoots are* all over now; even in Bangladesh, we have a *Sesame Street*. We successfully transitioned it to the private sector so that they could fund the program.

Q: That's a great success story as well, I think, transitioning it to the private sector. Are there other things about South Africa that you would like to mention?

ROLLINS: I mentioned the challenges of learning how to lead a group of high performers, work with a government that distrusts us, manage the PEPFAR program when the primary authority rests with another agency, collaborating with the interagency on ICASS, and finally, closing numerous outstanding old awards and working effectively with the RIG. And yeah, I can't—you've been prodding me on certain things. You know, you're looking at (laughs; unintelligible) try to remember,—

Q: Yes. Are there other parts of the program that are important to mention? I know it was so dominated by the HIV-AIDS program and PEPFAR, and we've talked a lot about that.

ROLLINS: Absolutely. PEPFAR took much of our time because OGAC introduced new quarterly reporting requirements, and the work was non-stop.

Q: And then, the close out work that you did, which is quite—

ROLLINS: And ICASS, managing the ICASS group. Because we had to—it was wrangling over the budget. You know, the ICASS services budget. That was contentious, as you can imagine. I calmed everybody down so that we could get something done and justify expenditures. Yeah, I learned a lot from that process, too. (Laughs)

We even had a Library of Congress representative there. And that was the first time that I had seen that. I didn't know that the Library of Congress had staff overseas.

Q: I assume that was a regional position.

ROLLINS: Yes. The other thing was that before we moved the Botswana mission to Pretoria, we had a regional HIV/AIDS program called RHAP, R-H-A-P, which provided services to ten countries in the region. So, we always had that going on. I supervised the RHAP director and engaged with ambassadors in those ten other countries. Those ambassadors always wanted more HIV/AIDS funding, because they did not have PEPFAR programs.

So, I would go on TDY with the director periodically to assuage the concerns of the ambassadors in the region.

Q: Was this like Lesotho and Swaziland?

ROLLINS: Swaziland, Lesotho, Mozambique, Zambia, of course Botswana, because we closed the program there.

Q: And Namibia—

ROLLINS: Namibia. It was—we didn't have a mission in—I don't remember having a mission in Namibia. We had a few PSCs there, but it wasn't a proper mission, I don't believe, at the time that I was there. Kendra Phillips was the RHAP director; she was often on the road. So, we had a regional component even before we closed RCSA.

Q: I hadn't realized that. That's interesting.

So, you were there three years and then at some point people began to talk to you about what you were going to do next. And how did that process work?

ROLLINS: Well, Fred Scheick called me, and he asked me what I was—what I was going to do next, what I wanted to do next. And I said, "I thought I was going to be a deputy director again or be a mission director of a small mission, a small footprint. I had bid on Zambia, Kenya, and other African posts. He asked me if I had thought about Asia?" And I said, "No." Because at one point, I was talking to someone, and they said, "You should consider bidding on the Russian mission." Then I spoke to someone in the Russia mission, and he told me about Russian racism. This FSO was white and had an African wife and children. They were often hassled and verbally abused. I did not want to put myself or my family through that, so I decided not to bid on Russia, which was good because they subsequently closed the USAID mission there.

So, Fred asked me if I had thought about Bangladesh, and I had not. He told me I had a good reputation and good leadership, and he thought I would be the right fit. He asked me to submit my bid list with Bangladesh as number one. And I did. He also gently suggested that I needed to tone down a bit. I had a reputation as demanding. He says, he says, "Denise, when I have—if I have a spot on my tie," he was trying to be—he was being very discrete and very graceful, he says, "If I drop some catsup on my tie, you I

would like somebody to tell me so I can go and clean it up." And he said, "I've heard great things about you and your leadership, but I also have heard that you can be a bit testy at times." (Laughs) And I said, "Yes, that's true." And he said, "So, I'm telling you this so that you can get the catsup off your tie." And I said, "Thank you very much, sir. Thank you." And so I got the Bangladesh mission director job. (Laughs)

Q: That's a great story, a great way to give a message to someone.

ROLLINS: Yeah. Some messages from your career are seared in your brain. This was very helpful. I acknowledged it. My staff told me that I'm just as demanding of myself as I was with them. I'm not going to ask you to do something I can't do." I feel like we're in this together to get the job done. Perhaps that is my saving grace, I guess, is that (laughs)—

Q: Let me ask you what the Africa bureau was doing during this time because I'm sure that they were also trying to think of positions for you. Were they upset that you got grabbed to go to the Asia bureau?

ROLLINS: Wade Warren had left the Africa Bureau and moved over to the F (Office of Foreign Assistance) at State.

Q: Yes—I think this was the period when Lloyd Pearson was the assistant administrator for Africa.

ROLLINS: Okay, yeah, because he's the one who came to South Africa and decided that we would create two deputy mission directors in South Africa. Yeah, Lloyd Pearson. Keith Brown, SDAA, and Valerie Dickson-Horton, DAA, had left the Bureau, and I didn't have a connection among the DAAs in the Africa Bureau. Connie Newman, who had served as Director of the Office of Personnel Management under George H.W. Bush was keenly focused on management and leadership. Pearson, not so much.

Q: Connie, right, and then I was acting for a short period when I was counselor, waiting for Lloyd's confirmation. Kate Almquist was one of the DAAs.

ROLLINS: Yes, she was DAA. Kate was focused on Sudan. That's been her life.

So, she really wasn't involved so much in Bureau leadership. Her focus has been devoted to Sudan. Even now, she's still doing that. But I can't remember who the other DAA was.

Q: There was a fellow when I was there, but I don't remember his name. But, that's beside the point. Most importantly, the Africa bureau didn't put up any obstacles.

ROLLINS: No, they didn't. And so, I said, "Okay." And I needed a high school for my son, Bangladesh had a great high school, and it was a terrific family post.

USAID/Bangladesh, Mission Director, 2007 - 2011

Q: And so, in the summer of 2007 you go off to Bangladesh. Did you replace Gene George? I had done a mission management assessment there in 2004 or 2005. I am curious if you might have seen it.

ROLLINS: Yeah, because he was very organized before he left. I believe I did see that mission management assessment and other things that I needed to—and he was sending me stuff before I got there. And the deputy mission director also left —that was—she became mission director in Nepal.

Q: Beth Paige.

ROLLINS: Beth Paige. Yes. So. I just saw her daughter the other day. (Both laugh) She's close to my son. They're best buddies. And so, yeah.

So, I land in Bangladesh. Getting myself up to speed on the program, we had this huge $30 million Title II program that funded all of our disaster assistance programs throughout the country, right? Unlike some Title II programs, the Bangladeshi government bought the food from us, issued us local currency, and distributed the food to the poor.

Q: So, you programmed the local currency?

ROLLINS: Yes, we used the local currency to fund grants to NGOs such as ACDI/VOCA, World Vision, Catholic Relief Services, and CARE. These organizations received the local currency and implemented programs in the country's most disadvantaged areas. We did not conduct director feeding programs that you see in other countries. The government bought the food from us and deposited the money in the banks.

So, I'm there ninety days, and in November 2007, one of the most significant cyclones hits the country. Cyclone Sidr. And it just wipes out the southern part of the country, killing the cattle, the people—I think 4,500 people died. All the rice that was just ready for harvesting in two weeks was wiped out. The rice, cattle, and housing are gone. I've never been in a disaster before. The Office of Foreign Disaster Assistance (OFDA) arrived within a day and began assessing the damage. Four OFDA staff people from Bangkok landed and began communicating with the NGOs. I did not know what to do because I had never been in a disaster. This is my first directorship. I'm 90 days in, and I am trying to learn about the program on the fly. I did not know how OFDA operated. They set up an office and started interacting with the government and the NGOs without informing me and the mission.

Q: Right and you'd never been involved with a major humanitarian disaster, right?

ROLLINS: No. We gave OFDA office space, but I did not know what they were doing or my role. They were not reporting back to me. We did not have an ambassador at that time, so the DCM was in that role, and she was saying, "Well, Denise, what are we doing? What are we going to do to help these people?" And I'm like—I just thought, have my team come in. "Oh, okay, you're on the—oh, you're on the disaster and humanitarian assistance program. Come and give me a briefing. I was pulling staff into meetings to get up to speed. And that night, I think two nights later while we were assessing the damage, I get a call, 2:00 in the morning, from Henrietta Fore, the Administrator. Now, she had sworn me in as mission director for (Peasley laughs)—okay? That was the first time that I met her and she's on the phone, at 2:00 in the morning. "Hello? Hello, yes?" "Hello, Denise? Henrietta here" I'm like, "Oh, oh. Oh, hi. Yes, hello." You know, you're trying to wake yourself up. And she says, "Do you need me?" I said, "Yes, yes, I need you." She was in Nairobi.

I think she was doing something with Sudan and she was in Nairobi, and she said, "Do you need me?" Again, and I said, "Yes." And she said, "I'll be there tomorrow afternoon." I'm going, oh, lord. What am I? (Both laugh) I don't even know what to do.

So, I get in the office early, I round up the team. I said, "Look, Henrietta's coming this evening." So, Walter Shepherd was the head of the humanitarian assistance office and I said, "Walter, I need you and your staff. We've got to put this thing together." We rented a seaplane from one of the NGOs to assess the damage in the south.

We managed to get that for the day and—fortunately, OFDA had flown in all the humanitarian supplies from the warehouses in Dubai and Bangkok. The planes arrived in the early afternoon with all the tents, water tank, and other supplies. So, we had our grantees offload the aircraft at the airport to greet Henrietta when she arrived; We could have her do a press conference with the USAID flags on the supplies to ensure the visual optics of seeing the United States's commitment to Bangladesh. So, we pulled it off.

Q: Well done.

ROLLINS: We pulled it off and then flew the Administrator down to the southern part of the country in a seaplane so she could see the devastation. We landed in the water, in the Bay of Bengal, and along the coastline, you could see the animals floating in the water, you could see the—it was, yeah, it was something. It was terrible

Later, we met with the Chargé, Geeta Pasi, and she said, "Well, you know, the military is coming, the Marines are coming in tomorrow." I said, "Oh, lord." So, it was this ship of 2,500 marines, the USS Kearsarge. They were on their way from the Middle East back to Okinawa, and since this had happened, they would stop in Bangladesh to help us. General Ronald Bailey was the Commanding General of the 3rd Marine Expeditionary Brigade and the lead US military commander on the ground in Bangladesh. I said, "Oh, my God." So, I remember Henrietta said to me, "Denise, I want you to lead this effort." She said, "Because others will try to take over control." She said, "It's your responsibility. You must lead it for USAID." I said, "Got it." I went—after she left, I went home, changed

my clothes, and put on my power suit (laughs) so that I looked like I was in charge. (Laughs) Oh, God, I'm such a character at times. Anyway, I remember going home, re-dressing, putting on my heels, and regrouping.

So, General Bailey arrives. I remember I was entering the Embassy the next morning, and suddenly, I heard behind me loud, syncopated steps. Marching steps. I look around, and I see General Bailey surrounded by his Marines. He was very polite, very nice. What was fascinating was that our grantees received the humanitarian equipment and supplies and had already trucked these items down to the southern part of the country. So, our humanitarian assistance teams were already in the area handing out and assisting survivors. We immediately began with a full-court press in the media to inform Bangladeshis that the United States was here to help. And that was when we were all focusing on the three D – Defense, Diplomacy, and Development.

We had the three Ds in lockstep. We interviewed on television, newspapers, radio and at the Bangladeshi military barracks. We met President Iajuddin Ahmed, who was in place due to a military coup. The two women leaders of opposing political parties were imprisoned. Bangladesh was operating under a caretaker government. And as our humanitarian assistance was distributed, I made sure that we arrived and ensured that the United States was recognized. The Marines had a vast number of humanitarian supplies, but some were of less use than others. For example, they had cases of water in bottles. What happens to the plastic bottles after use? They clog up gutters and become piles of waste.

