

The Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training
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AFSA Dissent Series

RACHEL SCHNELLER

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INTERVIEW

Q: Okay, today is April 26, 2024. This is our interview with Rachel Schneller as part of the ADST project on AFSA dissent awardees. Rachel, let's just start at the beginning. Where were you born and raised?

SCHNELLER: I was born in 1973 in Great Falls, Montana, and I spent most of my life in Montana, moving around frequently from place to place in Montana. So Montana is where I'm from. My son's middle name is Montana.

Q: All right, so what was your education like? Public, private, you know, what recollections do you have of that?

SCHNELLER: So I went to 11 different schools before I even got to high school. This was not because we were in the military. We're not a military family. We're just a very mobile family. And when I was eight years old, my parents got divorced. So then it involved a lot of moving around. I went to two different high schools until I finally graduated. Most of the time I was in Western Montana, but I graduated from Hellgate High School in Missoula, Montana, 1991. I was one of three valedictorians that year with a perfect 4.0 GPA. So I was a good student. My first year of undergraduate was at Concordia College in Moorhead, Minnesota, because I was really interested in foreign languages and it had a very good foreign language program. When I got to Minnesota, I really didn't like Minnesota. I was horribly homesick. Minnesota was very flat and I'm from the mountains. Very flat, very cold, very, just, I was very homesick. So I went back to Montana and I finished my bachelor's degree in 1995 from the University of Montana. Had a double major in French and creative writing and a minor in anthropology. And again, I had a 4.0 GPA, so I was a good student. OK.

Q: OK.

SCHNELLER: Then I went into the Peace Corps. I wanted to go somewhere where I could use my French. I wound up in Mali in West Africa from 1996 to 1998 and lived for almost three years in a mud hut with no running water or electricity. Learned to speak the local language, Bambara. And that's where I first started getting interested in maybe a career or a life doing international work, because I realized I really found the experience of living overseas and coming to understand another culture and how it operates well. And I also came to the conclusion I wanted absolutely nothing to do with assistance or aid or development, because I saw many, many NGOs coming through my village building some sort of project leaving and then the village would squabble over who was in charge of it or who got the benefits from it and then it would break down and nobody would agree to pay for fixing it and it just collected dust. So I know overall that there are a lot of really, really good projects out there, but I knew also myself, I did not have the mindset or the frame to be able to operate in that kind of environment where like 90% of everything I would do would go to overhead or break or cause more problems than it fixed. So the first time I took the Foreign Service exam—.

Q: Question, what years were you in Mali?

SCHNELLER: 1996 to 1998.

Q: Okay, yes, go ahead.

SCHNELLER: I took the Foreign Service exam for the first time when I was a Peace Corps volunteer in Mali. I took a bus from my village to Bamako, the capital. We took the exam in number two pencils sitting down. And then I went back to my village. It was still a very long time away. So it didn't matter because I was in Mali, I wasn't going anywhere. I finished my Peace Corps assignment, I went back to the States, I had the oral exam and did not pass it, which was okay. I was also in the process of applying to graduate schools because I realized it'd be helpful to have a master's degree. So I got into the Johns Hopkins SAIS program and did my first year in Bologna, Italy, which was fantastic. I took the Foreign Service exam for the second time in Milan. I think again it was in a number two pencil, like old fashioned tests. I think they do it all online now. And then I went about getting my master's degree. I was informed a few months later that I had passed again and that my oral exam would be the following September, I believe, which was fine because I knew I would be back in Washington, D.C. for my second year. I took the oral exam the second time and passed it and then went through the lengthy process of clearances, finished my second year of graduate school, and towards the end, right as I was about to graduate, I got the letter saying, we can offer you a position in the 103rd A100 class that is going to start on July 2, 2001. And so from my perspective, I was going to graduate in May, take June off, go back to Montana, have a good time, and then start my job in July. It couldn't have worked out better.

Q: Right. Now, at the time they invited you to join the Foreign Service, was it in a specialization or Cone or were you simply going to begin working and eventually determine a specialization later?

SCHNELLER: Right. I was in the cone of public diplomacy when I entered.

Q: Okay.

SCHNELLER: But I'm no longer in that cone. I'm now an economic officer.

Q: Okay. Well, that's fine. Now, you begin in July. You've had experience in foreign languages now in a developing country. What was it like to join the Foreign Service as a different corporate culture? Was there anything surprising or unusual for you?

SCHNELLER: I can't say that there was. I mean, I had never really been in corporate culture. I'd been in school, I'd been a student, I'd been a Peace Corps volunteer. I wound up getting a full ride scholarship to Johns Hopkins on the condition that I worked for the government for five years after I graduated. So I was intending on finding some sort of government job afterwards, because I didn't want to have to pay back my graduate school tuition. And so it seemed fine. We were a small group. We were about 45 people. I was about, what was I, 27 or something, when I joined the Foreign Service and found myself to be with a lot of people around my age. Some people were really young. Some people were in a second career, but probably the majority of us were somewhere between the ages of 25 and 35. And a lot of other Peace Corps volunteers, other people who had done Fulbright, similar backgrounds.

Q: Now, you joined in July 2001, and of course, just about as you're finishing orientation, there's 9-11.

SCHNELLER: Right, so that was very interesting. My first assignment was to Skopje in Northern Macedonia. That was one of my top two choices, my other top choice was Jerusalem. My graduate degree had been in international economics and relations, international relations with concentration on conflict management. So I was really looking at, you know, at the time, Macedonia was fresh out of the Balkans war, in Jerusalem, these seemed to look like really substantive, interesting places to work. My first day of actual language class was intended to be on September 11th, 2001. And of course, we did not have class that day.