The Marine's humanitarian assistance team was large—about 85 Marines, while our OFDA DART team was comprised of four people. This shows you how they've got more resources than the law allows because when they arrived, the Embassy had to assign them to another building on the compound. And, of course, we don't speak the same language as the military. Military-speak and USAID-speak have different acronyms and meanings. I convened the staff every morning and every evening because it was a full-court press, and everybody had to participate. I assigned my staff to spend—to go over for the day with the Marine's humanitarian assistance staff, so we knew what they were doing, and I had to force the OFDA Director, I forgot his name at the time (Ky Luu) was his name, he was a political appointee, he called me and got upset because I told him that the DART team lead would not communicate with me. Once Henrietta gave me my marching orders, I was serious about this. These are also our agency's resources, right?

I insisted that they report to me and let me know what they were doing, and I want to know what the military is doing so we can all work together as the three Ds. OFDA brought in another DART team leader who was a terrific collaborator. The DART team expanded as more staff arrived from Bangkok. We marched forward, trucking the supplies down south. I had planned to take leave at Christmas, and right after Thanksgiving, my mother passed away. We had to leave for Detroit at the end of November for the funeral. I was gone for about two weeks, two and a half weeks. Upon my return at the end of December, we received notice that a big Staffdel was headed our way. Tim Rieser's—not Tim Rieser. Who was his counterpart on the Republican side?

Q: Paul Grove.

ROLLINS: Paul Grove. (Both laugh) Paul Grove led the bipartisan Staffdel focused on cyclone relief efforts. We took them all over Bangladesh, right?

Q: Was this to look at the entire program or was this focused on the relief effort?

ROLLINS: Well, it was because of the cyclone, considered the worst in twenty-five years.

Q: Right. And some early warning systems, I think, had been put in place as a result of that earlier tragedy.

ROLLINS: Yes, which is—and we knew it was going to be bad, but we didn't know how bad. When the first and worst cyclone to hit Bangladesh was in 1970, Cyclone Sidr One, 150,000 people died.

Cyclone Sidr Two killed about 4,500.

Q: Yes, a huge difference.

ROLLINS: Big difference. There is a considerable donor community in Bangladesh, and every donor -- the Swedes, Finns, Dutch, British, French, Japan, Canadians, and, of course, the World Bank and IMF wanted to be a part of the recovery. I regularly convened the donors at my residence for breakfast over a couple of weeks to assess each organization's capabilities, funding, and management ability. We wanted to ensure that our resources were complementary. I often invited General Bailey and the Chargé to present the broader U.S. recovery strategy. I had large boards to draw on and divide up parts of the country by donor. It was a monumental effort.

Q: Was the government doing anything on this front to try to coordinate the relief effort?

ROLLINS: It was inefficient, but they welcomed our assistance. The Ministry of Disaster Management and Relief hosted the donors to determine what donor resources were available, how to service the area, and how to get supplies to the south. The government had limited resources, but they had our Title II food to distribute, so that was critical.

The Marines had water blankets and tents. As I mentioned earlier, we encouraged them to stop distributing bottled water and install what they call a Water Bladder, which holds hundreds of gallons of water and is easier to use. Our grantees also provided water purification tanks in the affected areas. The Paul Grove Staffdel arrived in early January. I believe there were six staffers that stayed about four days.

We flew them to the cyclone area and escorted them to one of our HIV/AIDS projects implemented by a Catholic Priest located in central Dhaka. This project worked to

provide jobs and skills training to girls discarded by their families. Early marriage is common in Bangladesh, and by the time a girl from a poor home reaches puberty, she is likely to be married off to an old man. Many of them are used by their husbands, thrown out of the marital home, and eventually become sex workers to survive. Some are also infected with HIV/AIDS. Some can get jobs in garment factories where 85 percent of the workers are women.

The session with the sex workers was heartbreaking, and it was painful to hear their stories. The Staffdel was in tears. When the Staffdel returned to Washington, they added a $60 million earmark to our budget for humanitarian assistance in Bangladesh. The Agency zeroed out the earmarked, but when the Administration resubmitted the budget to Congress, Paul's staff reinserted the $60 million. Our entire Development Assistance budget was $75 million, which included $30 for Title II. This was a big deal. When I left Bangladesh in 2011, our DA budget was $250 million. We designed new projects focused on agriculture, economic growth, health, DG, and humanitarian assistance. We rebuilt the cyclone-affected area and reestablished and diversified sustainable agriculture. Most of the $60 million earmark was used to fund the Army Corps of Engineers construction of 100 disaster relief buildings that protested residents and livestock during a cyclone.

Q: Right. I was hoping you could talk a little bit about how the centrally driven initiatives under Raj worked from a mission perspective.

ROLLINS: Yeah. Now, you know, I have five minutes left before I must go to my class.

Q: So, we'll have to save that for the next time?

ROLLINS: Yeah, I think so because that was interesting. We successfully applied for and received every new initiative Raj initiated – Feed the Future, Global Health, Climate Change, and the Global Development Alliance. There was also another initiative focused on working with the Muslim community.

Feed the Future was designed initially for 14 African countries. Franklin Moore, Africa DAA, told me, "Denise, the Agency is getting ready to announce a new agriculture program based in Africa. You should make a case for Asia. He told me there would be a conference call at 9:00 am EST but 10:00 pm my time in Dhaka. I arranged for my agriculture team to come to my house that night." And I said, "Okay, we want it." Fortunately, we had conducted a great deal of analysis due to the recovery efforts, which involved bringing in TDY support to assess the situation in every sector. I had my talking points and made a strong case for Feed the Future in Bangladesh. I was told later that we knocked the ball out of the park. We had extensive data on crops grown and how we planned to diversify to address nutrition issues – Bangladeshis have high levels of stunting and wasting due to consuming excessive amounts of carbohydrates (primarily rice) and little protein. We launched Feed the Future with a $75 million first-year budget. Very exciting.

Q: Yes. Okay, no, there's lots to talk about. I'm going to turn the recording off for now.

End of Session

Q: This is July 25, 2023, and this is interview number four with Denise Rollins.

When we finished up last time you had gotten to Bangladesh. You had been there about ninety days and were hit with a once in a century cyclone and you talked a bit about that experience. Further thoughts about your immediate immersion into disaster relief and then, subsequently what happened to the USAID program in Bangladesh?

ROLLINS: So, when the cyclone hit it really changed the dynamics of our program. We had a relatively nice sized annual budget of $75 million, but half of that was food aid, and the rest was everything else: economic growth, health, democracy-governance, and a couple of others—education, et cetera. And when the cyclone hit, we suddenly had a lot of money, mostly due to the Staffdel.

Bangladesh was back on the map for everyone. Many people mentioned the big world concert held in Madison Square Gardens in 1971 after the war for independence from Pakistan in 1071. That was the world's interest in Bangladesh after the 2007 cyclone. The other donors increased their budgets, the US military established a permanent presence in the country, and we had lots of Washington visitors.

During relief efforts, as I mentioned, the U.S. was always in the news -- the three Ds we were on television all the time -- the Chargé, the General, and myself. The General even took us to the Ministry of Defense to demonstrate that we all work together. This was an important message because the military had taken over a year earlier and installed a caretaker government. The two political leaders were imprisoned. My leadership of the international community contributed to the goodwill.

This was also around the time that the new—that the administrator began to roll out new initiatives, such as Feed the Future, the Global Health program—

Q: But this was after the political transition and the arrival of Raj Shah, right?

ROLLINS: Yes. Yes. And I got a call one day from someone in the Africa bureau who told me, who called me and said—now, the thing is, we had had—I had had to get my staff together at night so we could participate in calls to Washington, and this was when agriculture, you know, food was a crisis all of a sudden, we can't depend on exports, countries need to become self-sufficient now all of a sudden. We didn't have any agriculture money in our program, but suddenly, we have money now to do agriculture. So I was able—what happened is that I headed a donors group. I invited them over to my house. I had them for breakfast or for dinner and I just started telling them how we were rolling out these new programs, Feed the Future and Global Health and even the—there was a fourth initiative focused on Muslims, getting more—I forgot the actual name of it. Maybe you will remember the name of it. But because Bangladesh is a moderate Muslim country, we had a sizable program working with imams in Bangladesh as well. So, all of

a sudden, we're getting this money and we can wrap up our program. Fortunately, we had already done a lot of analysis, had had people come in and look at the agriculture sector, had people come in and look at the economy. We had people looking at disaster preparedness. You know, just the whole—even looking at education and what we could do. Of course, the administration decided we were just going to do reading and writing skills in elementary school, because we also had a *Sesame Street* program there that we were funding.

So, we had a lot of little things going on but nothing really big until we get the $75 million from Congress, which was a special contribution.

Q: That was a post-cyclone supplemental?

ROLLINS: That was a post-cyclone supplemental. And then, I get his call from Washington. I, along with the deputy in the economic growth office, had been on a call with Washington, talking about agriculture. And it was a larger group and the administrator was on that call as well.

Q: And this was Raj Shah, the administrator?

ROLLINS: Raj Shah, yes. So, a couple of days later I get a call from someone in Washington who says, "Denise, they're getting ready to roll out Feed the Future. They're selecting the countries now. All of the countries are in Africa. But you know, they need to have a country that's not Africa. So, you know, whether it was Latin America or Asia, and you know, why don't you put Bangladesh's hat in the ring?" And I said, "I will absolutely do that." So, I wrote a whole thing, sent it into Washington, and we were selected as one of the Feed the Future countries, at first, it was just going to be Africa. And I think it eventually became Cambodia as well, but really, we were the big kid on the block. And it started with—it was $30 million and went up to $45 million, just for agriculture. And then, the Global Health program. Again, that was small, $20 million. That went up to $75 million a year.

Q: I've always heard it was essentially a centrally driven program. To what degree is that true? Or, did you in the field actually have a leadership position in what was done?

ROLLINS: Oh, yeah, we had the—we didn't manage the grants. We—

Q: Right. But did you define the strategy for it or was it driven by—

ROLLINS: Well, we had a lot of support—we had a lot of support from Washington, and they came out to help us look at all of the analytical work that we had done, the World Bank and some of the other donors. Because folks had been looking at this sector for a while, we just didn't have any money. And then, suddenly, you know, we get this windfall. So, yeah, I mean, people in Washington came out to help us, you know, sort through all of that data and what was the direction we wanted to go in, what part of the

country, et cetera. So, along with our staff. And then, we're the ones who issued the awards and undertook the work.

Q: Okay. And you were able to define the priorities that you wanted to focus on in Bangladesh? You weren't hampered by Washington in terms of defining priorities?

ROLLINS: No, not at all, not at all.

Q: Okay; that's good.

ROLLINS: Yeah, we had so much data from us, like I said, the World Bank and other donors. We can't make up stuff, we have to—and then, also, we had to get the government onboard, the Bangladesh government onboard. And the minister of agriculture was a woman and you know, working with, I mean, she was a tough cookie, but she really—she understood the issue and the fact that she wanted to do what she could—you know, Bangladesh was suffering from there's too much water coming from the north, which is from the mountains melting, from the Himalayas, and then saltwater is intruding from the Bay of Bengal. And so, it is—and that saltwater was encroaching on the freshwater areas. So, trying to find—Bangladeshis diets are comprised of 75 percent carbs, rice. The saltwater was killing off some of the rice crops as well. So, trying to find salt-resistant varieties and tolerant varieties of rice, as well as other crops that they consume. That was really important.

Q: So, was it primarily a research and production program or were you also working on the marketing side as well?

ROLLINS: Oh yeah, we were doing marketing as well.

And yes, and consumption because Bangladesh has a high stunting and wasting. I mean, you'll see an eighteen-year-old boy or girl and they look like they're six my American standards, you know, by European—by Western standards. And that's because 75-80 percent of their diet is rice. So the Global Health program expanded into nutrition was able to incorporate farmers who were—a lot of them were women farmers, so they understood the nutritional value of the other crops, you know, brinjal, which is eggplant and other items that they could—so not to sell off everything but to consume some of those too. Hence, we had a nutrition program there as well. And it really did begin to show results.

And I remember—I'm just going to fast forward a bit—when I was assistant administrator for Asia, I took Paul Weisenfeld, who was AA for Feed the Future, on a tour of Bangladesh to show him our progress. He was shocked to see how much was being produced, all the fruits and vegetables, all the crops produced in that southern part of Bangladesh, which is the one where the salt is intruding on the land. So, we saw the benefit of it immediately.

Q: That's great to hear. And so, you were able to integrate some of the priorities from the Global Health initiative with the Feed the Future initiative as well.

ROLLINS: Yeah. If you've got farmers, let's say women farmers, well, they need reproductive healthcare, right? They want to educate their children. They need to earn money to support the family, so that's where economic growth and all of that comes together. So, it's all tied in. Now, you might have to go to different parts of the country because, let's say where child mortality is highest, right? Well, so you want your child survival service to be there. But that may not be where you're going to have an agriculture project, right? But where you can overlap, that's what we tried to do. So, everybody didn't see themselves as having unique and separate groups of people they're helping, but they're all the same people. And the democracy and governance activities were focused in some of the same areas because beneficiaries vote

Q: I know that there's a long history of working through local NGOs in Bangladesh, particularly, in family planning, where in fact, there were some very large Bangladeshi NGOs that delivered a lot of services. To what degree was the mission working directly with Bangladeshi NGOs in the program? Also, to what degree were you working directly with government, particularly on policy issues? Lastly, to what degree were you working with and through U.S. intermediaries? I've always thought Bangladesh might have been a little bit different than other countries.

ROLLINS: Mm-hm. Well, we didn't have a lot of one-on-ones, or local grants. When I say one-on-one, I mean where we gave a grant to a local organization. We had a couple in the environment focused on climate change. We did not have many, if any, local health organizations that we funded directly. Most of the health activities were funded and implemented through our humanitarian assistance program CRS, CARE, World Vision, et cetera, and, of course, support to field support. We developed a very close working relationship with the Minister and the Ministry of Health.

Q: Right.

ROLLINS: And so, that's how they conducted that business, mm-hm.

But we worked very closely with the government after I arrived. I may have mentioned that our staff had stopped interacting with the government directly and, instead, communicated through our implementing partners. I discovered that our staff didn't know anybody in any of the ministries. They didn't know a soul. So, we had a new ambassador coming in—well, he came in, and he said to me—and I'm still getting up to speed on the program and dealing with the relief and recovery efforts. Ambassador Jim Moriarty said, "I want to meet your ministers." And I said, "Okay." I said, "Let me set that up." So, I went to the staff, and I said, "We need meetings with the ministers of health, agriculture, etc. We don't know anybody there." I had established a relationship with the Minister of Disaster Management due to the cyclone, but none of the others.

I said, "How is it you don't know anybody at the ministry? Isn't this their program?"

And they said, “Yeah, but I was told that previous leadership did not pursue it. So, I said, “You know what?” I said, “You all must know everybody who’s got anything to do with the kind of work that we’re doing here and that goes all the way up to the minister. I want the ministers’ number on my speed dial. I want the home number; I want the cellphone number and the office number. And they ought to have mine. And so, from now on, you’re going to find out who’s in the ministry and who’s going to—and we’re going to—get this moving. That’s what happened. We started convening meetings with the government. They said they thought we had closed our program.

Q: Yes. I had that impression when I did a mission management assessment there, that there was very little contact with government.

ROLLINS: Yeah, I didn’t know that. That is the strangest thing. How do you—this is their program. It’s supposed to be their program.

I was down at the ministries regularly, meeting with all of the ministers. Talking to them about how to integrate their programs and encouraged them to collaborate with their own colleagues about what’s happening in the country, for example, with the Minister of Agriculture. In my meeting with her, Bangladesh had 160 million people. I said, “At the current growth rate, you’re going to have 20 million more people in twenty years. You’re talking about feeding people now, but you should also be looking at feeding 180 million people. It's called Feed the Future for a reason.” And I said, “So, you need to be looking at how you’re going to increase production for that extra 20 million that’s going to come onstream in twenty years.” I said, “The other thing is family planning. You ought to be talking to the Ministry of Health because in the more conservative areas like Sylhet in Bangladesh, you know, they have as many as possible, and the women have no control over their reproductive life. Mothers-in-law control everything that goes on in the household. In those areas, women have eight, nine, ten children —as long as they’re producing. Many of these women are malnourished and stunted, and their bodies are unable to sustain so many births. Many die in childbirth at some point. So, if women want to use birth control, then we should be able to provide that for them because we’re doing it in other parts of the country. I spent a lot of time with the minister of health, I talked to him about the importance of agriculture. You want healthy citizens in your country; they need better quality food. So, finally, the ministers established a ministerial council to collaborate on long-term issues affecting the country.

I had a strong relationship with the ministers. When we launched Feed the Future, Raj came out with his entourage. He had only been in office about six months, so he was green to the U.S. government, and this was one of his second or third trips. Our mission organized one of the largest Feed the Future launches. The entire Bangladeshi government, from the prime minister and the cabinet, was there, donor agencies from headquarters in Europe and Asia (Japan and China). This was a big deal. We set up an appointment for Raj to meet with the prime minister and the ambassador at her residence. And that was the kickoff for our program, which was wonderful and very well received.

As time passed, I continued to hold weekly donor breakfast meetings at my home from 7:00 am to 8:30 am. We started with health with the ministries and decided to do a show and tell for them. My fabulous health director, Khadijat Mojidi, corralled the numerous implementing partners and oversaw the development of their PowerPoint presentations. We went downtown to the government and began our presentations. I presented the big picture, followed by Khadijat focusing on health. We broke for prayers at 6:00 and continued well into the evening. The implementing partners were following and they introduced the Ministry to significant health issues confronting the country. It was a fantastic event because the government, the Ministry of Health in particular, had no idea what we were doing in the country. The presentations were succeeded by a lovely dinner. We left at about 10:00 pm. We brought the Ministry up to speed on child survival data, fertility, maternal health, HIV/AIDS, and other health issues. Everything was mapped out so the Ministry could see where the most severe problems were located. It was amazing. The minister of health, he was just, he was shocked. He said, "We had no idea you were doing all this stuff. This is really fascinating."

We rolled out this approach in all of the sectors -- agriculture, economic growth, private sector development, disaster management, education, and democracy and governance. This created a great relationship with the government at all levels, as well as with our implementing partners. The ambassador always wanted to travel with me, so we used to hit the road once a month. He could not accompany me every six or eight weeks, but he was determined to get on the road and see our programs. I also invited ministry personnel including ministers. We met with farmers, teachers, mothers, entrepreneurs, children, health staff, and local government officials. We asked our implementing partners to be on the ground when we arrived. This is one of the reasons why we were always on television, the papers, or the radio. We gave interviews all the time. As I've said before, we went from about $75 million annually to $250 million a year, and even food aid went up from $30 million to $42 million. We hosted a large GAO audit (Government Accountability Office) of our Title II program, and it came back with flying colors. a

Q: Now, that's very impressive.

Did you do these briefings for the ministries periodically or was this something that you did early on, followed by more regular contact on an ongoing basis?

ROLLINS: Well, we conducted briefings with the ministries, usually every six months or so. We were trying to get on a regular yearly review calendar, but at the beginning, they wanted to engage with us more frequently to learn about our program and implementing partners. The ministries often invited the media at the beginning or end of our review sessions to show the people they are engaging with the U.S. The press loved us and always wanted to hear something from us.

Q: Yes, that sounds much more reasonable. (Laughs)

ROLLINS: Yeah, but at the beginning, because we were establishing these relationships, it took a little time to get started on the program reviews. The second year, maybe six

months again, and then it was a year. So, we would do it in—in September/October, so we could also get ready for, you know, the reporting, the congressional reporting that we do.

And we would have the data.

Q: That's fantastic that you were doing that.

Who was the ambassador? You mentioned that you traveled a lot with the ambassador.

ROLLINS: Yeah. Ambassador James Moriarty. It was funny with him, he became a grantee of ours in Indonesia, so he was the chief-of-party for an ASEAN project after he retired from the State Department.

I used to joke with him and tell him his schedule was very light. He met with the admin or economic officers and, maybe, with a few other staff in the building, but that was all he did. I had meetings all day long, every single day, right? If I was not meeting with the senior leadership and sector teams or implementing partners, then I had meetings with the government. That is more than a notion. In Dhaka, it took two hours to drive downtown and another two hours to get back to the embassy. The narrow roads are clogged with taxis, bicycles, cars, rickshaws, and more. It is a significant effort to meet with ministers. I think the Ambassador thought managing one of our projects would be a piece of cake, but he realized it was more challenging. When I was acting AA (Assistant Administrator) for Asia, I traveled to Indonesia to review our programs. I met with him to discuss our ASEAN program and its accomplishments. He told me what a nice program it was and how he enjoyed it. When I returned to Washington, the Indonesia mission called the desk officer to say, "We want you to tell Denise." They had to fire him. (Both laugh) They fired him because he just wasn't getting the work done. And they said, "We just wanted to make sure you knew." And I said, "Oh, God, I'm so sorry." But you know, if he's not doing the job, he ain't doing the job. So. (Both laugh)

Q: I make no comments or generalizations about that. (Laughs)

ROLLINS: No, but I was—he thought this job was easy." (Laughs)

Q: There are two institutions in Bangladesh which are quite famous around the world, Grameen and also BRAC. Did you have much contact with either BRAC or Grameen and what your thoughts about them might have been?

ROLLINS: Both of those organizations are world-renowned. BRAC is the largest NGO in the world, and both have operations everywhere. BRAC and Grameen have offices in New York City and many African and Latin American countries. We transitioned our programs directly with them since they receive resources worldwide. They have a lot of money, and both have a lot of money and influential leaders. They don't need us now.

Which was fine. But we used to interact with them, nonetheless.

To let you know, when we were designing new programs, mainly if they were NGO-focused, we sought their advice. We wanted their ideas because they have been working in the space for decades. They always gave us good advice based on their own experience.

Q: Good.

ROLLINS: So, we knew them both well.

Q: You talked about going on trips with the ambassador and I'm assuming that relations with the embassy were quite good.

ROLLINS: Mm-hm. Oh, yeah, the relationship with the embassy was excellent. Because I kept them informed. I met with him weekly. I always told him what I was doing. And then, when we had folks come in from Washington to conduct sector analyses, I always had them meet with the ambassador so he would know what they were doing. They briefed the ambassador, upon incoming and outgoing. He appreciated that. He was always up to speed on what was going on. Even when we undertook our strategy, and I was heavily involved in that process because we didn't have a program officer. I had to serve as MD and program officer. I contracted a TCN, a Third Country National from Sri Lanka who another mission director recommended. She had spent two years in Zambia, South Africa, and Ghana. Nishana Fernando was highly recommended, and I hired her to help put the strategic plan together. We worked in the evenings and weekends. We got it done. I was without a program officer for ten months.

Q: When the program grew, did your staff also grow? Did you get additional direct hire slots as well as FSN staff?

ROLLINS: Yes, both. So, even—so I have a brick here. I'm going to show you this brick and I'll tell you—(Peasley laughs).

Q: Yes. I see it says Denise Rollins, Assistant Administrator, USAID.

ROLLINS: Yes.

Q: And the other says Renovation Embassy Dhaka, June 26, 2014. USAID Renovation Embassy Dhaka. So, you were co-located in the embassy, right?

ROLLINS: Yes, we were co-located. We had one whole side and the embassy had the other side. I had to fight OBO (State Department's Overseas Buildings Operations). The Agency awarded us OE for staffing, but our space was truncated. We had a large space but it was divided into many small offices. We need to go from about 70 staff to 150 staff. Small offices were not in the plan. I petitioned USAID Washington that we needed to renovate our side of the building but there was no action. When I went on home leave, I asked to meet with OBO. I made a presentation, and they said they would reply. I

included the USAID facilities people in the meeting. After a couple of weeks, OBO came through with a $10 million renovation of our side of the embassy.

Q: Here's a lesson learned. (Laughs)

ROLLINS: I got $10 million from OBO and I forgot, USAID was maybe $4 million and $6 million came from OBO, whatever it was, to do the renovation. Because we went from about seventy staff to—we increased our footprint to 170.

Q: Wow. More than doubled.

ROLLINS: So, we needed offices on three floors. OBO came out, did their survey, sat down with the staff, and presented office staffing options. I vetted the options with the staff. No surprises. I sat down with the ambassador and his team such as the management officer so they wouldn't be surprised by anything. It took longer than expected to complete the construction because it was supposed to be done—before I left in 2011, and as you can see, this was done—it was 2014. (Peasley laughs) Okay. So, it was a little late, but it did get done. And that whole side of the building, all three floors now. We got another conference room. We managed to get a conference room on two floors rather than just one and offices for everybody, so it's—they had an official opening and I couldn't go because I was acting AA and I had—and Raj wanted me to go to—I was on TDY to Cambodia, Vietnam and Philippines with him, so I couldn't go to Bangladesh.