Q: Right. Did eventually though, did you take Macedonian at FSI?

SCHNELLER: I did. Yeah, I'm fluent. I'm fluent in Macedonian.

Q: Okay, that's lovely. How many months was that?

SCHNELLER: That was about six months of training. And then I went on to Skopje. It was my first assignment. I did visa work. It was interesting. We were also in charge of Kosovo. Kosovo now is its own country, but at the time was still technically a part of Serbia that was under UN administration because there had just been this horrible war. So I traveled into Kosovo, dealt with American citizen cases, refugees. It was a really interesting assignment.

Q: Now, because this is an immediate post-conflict environment, did you encounter any dissent? Was anyone else there talking to you about disagreement with policy or had told you, were you learning anything about dissent?

SCHNELLER: Not at all. No. Never crossed my mind.

Q: Since eventually when you would begin writing about dissenting from policy or trying to correct policy, were you running into PTSD with anyone else or were you experiencing it? It's an immediate post-conflict area, but I'm sure there was still some lingering violence. Were you experiencing any?

SCHNELLER: No, no, no, no, no. I mean, quite the contrary. By the time I got there, it was sort of like the September 11th kind of took the spotlight away from every other crisis. And so suddenly the Balkans crisis looked like nothing compared to what had just happened to America. And without this international spotlight feeding the inter-ethnic tension in Macedonia, it had, by the time I got there six months later, it all died down. There was some squabbling, but no violence. It was a really beautiful country, I went all over it, it was great. Absolutely no trauma, strife, or violence. Terrible driving but no.

Q: Then you move on to a different region, one, I think, Conakry was next?

SCHNELLER: Conakry, yeah. I had a short assignment, a bridge assignment, because I already had French and I didn't need language training. I went back to the states after Macedonia and I was posted to the United Nations, our mission to the United Nations in New York for five months. And that was a great experience. I really liked it. I was assigned to the second committee on financial affairs. Conakry, Guinea – I was fully intending on loving that experience because, I was a public diplomacy officer, I was going to get experience, I was going back to West Africa, and I got there and I really didn't like it, which was a surprise to me. I found that I really didn't particularly enjoy public diplomacy work. That what had drawn me to the public diplomacy cone originally was this idea of reporting and getting the story out and realizing like actually that's not what public diplomacy officers do. They work with journalists, it's true, but they don't report, they don't create the story. In fact, they're warping it, if you want to say, in terms of spinning it and doing press briefings. I mean, that's a skill. Again, in terms of assistance, I knew I didn't necessarily have that skill, where I particularly wanted to get involved in it. I didn't have the temperament for it. So this was in 2001 and finished in 2003. I got there in January, 2005. I think by May, I just was ready when I saw the opportunity to volunteer to go to Iraq come up, I thought this is my opportunity. This is something I actually would be happy doing.

Q: And of course, it's a conflict area and you had focused on conflict resolution in your graduate work. But did you receive any other training before you went to Iraq?

SCHNELLER: Yeah, we had a two-week Iraq orientation course. It was pretty much useless, except we did get our, you know, CAC cards. I mean, we got through like a lot of

the logistical stuff that needs to be gotten through. I remember we had a two hour crash course in Arabic. Yeah. Where we were taught how to say get down on the ground and put your hands behind your head because it was coming out of an interrogation handbook. So yeah, it was pretty much pointless. At no point did anyone ever mention PTSD or trauma or anything like that. Remember, this was within the context of shortly after President Bush at the time he had his mission accomplished speech, May of 2003, everything was fine. We were all part of this big, victorious government mission that was going in and like, you know, making the region peaceful and not a threat to US national security interests. So the focus was not on combat or violence conflict at all.

Q: All right. And you didn't really have a chance to talk to many people coming back about their experience and so on?

SCHNELLER: No, but I did talk to people and their experiences were largely positive. And in fact, the person I was replacing, you know, was very enthusiastic about what she had been through, said that the only negative thing about her tour in Basra at the time was that at one point when she was taking a shower, she realized somebody had drilled a peephole into her bathroom wall and was spying on her but you know she said she was able to get out and meet people and do all sorts of exciting work. So it sounded great. This was the summer and fall of 2005.

Q: So now, all right, you get to Basra. What are your responsibilities?

SCHNELLER: I was an 03 reporting officer. It was kind of this catch-all phrase. We did a lot of different things. We did whatever needed to be done.

Q: Amazing.

SCHNELLER: I still count it as one of the most fulfilling assignments I've ever had and definitely one of the most formative.

I think two days after I arrived, I was asked to get on a helicopter and hand over some money to some sheikhs in the area north of Basra so that they could organize something that we were funding. But the only way to get them the funding was for me to hand carry it in cash. I did a lot of meetings, did a lot of reporting. It was exactly the kind of work I had joined the State Department for, like actually getting out on the ground, meeting people, writing about things. It was an incredibly challenging environment. It was difficult to move around and the security environment changed almost as soon as I arrived. Whereas previously, my predecessor had been able to get around and had hardly any security threats, in just a few weeks, that changed very drastically when we had a lot of Shia militant groups organize and were launching attacks against us. Keep in mind, these were the Shia, they were supposed to be throwing flowers at us in the streets for liberating them from Saddam Hussein. Nobody was prepared or expecting all of these groups of angry Shia militants to try to drive us out. But that's exactly what happened. And yes, they were funded and organized by Iran, but at the same time, resistance to the United States became kind of like, who could be the most nationalist in terms of Iraqi

nationalists and get all of the foreigners out. So we were seen as occupiers. It became a routine thing to have rockets launched over our compound.