Q: Just out of curiosity, while the renovation was being done, where was staff working?

ROLLINS: They had to shift to other floors. Yeah. I mean, people just had to juggle while that was happening. But they stayed in the building though.

Q: Any thoughts about the FSN staff in Bangladesh? I suspect some of them had probably been with the mission since the early days of the country.

ROLLINS: Oh, yeah. Some had been there twenty, thirty years.

But you know, one of the things that I noticed was that—and I'm sure you've seen this yourself—you know, all these, there were many old guys, right, old Bangladeshis, you know, academics, university professors. They had PhDs from local universities, maybe taught or what have you, and then they'd join us. There were hardly any women above a nine, an FSN-09, in the mission. However, we had an intelligent, very knowledgeable woman on the staff, Shahnaz Zakaria, who was the humanitarian assistance/disaster expert. She was excellent and connected with the Ministry of Disaster Management and Title II NGOs. I learned so much from her. And the food aid people loved her, too, but she was just an FSN-10, while the men were FSN-12s.

Bangladeshi culture, like a lot of more conservative countries, relegates women to the backseat, and the men do all the talking. I remembered that I had been to a leadership course. I learned, "One of the things that you should do to increase participation is to,

before ending a meeting, go around the room, look at each person and ask them directly by name, "Would you like to comment on the discussion we just had?" Usually, a leader will say, "Does anybody have anything else to say?' And the staff said, "No, no, we're fine, thank you." The leadership course was helpful to me in encouraging full staff participation from everyone in the room. And I started doing that because I noticed the men would sit at the table, let's say we'd go into the conference room, and the men would take all the chairs at the table, and the women would sit in the back. I arrived at the meeting a tad early and encouraged the women to sit at the table rather than along the side walls, as they normally did. I would say, "Oh, Shanaz, why don't you sit at the table." "Oh," you know, "Mumbaz, please sit at the table." So, I began pulling the women to the table and encouraged them to use their voice, experience, and presence to contribute to our efforts. It was wonderful.

The other thing we did was to review our hiring practices. I looked at the way we hired FSNs and at the position descriptions. We often shoot ourselves in the foot because we want somebody with twenty years of experience. I asked the staff, why? (Peasley laughs) Why do we need somebody with twenty years of experience? You don't need that.

I had the EXO review the positions with the technical offices to determine what skill set they needed and how long it took to acquire those skills. I had the staff rewrite all of the position descriptions to make them more reasonable. As a result, we started hiring more women FSNs.

So, the Bangladesh mission had more women in senior positions, by the time I left, than men because many of the men had left due to mandatory retirement. I think it's sixty-two or sixty-five. I'm excited that we were able to bring in more highly qualified women. and have them sit at the table and contribute to the discussion.

Q: Excellent.

ROLLINS: So, that was a big deal. And what's funny is I always wear lipstick, right? I always wear red lipstick, and the women, these Bangladeshi women, started wearing red lipstick. (Both laugh) And as a matter of fact, I've seen some of them who have immigrated to the United States and they are still wearing red lipstick, and they'll point to their lips. It's a power color. (Both laugh)

Q: That is a role model.

ROLLINS: Yes, absolutely. I told them "It just brightens up your face," It just makes you alive. And they started wearing red lipstick. I said, "Okay, that's great. That is wonderful."

Q: No, that's great. I don't know much about Bangladesh but have often heard stories about political leadership bouncing back and forth between two women presidents who are from different political parties. Any observations about that? Did these political

differences ever crop up with your large Bangladeshi FSN staff or were they all beyond that?

ROLLINS: You mean the political divisions?

The staff didn't talk about it much. Sheikh Hasina, who's been in now for fifteen years, I guess she's going to be president for life at this stage because she locked up her opponent. When I arrived in Bangladesh, the military had just taken over in 2007 and put both in prison. So, the first year or so, they were locked up and then the military turned over the government to a civilian caretaker government for about a year when they held elections. Sheikh Hasina won again and refused to relinquish power. She's won elections every four years since then. But you know, she locked up, you know, a lot of the head folks in the other political party, so she's there now, you know, she'll probably, you know, die in her boots.

Q: In many ways, Bangladesh is an extraordinary success story in terms of development, and yet in those places where development has not been very successful, we often say it's because of poor governance. But, even with the political machinations that have taken place in Bangladesh and relatively weak governance, they have been very successful. Is it in fact a better governed country than I had assumed?

ROLLINS: They have succeeded despite poor governance because corruption is big, big business there. Corruption is endemic. For example, the government decided to hire more healthcare workers, and we thought, "Oh, that's a great initiative, yes. They need them more throughout the country," Then we discovered that what is happening is that, first, you must belong to the right political party to be considered for a position. Second, they charge for the application. (Peasley laughs) So, a lot of what happens is that you must borrow a lot of money from your family and friends to pay this fee to receive the application and fill it out. Third, you must pay when you return the completed application. Finally, once hired as a healthcare worker, you must make enough money to repay the loans and take care of your family by becoming entrepreneurial. These jobs are low paying. So, what happens? You become resourceful, okay? So, there's corruption all up and down the line. Teachers charge parents to teach their children and to pass them on to the next grade. Healthcare workers charge for government-funded medicine and services.

When we announced the Global Health Initiative, we collaborated with the World Bank to analyze the health sector to help us determine our health strategy and how to complement the other donors. As you know, we primarily focused on family planning, reproductive health, maternal and child survival, and a tiny HIV/AIDS program. We only had $2 million a year for HIV/AIDS. The World Bank brought out a large team over several weeks to assess the status of the health sector in Bangladesh. When the Bank completed the analysis, it chaired a conference call with relevant donors to debrief us. The government had a procurement policy that any solicitation under $500,000 did not require competition. For one of the health solicitations, the proposals arrived and are tagged with a number. According to the Bank, the assumption was that the government

official would place all of the tags in a box or container and pull out a number and the proposal would win the bid. It appeared to be a random selection. However, the Bank discovered that the preferred proposal tag would be placed in the freezer overnight and then placed in the container. The official picks the coldest tag. I had never heard of that. It's very clever but demonstrates how embedded corruption is in the country. (Laughs)

Q: Where's that cold one? (Laughs)

ROLLINS: We said, "What? What are you talking about?" And they said—and they found out how it was done. Obviously, that would be a company that was supportive of the government, a friend of the president, etc. I had never heard that even having been in Nigeria, which is very corrupt. I thought that was ingenious, as a matter of fact. (Laughs)

Q: Were you all doing anything in your democracy-governance program related to anti-corruption?

ROLLINS: Yes, we had programs with IRI and NDI on parliamentary and local government reforms, and elections support.

Q: But not anti-corruption work specifically.

ROLLINS: We tried to do anti-corruption, but it was hard.

The focus was on parliamentary, local government, and NGO strengthening, that kind of support.

Q: So, to go back to where you started, it's not a particularly well-governed country, and there are lots of governance issues. But are there strong local institutions? I am still grappling with how they've been so successful.

ROLLINS: Well, there are some strong local organizations. And of course, we worked with many of them, but primarily through our implementing partners --World Vision, Care, CRS, and other contractors and grantees which have been on the ground for decades. The country's success, I believe, comes from local-level organizations such as farmers' groups, parents' associations, community health care, local and religious leaders.

Q: Okay. So, a lot of the success in service delivery is because of non-governmental organizations rather than government?

ROLLINS: Oh, absolutely, absolutely, yes. The government is based in Dhaka and does not regularly interfere with local-level matters. This is why Grameen Bank, BRAC, and ICDDR B, formerly known as the International Centre for Diarrheal Disease Research, Bangladesh) have been successful for decades.

Q: That's helpful. I'm trying to think if there are other things relating to the Bangladesh program that you would like to mention. And then, if not, there are a couple management-related questions I'd like to ask.

First, when you went to Bangladesh, you went into a brand-new geographic bureau. Did that create any special challenges? Any lessons or recommendations for people going into a new bureau? How do you develop the relationships to make the system work?

ROLLINS: Dawn Liberi always told me to stop by the offices of AAs and DAAs every time I come to the States to introduce myself because they make the staffing decisions. I know how to follow instructions, so I always made sure senior leadership knew who I was. I would set up ten-minute meetings to let the person know about my interests and experience.

The transition to Asia was initially challenging due to the cyclone 90 days after arrival and the fact that I had to get up to speed quickly on disaster management, relief, and recovery. Also, my mother died four months after my arrival. I went home, organized the funeral, and cleaned out her house before returning to Dhaka. The other challenge in Asia, in general, is overpopulation. I have never seen so many people in the smallest area. Bangladesh has 150 million people located in an area the size of Iowa. There are people everywhere and no personal space. Everyone is in your face and touching you.

Q: So, you had contacts already?

ROLLINS: Yes, but I also had to introduce myself to the desk officers and bureau staff. Plus, I was always told to bring little souvenirs to leave with Washington staff, so they always remembered me. (Laughs) Little tchotchkes. I also did that for folks in the travel section too. (Both laugh)

In Bangladesh, I asked the staff to contact their sector backstop in Washington to strengthen the relationship with the mission. This newly developed relationship went a long way to garner TDY support to the mission and help us with analyses, project designs and implementation, evaluations and funding. We became partners in all of the new initiatives due to Washington advocacy for us.

In addition to increasing diversity within the FSN staff, I also focused on bringing in a more diverse FSO staff, particularly in leadership positions. We had eight offices, and I managed to recruit seven FSO women to join me as Office Directors, several of whom were women of color. I had to convince them to come to Asia because Africa is more familiar and has more missions than Asia, so these dynamic leaders are being recruited by other missions. The Directors of Health and Education, Democracy and Governance, Economic Growth, Disaster and Humanitarian Assistance Offices, and the Controller and Contracting Officers were women. Kudos to them for trusting me and coming out of their comfort zones. I took another note out of Dawn Liberi's book to attract them to Bangladesh. When she recruited me for Uganda, she had her deputy director call me and say, "Denise, we want you!" (Laughs) Dawn and her deputy told me how they would

help get me promoted and ensure that I had a career-enhancing experience. I was enthralled. Keith Brown tried to recruit me for Ethiopia, but he was not as enthusiastic as Dawn in encouraging me to join him in Addis. (Peasley laughs) He stopped speaking to me for a couple of years (Peasley laughs) because I didn't go to Ethiopia where he was.

We all adapted quickly after the initial challenges in Bangladesh. Bangladeshis are terrific people, friendly, warm, and welcoming. We socialized with them regularly. My son graduated from high school at the American International School of Dhaka, and he still has close Bangladeshi friends; several were at his wedding.

Q: I've always heard that Bangladesh is a very good family post. Is that correct?

ROLLINS: Yes. Absolutely. And the school is terrific, absolutely terrific. That was the reason why I was interested in the position after Fred called me. He did well and made many friends. He got married just three months ago, and his friends came from Bangladesh, from around the world, as a matter of fact. So, he's still in close touch with them.

Q: Yeah, no, that's great, that's great.

Just two other quick questions. One, at the beginning of your tour, you arrived as a first-time mission director. I'm just wondering if you had a tick list in your mind of things that you wanted to make sure you did early on? If you could talk about that a little bit, it might be helpful for others in the future.

ROLLINS: Well, the first thing I wanted to do was to listen. You can't go into a place and start coming up with your ideas about how things should be changed. I tried to listen to staff and partners and to observe and see what was going on. That process had to speed up because of the cyclone, so we—it was baptism by fire. But— I wanted to listen to find out how the staff, particularly the FSNs and the Americans, worked together or not because, at some missions, there is conflict. I found that the FSNs and FSOs don't socialize with each other. I started hosting luncheons at my house for each team. We sat and talked around the table to get to know each other better. It was informal, no agenda. The staff also had an opportunity to meet my family. By my second year, my husband joined me and our son.