Early on, when I first got there, September, October, November, the rockets and the mortars would happen once every three weeks, and they would just kind of go overhead and land in a ditch somewhere and not cause any problems. But if you think back to February of 2006, when there was the bombing of the Samarra mosque. After that, all hell broke loose in Iraq. I mean, we'd already been seeing incidents leading up to that. But that was kind of this trigger point where after that happened, there became just uncontrollable spirals of violence throughout Iraq, many of them in Basra, where we were kind of like sitting ducks in the sense that the Shia militant groups, at first they were launching one rocket attack every three weeks that would go overhead, started launching three attacks a week, multiple times during the night. Then they started hitting things. Then it started to be almost every night. I remember talking to a colleague who was recounting how he had survived a rocket attack the preceding night or the night before. The rocket had cut right through the HESCO barriers around his sleeping compartment and penetrated into his sleeping compartment and out the other side and demolished the bed where his roommate would have been sleeping if his roommate had been present, but wasn't. He was deaf in one ear because of the noise. So we realized that we were in a very vulnerable situation because we didn't really have what we would call hard cover. We were all in these tin can compartments that we were told were safe because they'd been packaged with HESCOs and with sandbags and everything. But here was evidence that, against a rocket attack from a short distance it is not going to stand up. At the same time, we were reporting this up, but it kind of fell on deaf ears within the department because everything was supposed to be fine. We've accomplished the mission, remember? Everybody loves us. There's no problem here. So nobody wanted to hear, we're getting attacked every single day. We can't get out.

I think, the most excruciating traumatic experience for me came in May of that year when a local employee, a young woman who had just been married, her name was Muntaha, was assassinated on her way to work in the consulate. We got word that she had been in the car with her husband and their young son in the backseat. Some assassins on the scooter pulled up right next to them and shot the two of them, her and her husband in the head at close range and went off. This was because of her association with the United States. We found that the moderates that we were meeting with turned up dead. It got to the point where it just felt like meeting with me was getting people killed, or meeting with anyone in our compound was getting people killed. Yet the push was for us to keep meeting with people and keep reporting. So for me, the moral issues involved in doing what we were doing were very, very hard. It's very hard to keep doing that kind of work in that kind of environment.

Q: Aside from the very modest security construction around your sleeping quarters, were you granted any other security details or officers or any other kinds of security?

SCHNELLER: Oh yeah, I mean, we had incredibly high security. There were very high walls all the way around our compound. We never went anywhere without a very secure

military convoy. We wore body armor and helmets all the time. It was a very, very high threat environment and we were taking every precaution that we could have. But you know, I remember being in this compound looking at the walls and just thinking, wow, on the other side of these walls, everybody out there hates us and wants us gone.

Q: And once again, you're reporting neither to the department nor to the embassy in Baghdad, you were getting very much reply, understanding, support.

SCHNELLER: Right. I mean, they loved our reporting because we were explaining, you know, the different rivalries between the different Shia factions. We were really helping to explain, because this was the Shia heartland of Iraq. We were really helping to explain why things were becoming more violent throughout the country because we were able to really piece together what were the issues at play here. But that meant it was valuable to keep us there and keep us doing what we were doing. And really, there was, I don't think there was the only thing. The other thing they could have done to make things any safer would have been to evacuate us completely out of there. I mean, it was a high threat environment. In any other circumstance, every single red line would have been crossed and we would have been moved out. In these sorts of situations they're just so inherently dangerous that there are active combat zones and conflict zones, your normal way of dealing with threats in the state department just doesn't work. You know, trip wires, like, oh, are people launching attacks at you and protesting against you? Yes, okay, well then you should probably evacuate. Here it was like, well, this is the normal state of play here.

What it came down to was people getting killed on the base, which did start happening after which the decision was made to evacuate personnel from the base and I was one of those personnel to be evacuated. It was only a few weeks before the end of my tour anyway, but they evacuated a number of people from the base. I remember being on the helicopter from Basra to Kuwait. And I was on it with a contractor, a young fellow, a really nice, really nice American guy who was doing IT work, who had come out as a contractor to do this sort of IT, IRM kind of job. He was being evacuated out to Kuwait and then was going to Baghdad to finish out his contract. So when I had heard just maybe even six weeks after I returned to the States that this young man had been killed in a rocket attack in Basra, at first I was like, no, no, this can't happen. He was in Baghdad. Like, what do you mean? And then I found out that he had been sent back to Basra, even though he really didn't want to go because they needed him. And that he had been working so hard that on Friday afternoon, which was kind of the day off, Friday afternoon, he went back to his sleeping compartment to take a nap. His hooch as we called them, was directly hit by a rocket that demolished the entire place. And he was gone. That was, you know, you don't get PTSD until you leave the combat zone. Because while you're in a war zone acting like you're in a war zone is a completely normal reaction. When you leave the war zone and then you can't leave the war zone. That's when PTSD is an issue. As I learned.

Q: Now, all together, how many months were you in Basra? 11.

SCHNELLER: Okay, okay.

Q: So essentially a solid year. When you went to Kuwait how much longer were you there?

SCHNELLER: I was evacuated to Kuwait, and the contractor went on to Baghdad because he still had a contract. I went back to the United States in preparation for my next assignment.

Q: Okay. Just quickly before we go on to your next assignment, how is that determined? Did you say, all right, now after this experience, I want to do this, or the department simply said, yeah, after only a year, we need you to move on to somewhere else. How did that come about?

SCHNELLER: So at the time, you know, serving, doing an assignment in Iraq was really good for your career. I mean, it was supposed to be very, very helpful in landing onward in assignments. And in fact, I had landed a really nice onward assignment as the assistant public affairs officer in NATO in Brussels following Iraq. And I believe it was in, I don't know, January, maybe, where I got a message saying that my onward assignment to that position in Brussels had been eliminated as part of the Iraq tax basically. And so I no longer had an onward assignment, I needed to find a new one. And then, you know, at that point in January, February, there aren't a whole lot of options out there. And the department did what it could to try to help me find an onward assignment. By that point, I was feeling pretty, pretty tired. I mean, it wasn't exhausting. It was very fulfilling, but I was pretty tired and was like, okay, I don't want to deal with going to yet another country and dealing with another situation. I just want to go back to the States. There were lots of opportunities in the States. I realized also once I was doing the work that I was doing in Baghdad or in Basra, which I loved, that I didn't necessarily want to do another public diplomacy job. You know, I had a degree, I had a master's degree in economics by this point, and there were nice positions in the economic bureau. So I wound up taking an onboard assignment as an economic officer in the Bureau of Multilateral Trade that had nothing to do with the Iraq war.

Q: It's at this point you began work there in 2007? And that's also when you began to experience some of the PTSD symptoms?

SCHNELLER: Yes.

Q: Okay.

SCHNELLER: I started experiencing PTSD symptoms almost as soon as I got back. I couldn't sleep. I was hypervigilant. In retrospect, at the time I was shaking with nervous energy. I couldn't focus. I couldn't---I was supposed to be in this class training for working in DC. I remember being in this training class and here was this woman talking about how her life was so difficult. She had been in Paris and had all of these things taken care of for her and now she's back in America and she's like, it's so difficult for us. The department really should have more systems and programs to help us. I had to hold onto

the table because I was going to go across and strangle her. I could envision myself doing it. I got so angry, I started to see stars, and I had to leave the room because I didn't trust myself not to hurt her. I was like, you had it rough in Paris. Holy shit. Let me tell you. I went to see the health unit at the FSI campus and I was crying and shaking and they were like, yeah, we've seen a lot of people like you coming back from Iraq like this, you should really go see somebody. So I made an appointment with the State Department psychiatrist, RMOP and went in and talked to a psychiatrist who was saying like, well, you know, sounds like what you need is a good night's sleep. Here's a prescription for Ambien. If that doesn't work, you might want to think about, you know, getting some help. But, you know, a lot of people would say it would be better for you to do that outside the department because they don't want it to affect their security clearance.

Q: So that that individual, that regional psychiatrist or whoever you were seeing already cautioned you that getting medical assistance or psychological assistance for trauma could negatively affect your career?

SCHNELLER: Yeah.

Q: Okay.

SCHNELLER: I remember thinking, well, that may be true, but I really need the help. I won't be able to function. I won't be able to do my job at all if I don't get help. So I went and saw a psychiatrist and she diagnosed me that exact same day with PTSD. And I didn't know what that meant. I'd heard of it, but I didn't really know what it meant. She handed me this list of like 17 symptoms of PTSD. When I went down the list, I'm like, yeah, I think I have 15 of them; 15 of the 17 symptoms. I didn't know at the time how long it would take me to recover. I didn't know what recovery entailed. I just knew that, okay, I need this treatment. I was at a point where I could tell that, it was only a matter of time before I hit somebody at work or I wouldn't be able to sleep. So I wouldn't be able to function. I just knew that if I didn't get some sort of help, I wouldn't make it.

Q: Now, when you're speaking of help, and here we are at the very beginning, did it have an effect on your family life? And here I'm not trying to peek into every aspect of your life, but typically when you have PTSD, it also creates difficulties in your relationships with your family and not just your immediate family, husband and children, but your parents and everyone else who's in your life.

SCHNELLER: Right, at the time I wasn't married, I was a single woman, but yes, it did create difficulties with my family. My mother just couldn't understand. She was probably from her generation or the way she was brought up, it was shameful to get mental health treatment. She was worried that the problem was actually going to get the treatment. And then she blamed it on my father. And so I wound up just cutting off all communication with my mother for years just because I couldn't, I realized I couldn't recover and deal with her at the same time. If I dealt with her, it was going to hinder my recovery. And if I was going to focus on my recovery, I needed to get space from her.

Q: And this is not uncommon, I think as you found out, even within marriages and so on and raising children, PTSD can have negative effects on all of that.

SCHNELLER: Yes.

Q: All right, so now you're beginning treatment. You also, you know, as you mentioned, had a little bit of difficulty accepting that you had PTSD and that you really needed to work on it?

SCHNELLER: I don't know if I had difficulty in accepting that. It only was after, I think, getting through the crisis period and getting somewhat stabilized that the enormity of what I had been through and the enormity of actually having this condition started to sink in. And about six months into the treatment, I realized like, okay, I'm better now, but I still am not sleeping very well. I'm still having these very difficult periods where I feel desperate and hopeless. So then I asked to start taking medication. I actually asked for it. I was like, I think this could help me. So that's about six months into the treatment and maybe late 2006, early 2007, I started taking medication. That again was one of these things where that might affect your security clearance. Now I think people when they hear, Oh, you take Prozac, they're like, Oh, who isn't taking this kind of stuff, right? But back then it was much more if you're taking these kinds of mind-altering substances, be careful. But I found, there's some tinkering around with dosages and exact things, but I found it immensely helpful, especially with the sleep. Once I was able to sleep more or less normally, I was able to function better overall. But this whole process until I could actually sleep normally, I think took like nine to ten months.

Q: Yeah, wow. And that whole thing, you were still working in the economic bureau.