And I wanted to find ways to break through the separation between Americans and FSNs in some posts. I did that by initiating a monthly happy hour on a Friday, and each office took a turn doing it. So, we started with the front office; we had music, drinks, food, and decorations. The offices rotated every month. That was a way for everybody, including the Americans, to stay and talk to FSN counterparts and get to know them better. The overriding theme was that we could not discuss work during this time. The staff began to loosen up, and there was much more camaraderie. As an aside, the Agency Counselor, Clinton White, organized an FSN Family Picnic two weeks ago in Virginia. Over 500 former FSNs who immigrated to the DC area attended, many with their families. There was a sizable Bangladeshi contingent; many worked with me in Dhaka and received

SIVs. Many are now American citizens. I always want to bring people together to help increase understanding.

I also wanted to ensure we had a strong analytical foundation for our program so that we understood the terrain as well as we could and could justify funding and results. We prepared a $1 billion, five-year Country Development Cooperation Strategy, which the Agency approved. In addition to extensive analyses, we traveled all over Bangladesh to hear the views of beneficiaries, local organizations, NGOs, the private sector, academia, and other donors. As I mentioned before, I did not have a program officer for close to a year, so the workshops and much of the writing were done by Nishana, the TCN I brought in for six months to help me complete the strategy. We worked long hours, including weekends; the staff worked hard to meet with ministry staff as we finished the process. That two-hour Dhaka traffic crimped their style, but they persevered. Toward the end, one of the health Ips helped us organize a three-day debrief with staff, partners, and the embassy.

Q: Right. That's very useful, thank you.

Lastly on Bangladesh, you were there for four years. As you know AID currently works in so many difficult countries where people stay only one or two years. Do you have any thoughts about the value in being able to stay in a country for four years? Does it enable staff to be more effective?

ROLLINS: Sure. Oh, absolutely, absolutely. Because you get to know everybody in town, right, and they get to know you. So, we had a large cohort of Bangladeshi friends that we met through, mainly because I was part of a tandem. My husband was GSO at the embassy. He met many people, too, and they always invited us to dinners or parties. I also hosted many receptions, dinners, and Christmas and New Year's Eve parties. Four years will allow you to learn about the people, customs, and culture. The Office Directors also hosted their counterparts at luncheons, dinners, and receptions. Khadijat Mojidi hosted parties with the Ministry of Health regularly. We were a very social mission, as you can probably tell, which helped build relationships.

Q: And again, emphasizing the importance of relationships to success.

ROLLINS: Yes, absolutely. That was critical, absolutely critical.

Q: Okay, we're in 2011 and your four years are coming to an end. You're trying to figure out what you're going to do next. You went off to do something quite exciting, but I'm wondering how that came about. Did you debate with yourself about returning to Washington or staying overseas?

ROLLINS: Well, not so much because I had been overseas for twenty-three years.

Q: Okay. Not so much then. (Laughs).

ROLLINS: Washington was calling me, telling me I needed to return to DC. I'd been overseas for a very long time. Nisha Biswal, AA for Asia, had just come on board after being confirmed. She decided to host a regional mission directors' conference in Bangkok, her first trip as AA. Raj had already started rolling out some of his initiatives, which were driving everybody nuts because they used to say that he—it was drive-by tasking; he would tell someone, "I was thinking about. . .," and then, next thing you know, there's a whole initiative. Everybody's scrambling to deal with it. So, during this mission directors' regional meeting, I spoke up and discussed how we're trying to implement all the new initiatives and staff is overworked. While Raj often talked about work-life balance, there was no balance because we worked non-stop to implement the new programs with insufficient staffing.

After the first day, Nisha took me aside and said, "So, what are you going to do next?" I said, "I don't know. I've got to return to Washington." This was maybe September or August 2010. I told her I had to figure that out." And she says, "Let me get back in touch with you." She called me upon her return to Washington and offered me the senior deputy administrator of Asia position. And I said, "Okay, that'll do." (Both laugh)

Q: That sounds good.

ROLLINS: That sounds good. I can do that. However, I had no idea what I was in store for.

AID/Washington/Asia Bureau, Senior Deputy Assistant Administrator and Acting Assistant Administrator, 2011 - 2014

Q: Okay, so 2011, you come back and you are the senior DAA in the Asia bureau. And what surprises were there for you?

ROLLINS: I didn't know how to do my job. I can run a mission, right? I mean, I was in the field for twenty-three years. I can run a mission. But arriving in Washington, oh my God. All the—and see, Nisha was very political. Not only was she a political appointee, but she had been raised in the political space, right? She had been USAD Administrator Brian Atwood's special assistant, maybe fifteen years earlier. Then she was with—what's the name of the organization of all the NGOs in DC?

Q: Interaction.

ROLLINS: Interaction. She was the head of programs or something like that for Interaction, so she knew all the international NGOs. She's very politically astute. So, she knew all of them. And then, of course, she knew everybody on the Hill because she had been up there for ten years.

So, she knew everybody on the Hill on both sides, House and Senate. She also knew every federal agency because they had to come to her for money. They had to defend

their budget with her committees. So, she knew all of them. She often invited development experts from think tanks to brief us on various subjects. CSIS (Center for Strategic and International Studies) staff made presentations. However, I don't know anybody. (Laughs) I was in the field for twenty-two years. (Peasley laughs) I know programs. So, at the same time, I had a lot going on in my personal life with my son, who was trying to become an adult, and my husband (now ex-husband), unpacking twenty-two years of stuff in storage and adjusting to owning a home in the States. I'd say I struggled for about nine months; I was trying to fit in. Gradually, Nisha tapped my talent for the field and asked me to TDY to the five Central Asia missions to help them address the issues related to Secretary Clinton's New Silk Road Initiative.

Q: That was when the "Stans" became part of the Asia bureau?

ROLLINS: No, no, no. No, that was still—well, yes, yes, yes. Sorry, yes, it was. The Stans were part of the Asia bureau. But you know, they had been off everybody's radar until Hillary Clinton, who was then secretary of state, decided we're going to be the Silk Road, the new Silk Road initiative. So—this is when I started really getting involved with DOD, which was trying to find another route of delivering supplies to the Army in Afghanistan. Most of the supplies came to Afghanistan from Karachi, Pakistan, port, and overland. It was a dangerous road filled with mines and bandits. Tajikistan shares a border with Afghanistan. If DOD could fly into one of the Stans, it would be easier to deliver to Afghanistan. The other plan is to work with USAID to help the Stans produce food and other items to reduce the cost of shipping from the U.S. I attended a week-long DOD conference in USAG Bavaria, Garmisch, reviewing DOD supply requirements for 130.000 troops – in addition to fruits, vegetables, protein, how about toothpaste, soap, toilet paper, detergent, etc. DOD hoped that USAID could work with the local private sector in these countries to begin producing these products. DOD wanted to work with us to get Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan to produce more food for DOD to purchase instead of shipping everything from the United States. Our programs in Central Asia were focused on increasing production, fruits and vegetables, and even learning how to manufacture toilet paper. However, Central Asian produced toilet paper is not interchangeable with American toilet paper, so that wasn't working. Another issue concerned locally manufactured US vehicles. DOD decided to buy locally manufactured Ford Motor Company vehicles, maybe they were assembled in Uzbekistan, I think, Uzbekistan. But what they discovered was that cars made overseas, even those made by American companies, are a lot smaller than American vehicles.

Q: (Laughs) Yes.

ROLLINS: At the DOD conferences, the contracting officers said, "Have you seen twenty-one-year-old American boys?" And we could all visualize that they're probably six-two, six-three, bulky, "Trying to get that frame in one of those cars?" It was not working. The cars were all stick shifts, as well. So, that didn't work so well. (Laughs) We could work on fruits and the vegetables, but that was about it. (Laughs)

Q: One of the challenges AID always has in doing agricultural production programs is the marketing side. In this case, the market was the U.S. military in Afghanistan, right? So, you had a ready market for all of this?

ROLLINS: Yes. And these countries are fertile and produce great fruits and vegetables in Uzbekistan. There were some things we could do and others we couldn't do. Nonetheless, there was an increased focus on that area so they could find another route to service Afghanistan.

Q: And so, this involved lots of travel to Europe, but probably lots of interagency meetings in Washington as well.

ROLLINS: Yeah, lots of travel on a regular basis, meetings.

Secretary Clinton had many ideas and focus, but Afghanistan was the primary focus, including DOD supplies and women's entrepreneurship and education. She supported DOD and USAID. No one knew when the war would end, and she wanted to support the overall efforts.

Q: Another initiative by the secretary of state at that time was the QDDR, the Quadrennial Development and Diplomacy and Review. Were you involved at all? I know there were a lot of working groups created.

ROLLINS: The Bureau program office and others were involved. I oversaw staff, and I understood what was going on, but I was not directly involved in any way. I traveled a great deal on TDY. For example, Nepal was designing a CDCS strategy at one point, and when the draft arrived in Washington, the entire Agency erupted. Every bureau was concerned, and PPL said, "Absolutely not!" Nisha turned to me and said, "Denise, go do your thing." I TDYed to Kathmandu. I spent three weeks focusing on the analysis and redesigning the document. I met with a mission in every sector, a few NGOs, and the government. We resubmitted the strategy, and it was finally approved.

Q: I assume there were multiple DAAs. How did you all divide responsibilities?

ROLLINS: We had two others. One was political; one was career. I oversaw the program office and TS, Technical Support.

Q: And did you troubleshoot on countries and any other issues?

Yes. I held weekly calls with each MD, and TDYed regularly. I went to the Maldives a couple of times because we had a program there and (laughs) which was nice, but. I had no time to sit on the beach, but (laughs). And Sri Lanka. We had issues in Sri Lanka. We had a staffing problem that everybody, including the ambassador, got involved in. I had to send someone from HR to conduct a mission assessment. And it turned out that one of our employees, a Foreign Service Officer, was abusive —not physically, verbally abusive to everybody. And even the ambassador and DCM were fed up with her. After the HR

team debriefed me and others, I received the report and had to call our lawyers and others to determine the next steps. We decided to curtail her assignment.

Q: It's interesting. One of the key responsibilities of a DAA, senior DAA, is in fact, that kind of troubleshooting.

ROLLINS: Yes, many staffing issues. We also had a staffer who was visibly seen having sex with his housekeep on his high-rise balcony. The apartment manager called the embassy to complain. (Both laugh)

Q: Okay. No need to say more.

ROLLINS: Yeah, it was an interesting case though (laughs), getting him out of there.

So, staffing was, obviously, an important part of my remit.

Q: Without talking about specific cases, any generic lessons learned about how to remove staff from positions? I assume you have to coordinate with a lot of different people in order to avoid a legal morass?

ROLLINS: Mm-hm. Well, you have to start with the lawyers and HR.

I've been in missions where something unseemly was happening, and I've seen mission directors unable to address these issues. They are uncomfortable broaching this topic, even though everybody is complaining, and it is affecting staff morale.

I've never been that type. I have to do what's best for the entire staff because if, for example, someone is verbally abusing people and it has reached the ambassador, you must take action. In that case, staff passing through Washington made appointments with me to tell me about this employee's behavior, and she made them feel. The MD feared addressing the matter, so I stepped in from Washington. I counseled the MD several times, but he was afraid of her. I stepped in and got it done.

Q: Yes; that's an important function, unfortunately. So, you were the senior DAA for a couple of years and then you became the acting AA. Did this mean that Nisha left?

ROLLINS: Yes, I think I was SDAA for two years and then she left and went to the State Department as assistant secretary for South Asia.

Q: Before we move on, one other question. There seem to be ever increasing numbers of political appointees in senior jobs in Washington. They are often working closely with senior career officers. How did you see collaboration between the career and the political staff during that period?

ROLLINS: Well, in the Asia bureau we had excellent collaboration.

Q: I'm talking about more agency-wide as opposed to—

ROLLINS: Oh, agency-wide. I could see that there were problems in other bureaus. I was lucky that Nisha was so thoughtful and willing to teach me.

In other bureaus, the political appointment had specific ideas about how the bureau should operate and clashed with the career staff. Many politicals do not understand bureaucracy and the laws, rules, and regulations that govern everything we do. Nisha had been at USAID; she knew how it worked, and we didn't have that hurdle to cross. But in some of the other bureaus, the politicians had not had experience managing large staffs, some had never had staff, and were based all over the world, including those interacting with Congress and the National Security Council. I could see that there were conflicts in some of the other bureaus. I was lucky.