SCHNELLER: Yeah. And just trying to get through my daily routine, go to work, do my job. I would continuously get these reminders of people that I had been working with in Iraq who had been killed, or friends I had, close friends who were serving and wound up in Basra and just worrying intensively about their safety, knowing what they were going through. So it was very difficult in my situation to leave the war zone. The war zone kept pinging in my inbox every day. Some of the things that I found myself faced with, I just was so tired and exhausted from what I'd been through, but I wasn't authorized any home leave because under the regulations at the time, you had to be overseas for a continuous 18 months. I had been overseas for 11 months. So I didn't qualify. But I was like, how can this possibly be right? I mean, you send people to work in a war zone and then they don't get any home leave. This is ridiculous. I kept asking, also because the speed with which we would have had to set up these positions in Iraq, like when I went over to Iraq, my position was actually not even listed as an overseas position. It was listed as, I'm posted to Washington DC and then they're sending me on TDY to Iraq. So they're like, yeah, you were never actually posted to Iraq. So you don't even earn any home leave. I was like, how can this be right? I spent 11 months overseas and doesn't that count for something?

So these were the beginnings of what later became the substance of my constructive dissent. But at the time that's why I kind of laughed. I'm like, I had no idea. I did not

consider that I was doing dissent at all. It never occurred to me that what I was doing was dissent. When they told me, when my supervisors brought me into their office and said, hey, Rachel, you're getting this constructive dissent award. At first I was like, yay, an award. Then I was like, for what? Like I honestly did not understand what that had to do with me. I had never gone through the dissent channel. It never even occurred to me. I think our policy in Iraq was, as we all know, quite misdirected at times, but I was at the point where I'm like, well, we're in it now and we have to stay in it and we have to do a good job. We have to stay committed to it. I cared very much about what we were doing in Iraq.

At the time, there was a lot of talk about how to keep staffing the State Department overseas in Iraq. There had been an Iraq tax, but just for people who were going for one year. You go through a lot of people and you continually need more and more people to go out. So the department was at the time looking at directing people to assignments in Iraq. This was a very controversial issue. A lot of State Department people, officers, who were opposed to our going into Iraq to begin with, were adamantly opposed to being directed to go work there. I kind of thought about this and I saw that there was a legal argument to be made. Okay, we need people to go and in a sense, yeah, I mean, direct people to go. But I was just thinking, if you're going to make people go to places like this, like, damn sure, better take care of them when they come out. You can't, as an institution, ask people to go serve in places, having been there and gone through that and knowing that, you're asking people to put their lives on their line, their sanity on the line. You're doing all of this and, based on the way I've been treated by the department, when I've come back, just basically get over it, take some Ambien, whatever. I was like, this is not the way to go about doing it. So that's when I spoke out in a town hall. It wasn't because I had a dissenting policy. I didn't even intend to say anything during that town hall. I didn't go in with any prepared remarks. I just went in there and, you know, as the conversation was going on, it was like this: fine, you know, I mean, I loved my tour in Iraq. I really did. I thought it was meaningful, fulfilling, necessary, the side in the State Department that was basically saying we should never have gone into Iraq. You know, our policy in Iraq is really bad, we shouldn't have anything to do with it. I did not agree with that. And I remember, in that town hall, there was somebody who got up and was like, Oh, what's going to happen to our children when we get killed in Iraq? And I thought, this is just ridiculous. Yes, you can send people to Iraq. We need the work to get done. People can quit if they really don't want to do it. But if you're going to send us to Iraq, you better damn well take care of us when we come out of it and we're all messed up like me.

Q: Now here I just want to mention one thing. You talk about this public town hall. This is the one.

SCHNELLER: It wasn't public, it was the town hall inside the State Department.

Q: But what happened if I remember.

SCHNELLER: Reporters there.

Q: Yeah.

SCHNELLER: And reporters, yeah. Yeah.

Q: It became a public outcry or, you know, it got into the press. There were many negative stories, some of them against the Foreign Service, but some of them against the treatment that the Foreign Service was getting and so on. Can you comment on that? Did that begin to give you a sense that you had to speak out more than just at the public meeting, at the town hall meeting?

SCHNELLER: I'm trying to think back to how I felt, this was a long time ago now. I guess one of the important things about the time I started speaking out was that this was about the time in my recovery process when I was well enough that I was functioning, I was sleeping, I was processing, and had processed a lot more of what I'd been through. I wasn't in survival mode anymore, dealing with the day to day to day. I was getting treatment with my psychiatrist and really delving into what it was about the situation in Basra that triggered me? A lot of other people were in Basra with me and some of us got PTSD, some of us didn't. And why me, in my particular situation did I get PTSD? And the thing that made me get PTSD wasn't necessarily the realization that it wasn't that I was not happy with the work. It wasn't that I felt like, oh I'm not doing important work or whatever. It was in a situation where people were getting killed. That's very traumatic. And it could have been me.