Q: And did the career DAAs ever do anything as a group? I know at one point in the nineties when there were a lot of morale issues within the agency, Brian Atwood used to meet periodically with just the career DAAs to try to get their perspective on what was going on.

ROLLINS: No, I don't believe so.

Q: Okay. But that's a good sign.

ROLLINS: Yeah. Raj did convene a council of all the AAs and—which we had not had in the past. We used to have monthly meetings with him to go over his agenda. A few times, his executive mentor joined the meetings to share the issues on which he is working with Raj.

Q: And what was the purpose of those meetings? Was it to deal with a specific issue each time? Was it a decision-making body?

ROLLINS: It was a decision-making body—well, he had final, decision-making authority, but the purpose was to discuss various options—so one of the things that he introduced was each bureau had to come up with indicators of success, they had to decide what they were going to be measured against because he wanted something that he could look at to see if you had accomplished your goals and objections for the bureau. Each bureau developed a strategic focus and what the measurements would be. We reported every month what we accomplished or roadblocks.

Q: Can you give an example of what kind of thing you might have had in the Asia bureau?

ROLLINS: Okay. For example, in the new Silk Road initiative, our focus was on getting several private sector companies to produce whatever the product was for the military. In South Asia, Bangladesh and Nepal received agriculture funding, so we reported on what was happening in Central and South Asia.

Q: Okay; like Feed the Future measures?

ROLLINS: Mm-hm. And in HR, for example, they want to put in place certain efficiencies. It was taking about 150 days to hire a CS employee and they tried to reduce it to 90 days.

Q: And so, at each of these monthly meetings people would report out and—

ROLLINS: Had to report—if there was any—you had to submit a document, they had a special document that you had to use to report on. You submitted your numbers a couple of days before the meeting. If there were any success stories, Raj would highlight them in the meeting, and if there were problems or roadblocks, those were also mentioned.

And then, there were two sessions with Raj and his coach. He was one of the top executive coaches in the country and was also the coach for the Director of the World Bank, and the CEOs of Coca-Cola and the Ford Motor Company. He reported on some of his advice to Raj.

Q: At these monthly meetings?

ROLLINS: Yes, but only two sessions. They were special meetings that were—I think they were six months apart. There was one and then a second one.

Q: Really? Tell us all. (Laughs)

ROLLINS: These discussions were interesting because I didn't know he had a coach at that point. Then this guy arrived, who is pegged as the crème de la crème of coaches, right? And so, yeah, he was working with Raj to help him improve his management and leadership skills.

So, that was interesting. The coach focused on encouraging Raj to be more empathetic and understanding. With so many new initiatives and a focus on data collection, significant burnout was everywhere. And then, if there were going to be a new initiative or something new, he would announce it at these meetings.

Q: Was the innovation lab one of the things that you all would have discussed? Or was that something that was on its own track?

ROLLINS: When the Lab was introduced, there was a great deal of resistance. There were presentations, briefings, and town halls to sell the concept. The major component was that the procurement rules would be modified to make it easier to engage with the private sector. The Lab would reduce procurement days from about 800 down to 300. This was reported on at the monthly senior leadership meetings.

Q: One of the other big controversies during that period was when Raj set the target for local procurement, what is now referred to as localization. Was that topic ever discussed at a meeting like this?

ROLLINS: Oh, absolutely. Because when he introduced it and said we were going to do twenty-five—no, 30 percent, was it?

It was like everybody's eyes got big. How are you going to do 25 percent? How are you going to get that number, you know? The current administrator's target is 30 percent. But once they understand the contracting process and all the requirements that an organization must fulfill to manage USAID resources, you can't just hand out grants just left, right? After my experience in South Africa, it was clear to me that we are unlikely ever to achieve those levels of localization. I hate to be pessimistic, but looking at what I have seen in Nigeria, South Africa, and Bangladesh, finding organizations that can work directly with us will not be easy. It is a notable goal, though, and one we should continue to pursue. There will always be a few, but 25-30 percent is high. Everybody agrees that we'd like to do more locally, but we also understand that we must have accountability.

Q: One of the other issues during that time was government-to-government work. The financial management people put in place an elaborate system to analyze host country systems. Was that ever discussed in these forums? Could those of you who had done work directly with governments opine on what was being done?

ROLLINS: Yes. We did one in Bangladesh for family planning commodities, and it took a while because we wanted to work with the Ministry of Health. However, when the World Bank analysis was clear that the MOH did not have the systems, we discovered that the MOH family planning budget line item was segregated and transparent. So, we worked directly with this division of the MOH to procure family planning products. We could track funding for and selection of commodities and tracking because the procurement was with an international organization that provides commodities for most USAID FP programs. However, we could not find other divisions that would lend themselves to direct USAID funding.

Q. Was there a generic discussion of this issue at all with Raj Shah?

ROLLINS: I don't remember. It doesn't come to mind.

Q: Okay. I was just curious what kind of policy questions might have been debated by senior staff.

Were there other issues during the year you were acting assistant administrator that we should discuss? Did you have to spend time on any specific country issues or was it just the kind of troubleshooting you had been doing before?

ROLLINS: It was more the troubleshooting. I was still overseeing the new Silk Road initiative because that was just so high-profile.

But, it was more troubleshooting, and Raj wanted to go out—he had not been to Asia since the launch of Feed the Future other than China; I think he went to the Philippines, somewhere else before coming to Bangladesh for the launch, and then he was off to India. He spent more time in Africa with most initiatives, including Power Africa. He wanted to return to Cambodia, Vietnam and the Philippines. I dropped everything to accompany him. We spent about a day and a half in each place. I boarded the flight to Cambodia, and as soon as I arrived, around 11:00 at night, the mission director said, "Oh, Raj just called. He's not going to be able to make it." (Peasley laughs) So, I represented him in those three countries because he—and it turns out I didn't know at the time what was going on, but it turns out Ebola had just come up, and he was—the president called him to talk about what we were going to do to deal with Ebola.

And so, he was putting in place the Global Health Bureau to be in charge of it.

ROLLINS: A year later, when I retired, that was the next job that I got.

I had retired from the Foreign Service but they brought me back as the head of the Ebola—

Q: So, he had a legitimate reason for not showing up in Cambodia.

ROLLINS: He had a legitimate reason. But it was, just to find out that night that he wasn't going to be there. And of course, you know, we had this considerable fanfare for the administrator and all that and now he's not coming. But anyway, I did what I was supposed to do.

I'm a good soldier. (Laughs)

Q: Very good. I assume that as acting AA you had a lot of dealings with the State Department as well and in that case, did you have multiple State Department bureaus you had to coordinate with?

ROLLINS: Well, yeah.

Q: I think they're organized differently than AID.

ROLLINS: They are because South Asia is one group.

Q: Then there's East Asia.

ROLLINS: And then there's East Asia. And the Stans are—they were part of Eurasia and the Europe Bureau. So, I had to deal with one, two, and three different Assistant Secretaries and bureaus. And then, also the democracy and governance activities were managed by—oh, so it turns out Michael McFaul, who became ambassador to Russia, was the head of that department at State. So—that was doing DG work.

They didn't call it DG, they called it something else, democracy work.
So—and—so, you know, and he was focused on that for the region, so I had decided to deal with him on a regular basis too. (Both laugh)

Q: Yes, I've had to deal with him too in the past. (Laughs)

ROLLINS: Yeah, because he was always critical of us. I remember the first time I met him, the staff gave me a briefing, but they didn't tell me all the scuttlebutt. I get into this meeting, and McFaul is there, along with staff; he starts questioning me about our program in Central Asia. Well, I only know so—I think I'd been onboard maybe two weeks, and all I know is what I've seen in the briefing paper. I was embarrassed and State colleagues took up for me and our programs. Afterwards. I asked the staff, "Did you all know he would ask me this question? "And they said, "Yeah, we kind of figured." "Then why didn't you tell me?" They gave me a standard boring briefer with no real issues, while there were many we needed to address.

You know, he survived, and he went on to become U.S. ambassador to Russia, so it's all well and good, but—

Q: So, you decided to retire from this position. Were there special reasons that prompted this, or did you simply decide it was time to do something different?

ROLLINS: Well, my four years were up as SDAA and, and my position was going to go to Gloria—who was coming back from the Philippines.
And I had agreed to that early on because, you know, I had done four years.

I wanted to teach at one of the military schools, but Raj said I couldn't because he needed me. So, finally I just said, you know, I'm just looking around, I said, okay, if I'm going to become another DAA in another bureau, I always like to do something different and new and I just didn't see anything that I wanted. There was nothing else I wanted to do and I didn't want to do the same thing in another bureau. So, I decided I was just going to retire. I was sixty-two at the time. I still had three years left before mandatory retirement but I just, I was just, I wanted to do something else.

Q: So, you retired in 2014? You remember the date?

ROLLINS: Well, officially it was December 2014, December 31.

I took the Job Search Seminar for the month of October. With two extra months to ostensibly "look for a job," I officially retired December 31st, 2014. Then, the next month, in January, I get a call from Eric Postel, Acting Africa AA, who told me he needed me. And I said, "Eric, for what?" I didn't even want to work for a contractor, an IP. I wasn't interested in any of that stuff.

And he says, “I need you to work on Ebola.” And I said, “Ebola? I don’t know anything about Ebola.” He said, “You can learn about Ebola. I need you for your management skills and leadership.” I said, “Okay.” So, he called me a couple of times and I said, “Okay.” He brought me on board, I think it was March 1st, 2015

AID/W, Senior Coordinator for the Africa Ebola Unit (Post 12/31/2014 Retirement), 2015 – 2016

Q: Did you come back as a retired annuitant or as a PSC or through some other mechanism?

ROLLINS: PSC.

Q: You mentioned earlier that the Ebola task force had started in the Global Health bureau, and I believe I’ve interviewed Dirk Dijkerman who was involved with it at the outset.

ROLLINS: Global Health had it and I guess Raj was unhappy—what I heard, I don’t know, Raj was unhappy with the management of Ebola. I don’t know what the problems were, but—so he wanted somebody else to come in. They convinced Dirk Dijkerman to come in. Dirk came in and he said, “I can give you ninety days and then I’m going back to Arizona,” He said, “So, you’re going to have to find somebody to replace me.” That’s how I was pulled into it.

Q: Was Dirk working for the Africa bureau? I’m wondering at what point it shifted from the Global Health bureau to the Africa bureau. Had it shifted before you were there or were you instrumental to creating that new entity within the Africa bureau?

ROLLINS: I created the new entity—

Q: Oh, you created it.

ROLLINS: Yes. Global Health had it initially; OFDA was also involved. Dirk handled the transition away from GH, but I established the Africa Ebola Unit. Jeremy Konyndyk, the head of OFDA, and I worked hand in glove. We worked, of course, with DOD and CDC and NIH (National Institutes of Health). But I created the position in the Africa Bureau and hired about 25 people to staff the AEU.

Q: —and then, leadership shifted to the Africa bureau when you took that position.

ROLLINS: Yeah. So, I hired the staff. We had about twenty-five people and organized the team into a cohesive team.

Q: And were we working in multiple countries or were you focused on Liberia?

ROLLINS: No, we worked in all three countries – Liberia, Sierra Leone, and Guinea

The French were supposed to manage Guinea, and the Brits were supposed to do Sierra Leone. But they didn't have the resources or the know-how. So, what happened is we implemented programs in all three countries.

Our most significant investment was in Liberia. DOD established Ebola treatment facilities, and CDC and our humanitarian assistance implementing partners brought in doctors and other medical professionals. OFDA handled humanitarian assistance such as tents, water, food, medicines, and more. We, through OFDA, we had—because people were just dying left, right, and center, as you know. And so, OFDA brought in, you know, the water and housing, you know, the tents and clothing and you know, all the sanitation supplies, things of that nature. And we had this money. We had $4.5 billion.

Q: Was disease still being transmitted by the time you came in?