We were trying really hard to tell the department how serious the situation was and just getting no response. So when I came back to the department and it kind of was the same thing; things are really bad out there. People are getting traumatized. This is a really bad way to treat your personnel. You need to treat us better because you're asking us to do really difficult work, which we'll do, but you need to be aware that there's some responsibility on the part of the state department, too. Just getting the same sort of stonewall treatment of like, yeah, regulations say 18 months overseas and you're only there for 11. As somebody with PTSD, and I think only another person with PTSD could really, truly understand that people with PTSD do not react to things the way people without PTSD do, especially when we're starting to recover from it. A lot of times, people with PTSD are there because they felt like they were in a situation where they couldn't survive or they couldn't save somebody, and so people talk about the fight or flight, but with PTSD, it's like you're in the freeze. You can't run. I was in Basra, and I couldn't leave the walls. I had to stay there in my duck pond waiting for something to hit me. I couldn't fight because I didn't have a weapon. I couldn't go out. I couldn't get the bad guys. So I was in this frozen position. When I got back to the States, suddenly I had options and I could have run. I could have done the flee option of like, Oh, I'm just not going to deal with it. I could have quit the State Department. Like, is this really the policy? You know, and just questioning it really more than anything. Like, seriously, you send people over it by like, okay, on paper you say I was posted to DC, but in reality I was in Iraq and nobody can deny that. So why am I not getting a home leave for this? Asking questions that it was really hard for the department to return, the most that they could do is simply not respond. Then two weeks later, I'd be like, Oh, is there any update

on this? A lot of the pushback I got from the department was more of like, Oh, we wish you would just go away and stop asking us these questions. Like, you're really annoying, Rachel. You won't let this issue go. I wouldn't, because I was like, well, I want to know, I want to know why, you can send us there and then when they come back, tell them, oh, it might affect your security clearance.

Q: Yeah. During this time, as you begin to question and talk to management, were you also talking to other people in your situation or getting advice from others in the department on how to go about doing this, including AFSA, the legal representative for people who have grievances or problems in the department?

SCHNELLER: There was a small group of people who had been working “undercover” in the State Department for years who would suddenly swing by my office or send me an email and reach out to me and tell me what they had been through and what their experience had been and asking for support, asking for advice. It was almost overwhelming. It was almost more than I could handle because I wasn't a hundred percent recovered myself. And so I was still trying, I was still in the situation of trying to recover for myself. So helping other people was really a stretch. I needed to help myself first, put the air mask on first before I could help other people. But I was able to tell them things like, you know, I tried this medication for sleep and it really helped. Or here's a referral for a psychiatrist. Or here's how I handled it. And, you know, I realized like, you know, part of the problem was like people were so afraid to get the diagnosis, right? Like the diagnosis was like, oh, if I get diagnosed as PTSD, then my life is over, my career is over. I'll never be promoted. I'll never get a security clearance. But I was saying without the diagnosis, you can't get the treatment. Without the diagnosis, you have no medical claim to anything. You can't self-diagnose with PTSD. You might know you have PTSD, but it's going to take a medical professional to get that diagnosis and that will protect you. I mean, it's also like, look, this is a medical diagnosis. There is treatment for it. This is not like a personality disorder. This is not like a death sentence. It's in a book somewhere with a number and a diagnosis code and everything.

Q: Here also a quick question once you're diagnosed with it at that time And you know, you're getting treatment. Did the department offer any support, you know, I don't know, copay support or anything?

SCHNELLER: No, no, no. In fact, they didn't know because I'd been advised to go outside of the department. I was getting treatment on my own through the private sector. My insurance covered a lot of it, but it didn't cover all of it. Over time, the bills started adding up. Then that's when I started thinking, wait a second, how is this right that I'm paying for all this medical care for PTSD? So I started the process to file a workers comp claim. This wasn't a dissent. It was just that I had been injured and this costs a shitload of money and I didn't think I should be the one that has to pay for it. So I asked to file a workers' comp claim. That was hard because mostly, I mean, the workers' comp system is like you slip on the floor and you break your leg. What part of your body was injured? That's one of the questions. Your leg, I broke my leg. Here's the MRI, showing a broken leg. But with PTSD, it's like, where were you injured? Mentally, you know? So I was

trying to fill this out from the perspective of let me get all this documentation. I had all the medical documentation. Of course I needed the diagnosis and I had that, and it was clearly linked to my service in Iraq. Then the last step was that it required somebody from my HR office to sign off on it and send it forward to the labor department or something. That's where there was some pushback of oh, do you really want to file this? Yes. And they're like, well, you know, it's going to take a really long time for them to even get around to looking at it. Then they'll probably deny it and you'll still be on the hook for all of this medical.

Q: Okay, so workers comp, one question about that is in this difficulty because workers' comp is generally only related to physical problems, did you get advice or help in going through the process?

SCHNELLER: No, it was really, really difficult. I had to basically figure it out on my own, and it took a long time. It took me months, and in the end, I had to stress, yes to the HR, I want to file this. They kept being like oh, okay, but you know it's not going to work, and it's going to take a really long time. I think it got filed on like June 30, 2007. On July 7th, literally 10 days later I got the letter from the Department of Labor saying your case has been approved. Wow.

Q: That is astonishing.

SCHNELLER: It was so gratifying. Oh, I can't tell you how gratifying it was to go in and be like, look, here we go, I'm approved. Yay, all right.

Q: Now the approval, what did the approval grant you?

SCHNELLER: It meant that from that time on, the department was on the hook to pay for all of my treatment related to PTSD.

Q: Okay, all or just the copay assistance or everything?

SCHNELLER: Everything.

Q: Everything. Okay.

SCHNELLER: The stuff that had already been paid by my insurance, there was no way to change what had already happened. But from that point on, my provider, she billed. I think it goes through the Department of Labor, but ultimately it's a department responsibility. I think that's one of the things that woke the department up to like, okay, this could become a very expensive endeavor for us. If every person coming back from a war zone then gets a diagnosis and then we have to pay for all of their treatment.

Q: Interesting. All right. Now, so you submit this to the Human Resources Bureau or to the Medical Bureau or how did that work?

SCHNELLER: I went through the HR person in the Economic Bureau because I was working for the Economic Bureau.

Q: Okay. And then you're still receiving treatment, you're still receiving support. Did people begin to come to you and say, wow, can I do this as well?

SCHNELLER: Yeah, they were very interested in it because it is expensive to get this kind of treatment. I told them, first you have to get the diagnosis because they were like, oh, I've been receiving treatment for years. Is there any way I can get reimbursed for that? I'm like, no. What's done is done. But if you're going to file a workers comp claim, you have to cough up the medical documentation. If your medical documentation is several years old and yet you're trying to link it to this experience, it's going to be harder to do now that a number of years have elapsed. Well, I don't know if they ever did, but I know that after I did that, the department actually started informing people how to file workers comp if they had PTSD after a combat zone, which was a far different treatment than I received.

Q: So in essence, we might say that this really created a new policy on the part of the department. Because the fact that it isn't simply passively receiving workman's comp requests, but it's actually actively letting people know that, yeah, we accept that this is a potential outcome of serving in a conflict area because Iraq is only one conflict area. You might have been in Afghanistan, you might have been in other places where you could easily get PTSD.

SCHNELLER: Oh, yeah, there were people who had survived the embassy bombings in Nairobi, and there were people who had been in the Balkans, or people who had been in Rwanda during the Hutu Tutsi war. A lot of people in the State Department wind up working in very dicey situations across the world. I think Iraq brought it to a boil because of the sheer numbers and the sheer size of the effort to send people into like an active war zone in numbers. A lot of these other conflicts where people have been traumatized, it was like they went in, things were normal, and then bam, something happened, right? But this was like, we went into Iraq, we invaded it, we took it over, we created this situation, we want to keep sending people into it.

Q: So you need to recognize what the potential harms are, aside from physical harms. All right. So here you are. You're beginning to take action for your own care. And then as people begin to know, they also recognize that you're a catalyst, in essence, for change in department policy. But now at some point you decide to write an article for the Foreign Service Journal on your experience. What prompted that?

SCHNELLER: I don't know, I'm trying to remember. I don't know if there was one certain thing. I mean, I like to write. A lot of times I think, well, if I were to write an article about this experience, you know, what would it say? And so it just, I don't know if there was one specific thing that came out of it, maybe because after I spoke out at the town hall and started getting requests for media interviews and started going through the clearance process to get clearance to do the speaking that it was like, well, this is reactive.

You know, I'm waiting, these are people coming to me and then they ask the questions. But if I were going to write something and proactively put my message out, what would it say?

Q: Right, right.

SCHNELLER: And also knowing that there were a lot of people suffering in silence. They were afraid to, you know, they weren't willing to tell their story or they wanted their privacy or, you know, and, I put, it was a risky thing to do, you know, basically writing that like, here I am, I have PTSD, I have a mental illness. I'm not okay. But it's not the end of the world. There are ways of dealing with this. And knowing there was no going back. Once I speak publicly on this, like I'm outed as somebody with PTSD. I'm outed as somebody with a mental health issue.

Q: So two just two quick things.

SCHNELLER: And being okay with that. Every once in a while I see something on TV or in the movies that I'm like, that's exactly how I feel, you know, and I had that moment, I was watching that cartoon movie, Dory, you know, Finding Nemo, Dory, and Dory's that blue fish, and you know, recent memory loss. And at one point somebody is saying we can't do that, that's crazy. And Dory's response is, I'm okay with crazy. And that's kind of how I feel. So he says, Rachel, you're telling people that you're crazy. And I'm okay with crazy. Because I've seen so many people in the department and they're like, they're assholes. They are horrible to work with. They're incompetent, unethical, and yet it's somehow okay because they don't have a mental health issue, or at least they don't have a diagnosed mental health issue. And I'm like, I would rather be crazy than be an asshole. So.

Q: Now, two quick things here. One is in the same Foreign Service Journal where you authored an article with your own name, another person authored an article as anonymous.

SCHNELLER: Yeah, I kind of remember that.

Q: As you say, there were people who knew they had PTSD, wanted to talk about it, but felt uncomfortable being public.

SCHNELLER: Yes.

Q: And then the other question is, as you mentioned, various media organizations came and said, we want to do an interview with you. And the department allowed you to do that.

SCHNELLER: Yes.

Q: OK. But once again, the media outlets want to question you in one way, but you have your own story, and it's not necessarily related to all the questions they want to ask you.

SCHNELLER: Right. Yeah.

The process was painful and horrible. Again, I think having PTSD was actually an asset and only somebody with PTSD can understand it where like none of it mattered to me. Like people saying this might affect your career. It was like, I don't care. I almost died. And you have a person with PTSD where every single moment feels like they might die. Through therapy, the only way somebody with PTSD, I think can truly recover is to come to grips with the reality of that. Because in reality, you could walk out the door of your apartment, get run over by a car, and I might never see you again. Right? God forbid. Right? But we all know stories where that happens. You know, somebody is just sitting in a car and then, you know, the bridge in Baltimore, working on a bridge. Who would have ever thought that, you know, five minutes later, the entire bridge collapses, they're in the ocean, they're dead. And that's the reality of it. People without PTSD just are blissfully able to function like that is completely unheard of. But once you've been in the situation, you have to come in order to recover, you have to get to a point where you are, you accept that at any given moment of your life, you could be dead.

Q: Now, once you publish that article in the Foreign Service Journal, obviously people come to you and talk to you about how they can get support, but were there other outcomes that you were aware of as a result of your article?

SCHNELLER: Let's see. I pulled up the citation for my award, and that helped remind me.