ROLLINS: Oh, yes, it was still being transmitted. By this time, though, we had figured out how to prevent the spread. It was hard to avoid it because family members took care of the sick and then became infected with the disease themselves. You have many people living together in cramped spaces. In some families, they lost twenty people. One of our projects in Liberia was focused on dignified burials. At the onset, bodies were placed in mass graves. Families were distraught not to be allowed to say prayers and wash the bodies, as is tradition. So, our project scoped out large land areas near the cities and allowed families to watch from afar as their loved ones were put to rest.

Q: The whole gamut.

ROLLINS: And then we had money for things like agricultural development, private sector development, democracy and governance, primarily those areas because they were devastated. You know, the farmers and entrepreneurs were dying.

Q: So, it was—so by the time you came in there was still work on prevention and treatment, but then more of the focus began to be on recovery for the affected communities?

ROLLINS: Recovery, yes.

Q: Was there also work with the ministries of health?

ROLLINS: Oh, yes. A big part of the program was global health security, which focused on health systems strengthening in all three countries. So many doctors and nurses died tending to the sick, and there were few medical supplies, such as gauze, needles, sutures, or medicines available. Our projects were designed to restart the agriculture sector, get the private sector up and running, and rebuild the health sector. It was a daunting responsibility, but our team was committed to achieving a better outcome for the people in these three countries. The Food for Peace team recommended buying as much food

locally instead of importing food from the U.S., which is often the response. As transmission subsided, farmers could return to the rice fields and begin planting other crops. Our efforts were focused on helping them not only return to normal but also build back to better.

Q: And presumably you were working closely with the missions, and they were overseeing the work.

ROLLINS: Yes. The three missions received significant budget plus-ups from the Ebola funds and had to design new projects, sometimes in new sectors. These missions lacked sufficient staff to take on the new designs. Fortunately, AEU had close working relationships with the technical bureaus and requested them to TDY to the missions and help conduct sector analyses and design the projects. In the health sector, we plus-upped existing field support to speed up assistance rather than soliciting new awards.

Q: So, all the mission awards were modified to do this additional work.

ROLLINS: Yeah. For the most part, unless it was a new effort, such as agriculture in Sierra Leone and Guinea.

Q: So, that was the important decision to make because then you could move more quickly.

ROLLINS: Yeah. New awards would have taken forever to procure.

Q: Do you know how that decision was made to amend awards because that was a very smart thing to have done?

ROLLINS: I met with the missions and discussed with the technical bureaus the best way to proceed. I held weekly in-person meetings with technical bureau staff (Health, Agriculture, D & G, economic growth, and others) and weekly phone calls with the three mission directors. I also met bi-weekly, if not more often, with OFDA and Food for Peace staff. We all agreed that existing procurement mechanisms were the fastest way to get teams on the ground and obligate funds with a two-year expiration date.

I also met with the Office of Procurement team because contracting officers in Washington completed the awards once the contract and grant amendments were prepared. In addition to meeting with numerous USAID bureau staff, I regularly briefed the National Security Council at the White House and congressional members and staff on Capitol Hill. President Obama signed the Ebola legislation and required regular, often weekly, updates. I attended regular meetings in the Situation Room to update them on the status of Ebola in the countries and our activities to decrease transmission and rebuild the economies. To visit the region, I flew from New York to Accra, then a commercial flight to Abidjan to catch the WHO flight to each of the three countries. Commercial airlines had suspended all flights into the region, and WHO was the only plane operating. I was on the ground every few months to see our progress firsthand. I met with government and

local officials as well as with our implementing partners and visited many Ebola Treatment Units, affected communities, and burial sites.

Q: You mentioned President Obama's strong interest. Wasn't there a coordinator at the White House as well? Was that person still there? Was it, in fact, Ron Klain, the guy who became Biden's chief-of-staff?

ROLLINS: Yeah, he hosted the meetings along with a few other White House staff.

Q: So, was there strong involvement of the White House?

ROLLINS: Oh, let me tell—on a regular basis.

A regular basis. The President was keenly concerned because we had a couple of Ebola cases in the U.S., and Americans were afraid the virus would be transmitted more broadly here. He wanted the day-to-day data on cases by country provided by the CDC, funding expenditures, and activities. The Hill, both House and Senate, also wanted details regularly. As I mentioned, I had regular calls with staffers, and occasionally in-person meetings on the Hill to brief them on progress. It was very intense. Very intense.

Q: Were you all working with or in close contact with African institutions during all of this as well?

ROLLINS: Oh, somewhat.

We trained numerous healthcare professionals in the countries to reduce the spread of the virus and provide personal protection equipment (PPEs). One of the accomplishments of the Lab, created by Raj, was designing a competition under the Global Development Alliance to encourage partnerships to address Ebola. For example, GDA spurred new designs for PPEs for an impermeable suit with shoe covers and goggles to protect healthcare personnel. Johns Hopkins University, a Maryland bridal gown designer, working with Liberian healthcare personnel, won one of the awards for a new protective suit. Also, NIH and NIAID, conducted Phase 2 vaccine trials with the Liberian Ministry of Health.

Q: How long were you in the position?

ROLLINS: Eighteen months.

Q: Do you know whether any kind of after-action review was done to pull together lessons learned or to document the experience? Are you aware of whether that happened or not?

ROLLINS: I am aware that it happened, but I don't recall seeing it. Because I think it was getting vetted after I left the position.

Q: Vetted as you left. So, the Africa bureau didn't lead the preparation of such a review. It was being led by somebody else?

ROLLINS: I am told that the military prepared a formal review, which is standard practice. USAID conducted informal reviews and published quarterly OIG reports on our activities. After I left, the AEU disbanded, and the remaining Ebola activities in the three countries were transferred to the West Africa Office in the bureau, which was understaffed.

The military conducted an After-Action Review after I left and I was advised to be cautious because I was told that DOD is looking for more resources and if we are too visible, we may get a call to transfer more funding to them. "Okay, don't let them box you into a corner and agree to pay for anything." (Peasley laughs) Apparently, the Agency was forced to transfer $25 million to DOD during the 2011 Philippines Tsunami, and during a conference call, we were boxed into a corner and had to cover the costs of the military's actions. I met with DOD at the Pentagon a few times and was careful to ensure that USAID was not committing to cover any of their costs. I'd say, "Well, as long as you guys, you know, can cover that, that's fine." "No, ma'am. You know, we're going to need support from USAID." And I say, "As long as you can cover the costs" They knew how much money we had. They received funding to build the ETUs, not for other activities, such as renovating the Liberia airport runway, which was one of their requests.

Q: Right. What would you say worked best once the management shifted to the Africa bureau? Do you think it could have started with the leadership in the Africa bureau? Or did it need to have started in the Global Health bureau or wherever it was?

ROLLINS: I initially thought Global Health was the best suited to manage the program, but given the other sectors we had to revive, such as agriculture, the private sector, and D&G, a regional bureau, such as Africa, was better able to manage across sectors. The response needed to be broader than just health. Once the Agency decided to hire a coordinator with a staff, the bureau was willing to take this on.

Q: No, that's fair enough.

ROLLINS: Yeah. I don't know what happened initially with Global Health management but it all worked out in the end.

Q: Okay. Any lessons learned you have from that experience that you think would be important to share?

ROLLINS: There were so many moving parts and organizations involved that it was difficult to determine everybody's role and ensure that they understood our role, which was developing as a new entity. You must communicate and collaborate at the outset to outline roles and create movements and timelines. It was helpful to me, for example, to visit CDC in Atlanta to meet team members and observe their operations. I learned that during the Bangladesh cyclone. We had numerous NGOs on the ground, the government

and the Marines. General Bailey held 8:30 am daily stand-up meetings for everyone to share their movements and focus for the day. We met again at 5:00 pm to discuss progress. With Ebola, there were so many government departments and agencies that it was difficult to communicate or collaborate. The same departments and agencies were operating in the missions, which held daily meetings chaired by the ambassadors. As I noted with the cyclone recovery, government organizations use many acronyms and languages. Considering all the pitfalls, the USG performed admirably in stemming the virus transmission, rebuilding the economies, and strengthening the health systems. In the end, there were roughly 28,000 Ebola cases and 11,500 deaths.

Q: I assume that the experience you had on the cyclone in Bangladesh was valuable as you took on this role?

ROLLINS: Yes, yeah. Because working, that was my first time working with another agency. And particularly one as massive as the military. I learned a great deal from General Bailey about planning, communication, timelines, and strategy. His focus on building relationships was beneficial to me. DOD establishes relationships with militaries around the world and trains thousands of foreign militaries at the various U.S. academies. When a conflict or disaster arises somewhere, DOD can pick up the phone and call a counterpart who has been trained in the U.S.

I had worked a little with CDC on PEPFAR in Nigeria and South Africa, but our relationship was more contentious than collaborative.

Q: Does AID have any training programs on how to manage in those kinds of emergency situations? Are there any training programs or role-playing opportunities?

ROLLINS: Not that I know of.

And it's unfortunate because OFDA staff are trained and know how to do their job, right? But the rest of us have no experience until something happens. I visited PACOM (the Pacific Command) in Honolulu and met with the DOD/OFDA team assigned there to see their setup. Since 60 percent of disasters occur in Asia, it would benefit Asia mission leadership to receive some basic disaster, relief, and recovery training.

I told the OFDA team during the cyclone, "Look, guys. We're on the same team. I need to know what you're doing so I can make sure that everybody else understands what USAID as an entity is doing." Fortunately, after much discussion, OFDA changed the team lead who understood the importance of working with the mission. But it took an argument with Washington to make the change.

Q: The State Department used to have these emergency planning exercises at post for which there would be role-playing around a series of disasters. All the agencies and sections would have to participate.

ROLLINS: Yeah, they chair planning sessions, but those sessions are useless in the midst of a disaster.

Q: I would agree with you. But I'm wondering if AID needs to think of something that would, in fact, be useful. (Laughs)

ROLLINS: Yeah, that would be very useful if we could have a—re-enact a disaster of some sort with role-playing. But no, we don't teach anybody any of that. I also think that the agency needs to train senior leaders who have been in the field a long time on how to manage and lead your staff in Washington. We manage FSOs and FSNs overseas. Back in Washington, it is primarily civil servants. Position descriptions, work hours, and performance evaluations are different, and not understanding this can create conflict, which might lead to a union stepping in. One evening around 5:00 pm, I was looking for someone from the budget office. A voice says over the divider, "Her hours are 7:00 am to 3:30 pm." Overseas, we work long hours during the week and many evenings and weekends for receptions with government or donor counterparts. It took me a while to get used to that.

Q: Okay, thanks, Denise. I'm going to suggest we stop for now and then reconvene to wrap up.

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Q: This is July 27, 2023, and this is interview number five with Denise Rollins.

Denise, when we finished up last time you had returned to AID after your retirement to head up an Africa Ebola unit, and you talked about that work, including a significant amount of interagency coordination. Do you have any final thoughts about that position and what happened with the unit? Then, we'll move on to a final wrap up.

ROLLINS: Okay. Yes, so by the time my eighteen months were over, Ebola was under control, and the three USAID missions had fully integrated the Ebola-funded projects into their portfolios. Liberia, under MD Tony Chan, was doing well. However, there were some management challenges in Guinea and Sierra Leone. Wade Warren and I traveled to both countries to improve operations, but ultimately, I had to remove the Country Program Manager in Sierra Leone and recruit a replacement.

Recruiting and managing the twenty-five members of the AEU, took constant vigilance. Most team members had not worked for USAID directly which required extensive training and oversight. At the time, I was focused and had to get the job done. As I reflect on the period many years hence, I wonder how I did it.

Q: Excuse me, just on Sierra Leone. Was there actually an AID mission there?

ROLLINS: It was a unit attached to Guinea, so the Guinea mission director was the mission director for Guinea and Sierra Leone.

But we had one U.S. direct-hire there, Christine Scheckler. When she departed, I recruited Khadija Mojidi to assume the position. We also had a local-hire PSC and a few FSNs in Sierra Leone.

Q: It seems that another important lesson learned was having that partnership with the inspector general's office at the outset so that they were monitoring throughout the program. You also developed a good relationship with them, helping ensure that the process went more smoothly.

ROLLINS: Yeah. I invited the OIG staff to attend our weekly meetings, and they allowed us to review the draft of the quarterly Congressional reports to ensure accuracy. I learned how to work with IGs in South Africa. We were collocated with the RIG in Pretoria, and I relied on them to approve local audits of the numerous closeouts on our plate. If they rejected an audit, I sat with them to understand the problem. In Bangladesh, the GAO reviewed our Title II Food Aid program. I ensured that the staff and our Ips understood the GAO role and what they were looking for. We had an excellent relationship with them, very transparent, and we received a great review. As I've said before, relationship-building is key to getting things done. So, I did the same thing with Ebola.

Q: Good. That's a very important point that people often forget during times of emergencies and when massive supplemental programs are implemented. So, everything got fully integrated into the Africa bureau?

ROLLINS: Everything got fully integrated. We had done our job. Ebola was under control; country programs were working well. There's an expression I like from a Dionne Warwick song, "knowing when to leave can be the smartest thing that anyone can learn."

Q: (Laughs) I know, that's another important lesson learned.

ROLLINS: Yes. And so, I decided to leave at the end of October and started integrating it into the Africa Bureau. Some of the AEU team stayed in the bureau, and others found other positions throughout the agency. My AEU deputy successfully applied for the PSC position in Freetown. One of the civil service desk officers became an FSO and is overseas now, and another staff member became a USPSC in Haiti. They have done well.

Q: At the end of this, I assume the Africa bureau ended up with a much stronger capacity on pandemic response work. There have been several outbreaks of Ebola and other things recently, and I suspect people have been able to move very quickly to avoid a massive emergency.

ROLLINS: Yes, I assume so. The more recent outbreaks are not of the same intensity as it was in West Africa. Ebola hit urban areas in West Africa where you have population density which fueled the spread of Ebola like wildfire. In Central Africa and Uganda, where it pops up periodically, it's usually out in rural villages with fewer populations and they are spread out. The virus tends to die quickly in those areas.

Q: Right. And people know how to respond more effectively. So, you left the position feeling quite happy and satisfied.

ROLLINS: Oh, yeah. No, I felt like I had accomplished quite a bit, yes. (Laughs) Yes.

Final/Wrap Up Thoughts

Q: Since your second retirement, I know you have been doing a lot with the USAID Alumni Association to support its mentoring program. This has kept you in touch with USAID so you might have some important observations about that.

But, before discussing that, would you like to look back on your career and important lessons learned, as well as things that you might be most proud of? Or, are there things you might have done differently if you had known better at the time? Because throughout our interview, you've spoken a lot about learning.

ROLLINS: Mm-hm. Yeah, you know, I had an amazing career. Where does anybody get an opportunity to do the vast, broad things that we do in these countries? Nowhere, except with USAID. Whenever I tried to explain to my family and friends what I did for a living, I would always tell them, "Well, it's like working for the entire U.S. government wrapped up into one agency." We had a housing program at one time, and we have programs in health, education, private sector, agriculture, environmental and natural resource management, climate change, power and water, democracy and governance, and more. Plus, we work with everyone in a country, from the farmer, teacher, or healthcare worker to local government, the private sector, academia, NGOs (international and local), and other donors. What other job gives you this rich, colorful canvass of activities and people with which to work? I had never heard of the USAID Foreign Service until I attended SAIS. Most Americans know of the State Department. For many years, some friends thought I had worked for the CIA. I am lucky that I returned to school after nearly twelve years and pursued my undergraduate and graduate degrees, which made me eligible to join USAID. I have had an incredible career.

Q: Yeah, the other agency (laughs).

ROLLINS: The other agency. I was also lucky to have wonderful mentors.
Myron Golden told me, "You must have a lot of mentors. You don't just have one or two. But you must have mentors everywhere who help you move through your career." He added, "You also must manage your own career. Nobody else is going to help you. You must learn the ropes." I read—back in the day when we used cables that circulated in a large binder and I read every single cable, as Myron told me to do. I also got up to speed on USAID's rules and regulations as presented in the old Handbooks, particularly Handbook 3 for Project Design. Nigeria forced me to understand the legal requirements because our lawyer was based in Dakar, Senegal, and it took him a while to respond to all of the West Africa missions. Nigeria did not have a controller either. I had to get up to

speed on funding requirements and conducted the mission's first Federal Managers Financial Integrity Act assessment, usually managed by the controller's office. All of these experiences taught me how to get things done. I love learning, figuring out how to operate, and teaching others. I like the expression, "Everything is figureoutable." It was part of my leadership style.

Q: You got your hands dirty.

ROLLINS: I got my hands dirty and I loved it.

Q: And when you were young you were willing to take on almost any kind of assignment when people asked if you could help. You would say "yes."

ROLLINS: Yeah. My son used to say to me "Mom, why do you ask so many questions?" (Laughs) I'm naturally curious and enjoy learning.

Q: Yes; that's an important lesson. I think many people want to jump ahead so quickly they don't want to take the steps to learn and get their hands dirty.

ROLLINS: Yeah. So, I learned how to be self-sufficient. I learned how to manage from people I admired and inspired me and tried to incorporate the aspects of their leadership that appealed to me.

Q: In thinking back on some of the things that we discussed, you really emphasized your experiences in Ghana, that it impacted how you approached your work from thereon, especially in developing those close working relationships with counterparts. Unfortunately, that isn't always the case in AID missions.

ROLLINS: Mm-hm. No, it's true. It paid off for me in Bangladesh when we had to restart our relationships. But the staff, once they understood why we were doing it and how it would benefit all of us, including the country, refocused and moved forward. The international and local NGOs were also required to collaborate. If they had projects in the same region, they had to meet and discuss their activities and find ways to complement each other. It is easy to work in a silo, but it is inefficient. The other IPs had to collaborate, as well. This is one of the reasons Bangladesh has been such a development success – everyone is working together. I am a great student of Joe Goodwin.

Q: Yes. Probably one of the most important management principles and leadership principles to know.

Were there special challenges managing as a tandem couple and with a family? I think from what we've discussed the agency understood the constraints that you were under. Were there any special challenges working as a leader with a family overseas?

ROLLINS: Well, the fact that we worked for two different agencies, that was more of the issue with State than with USAID. Cecilia Pitas was a miracle worker who negotiated

with State to get tandem assignments. There were more tandems with women joining the Agency and Cecilia worked miracles. Marilyn Zak told us about earlier days in the Foreign Service when women officers had to resign if they married. She shared with us the lawsuits they filed around 1982 and won that treats women the same as men.

Q: Yes, it was a little bit earlier than that, but it did go into the seventies.

ROLLINS: Oh, okay. Because I remember her telling me about that. The most difficult part for my family was when my husband joined State as an FSO in 1997 when we were in Uganda. State offered him China, Mexico, and a few other countries with no USAID presence. Cecilia took up the cause and worked with State to identify Nigeria for both of us. She was also instrumental in our tandem assignment to Bangladesh, although he came a year after me.

In terms of having a family, I was encouraged to serve in hardship posts early until I needed a high school. That's what I did. When I first joined, though, many posts did not have high schools, only elementary and some middle schools. Many FSOs sent their children to European boarding schools. I did not want to do that. Fortunately, as I moved around, the American schools expanded, and some offered virtual high schools, while others built high schools. We were fortunate with South Africa and Bangladesh which had highly recommended schools.

Q: Right. No, that's good to hear.

And do you have any recommendations for AID and its efforts to improve its diversity profile? Any thoughts on things that you've seen to be most effective in both recruitment and in supporting staff to help ensure success?

ROLLINS: Yeah, that they get onboard. For a long time, the agency did not focus on diversity. Raj began to address it with political appointees. However, Deputy Administrator Don Steinberg assumed the diversity portfolio. He chaired monthly meetings on diversity that included representatives from the bureaus and the Office of Civil Rights and Diversity. The problem is that it was difficult to get data – how many diverse people are in the agency, how many are we recruiting, how many get through the recruitment process, and are on board?

I kept asking, "Well, where's the data?" The agency knew how many people applied for jobs, their nationality, or ethnicity, but these applicants were not tracked after applying. So, there were gaps in understanding what was happening, particularly with Hispanics, black men, and Indigenous people, all underrepresented. Unlike State, which has the exam, which weeds out the vast majority of the people who take the exam, and the in-basket test, if you pass the exam, is subjective.

Q: On the actual recruitment into the agency?

ROLLINS: Yeah. It's more subjective because it's based on—you're looking at somebody's profile, their application, and it's not until they come in for an interview that they begin to know them. Evaluations of State's FSO recruitment suggest that once the applicant passes the exam and is called in for the in-person, in-basket test, the examiners tend to select people based on their own gender, color, and background. It is not unusual, which is why conscious diversity is required. This is why I kept asking for data to help USAID figure out why we were not hiring a more diverse Foreign Service.

DACOR Bacon held an event just a week ago or two weeks ago. They host the C-3s, the new IDIs. Our incoming FSO classes are much more diverse now, primarily due to the Donald Payne Fellowship Program. Raj created and launched this program with Howard University as the grant manager. Encouraging students to pursue degrees in international development and our technical areas lays the foundation for acceptance into the program. At the beginning of Payne, the agency funded ten participants a year. Administrator Powell has increased the number to thirty per year. Our Development Diplomats in Residence, based in Atlanta and Los Angeles, encourage undergraduates to consider careers in development and to acquire a graduate degree through the Fellowship program.

We also need to show more people of color in diplomacy and development. We have Ambassador Linda Thomas-Greenfield at the UN in New York, but I don't know how often she's on television. We used to see Ambassador Andy Young often on television.

Q: And he was on TV all the time too. (Laughs)

ROLLINS: He was on TV all the time. So, you saw yourself. And then Don McHenry came afterwards. You saw yourself. Even when Condoleezza Rice was secretary of state, you saw yourself. We must show young people who they can be by seeing people who look like them in these high-level positions. USAID used to have somebody in HR tour colleges to encourage development studies in HBCUs. I believe his responsibilities are relegated to the DDIRs now..

Q: Yes; it's a good point.

Are there other thoughts you have before we wrap up? I assume you would encourage young people to consider careers in international development?

ROLLINS: Oh, absolutely. Absolutely. Because we need all voices.

Yeah, I am just so grateful that I had this opportunity. And like I said, I just fell into it, but I embraced it and learned and moved forward and did fairly well. I highly encourage a career in development.

Q: Yes, you did very well.

Before we close, during our interviews, I certainly have learned about your extraordinary skills as a manager and a leader. I know you've done some leadership training and work

on your own, outside of USAID. Do you have any recommendations on management and leadership that USAID could be doing to enhance the skills of its staff?

ROLLINS: Well, you know, I mean, the agency recognized that they have a leadership crisis now. We have had discussions with the agency, and the UAA/USAID Mentoring Program supports Senior Leadership Program FSOs posted overseas, but we can only do so much. Part of the problem is that we lost many more senior FSOs due to attrition or retirement, and recruitment lagged for many years. We now have less experienced FSOs serving in more senior positions, and it is not working out well for the FSO or the agency. It is a disservice to both. Some FSOs believe they are ready for more senior positions but don't understand what is required to do the job fully; you must have more experience managing all the elements of our programs. There are also issues between deputy mission directors and mission directors. Determining the division of responsibilities is critical in the relationship, and the MD should be mentoring the DMD to build their capacity. I understand the agency has created a couple of different mentoring programs for some FSOs, such as Payne Fellows and Payne Alumni. There are other programs as well; however, the UAA/USAID Mentoring Program is the largest and highly valued. I benefited tremendously from a series of mentors over my career.

Q: Yes. You clearly had the chance to work with some extraordinary mission directors early in your career.

ROLLINS: Yeah, and I listened to and respected them. They cared about me and saw potential. Senior leaders need to connect with the next generation of leaders. I am told mission directors and deputy directors have monthly meetings now to discuss issues. That's a great start but hearing from someone who has already been through whatever you are going through now is immensely helpful. The agency is trying to cobble together different avenues to help train, you know, new, novice leaders in the agency. But it's going to take time.

At UAA we are concerned about the next generation and do our best helping guide current FSOs. In Cohort 13, to be launched in September 2023, we hope to encourage fifty, maybe fifty-five mentors, which will be more than Cohort 12. And if we can get them pulled into the system and then we can continue to work with those in the field, particularly the more senior level officers. The agency asked us to prioritize deputy mission directors.

Q: Unless you have any further thoughts, let's wrap up our interview. Thank you so much for sharing your career and insights with us.

End of interview