I asked the department to do more about PTSD. For example, at an August 1st, 2007 hearing, a Senator cited the USA Today article in urging the HRP-DAS Heather Hodges to do more to assist PTSD sufferers. What did I say? A few days after I spoke out at the town hall, a few days later, an admin message from the secretary to all employees committed to the department. The department's medical bureau was authorized funding to dedicate four new full-time employees to work on PTSD issues. I didn't even know about that until I wrote this. I "worked to help us get home leave for their service in Iraq, which they technically did not qualify for since they had been assigned on TDY. This issue took over six months of constant struggle on Rachel's part, largely because of positive findings in Rachel's case, which set a precedent for all of the episodes who had been sent to Iraq on a similar basis." And on that note, I do remember where this case went up to the director general. And my supervisor who wrote this award citation was like, Rachel, we have great news. The director general is going to sign a special deal just for you, where you will get your home leave and you will get the chance to use it, and isn't this great? I was like I can't accept this. This isn't right. And I turned it down. I'm not going to accept this because other people were in this situation. And I think she was kind of flabbergasted, but, you know, you got what you wanted, right? And like I said, with somebody with PTSD, this isn't meaningful to me. I went through this with a lot of people. I wasn't the only one who did. It's not going to help me recover and heal, just to

get a separate side deal that would sweep the main issue under the table. Right. That's where people were saying, but you should be happy you got what you wanted. I'm like, this isn't going to help.

Mandatory home leave. Not only did we not qualify for a home leave at all because we'd only been overseas for a little bit, but the department made it mandatory for people serving in high threat zones to take home leave. You couldn't even opt out of it.

Q: Yeah. Now, aside from the one home leave that they offered you as an individual, they began to change the policy so that they understood anyone going to a conflict zone as active as Iraq, you have to take a break. There's no choice.

SCHNELLER: Yes. So sometimes people are not the best stewards of their own health and they're like, yeah, sure. In fact, it's well known that people come back from a war zone and go immediately back into another one. Because, when you've been in a war zone, if you have PTSD, you're perfectly fine in the war zone. You function very well because your actions in the war zone are appropriate actions. When you come out of it and you're trying to live like a normal human being, that is the problem. So when you find that you're not able to function like a normal human being, you look to go back to the war zone because that feels normal. That's really this heartbreaking part of PTSD where you find people who are just going back in it and in it and in it because they're not able to function in any other way.

Q: In the corridor talk right around this time, I was in the national war college in Washington, D.C. It's 2008 to 2009, and there had been a lot of people who had deployed and then were coming for a year to the war college, you know, to analyze their own experiences and share them with others. The common expression for people who went from one war zone to another was adrenaline junkies. And it was kind of derogatory. It was like, oh, you can't function in a regular job. So you just go out there again and again. And, you know, you're sort of an addict to this kind of thing. In other words, that it was beginning to be recognized as a kind of a thing for some people.

SCHNELLER: Yeah, they're trying to function. I mean, it's sad. They come back, they know, it is in fact discouraged and is considered shameful and not something that you're supposed to admit, then, you know, they're making a logical choice to return to a war zone where they can function and being an adrenaline junkie is a positive thing. I think people can make their own choices, but they should have, you know, real choices.

Q: Yeah. And oddly enough, right around this time, this movie called The Hurt Locker comes out where the main character works in explosives, eliminating mines and explosives, and he comes back and he doesn't feel that his family connections were as satisfying as going out and being exposed to that very extreme conflict environment and as sort of a cautionary tale, that this kind of thing can happen to some people where what was their normal life is no longer satisfactory and what they want, at least they think they want, is the constant exposure to life and death circumstances. But the other thing I wanted to mention as an outcome, you mentioned the Senate, the House Committee on

Armed Services also cited your article as part of its response to requesting that the department take all appropriate action to treat people with PTSD, understanding that you really need to look at these returnees from all conflict areas to be sure that they can still function in their old civilian life. So in other words, this article that you wrote.

SCHNELLER: I was like, didn't the Defense Department already fight all these battles after the Vietnam War? Didn't we already see what happens when you don't take care of people who are traumatized after they come back from a war? Why is this so hard in the State Department? Like, didn't we already figure this out? I sort of felt like, wait a second. You know, I'm not dissenting. I'm just trying to show you what we've already figured out and what we should be doing. So I mean, yeah, there were times that the State Department really did not want me to do the CNN interview, for example. And I sent the request to the PA Clearances and said, CNN has requested to interview me. And I didn't get a response. Two weeks later, any updates? No response. And then my office director called me into his office and was like, I understand that you've made a request to do an interview with CNN. And I was like, how did he find out about this? Like really? And he's like, maybe you should really think about whether or not you want to do this interview. It's probably not going to be good for your career if you do. And then, you know, if somebody with PTSD, that sounds like a threat, right? And I'm like, what do you mean? Is that a threat? What's going on? And he was like, well, there could be consequences to your career if you do something like this. So I was like, like what? He's like, well, you might not be able to get another high level position. Because again I'm asking this question of, okay, but why does that mean consequences for my career? I said, I am somebody with PTSD and I thought I almost died. You're not going to be able to scare me by saying oh, you might not get the staff assistant job you wanted. You really think that's going to deter me? Well, you might not be able to get the positions that you want later on. It was very vague. I said, look, the State Department can turn down my request. I sent it to the PA Clearances. They don't have to clear on it. If they don't clear on it, I won't do it. If they do clear on it, I might do it. But I can't make that determination until I get a response one way or the other. And so finally, I got the response like, yes, you can do it. And I did it. It didn't really have any consequences for my career.

Q: And just one quick thing about that. That's totally wrong. I mean, your supervisor should never have found out about this because you applied in a separate channel. You didn't have to go through your supervisor for approval. And someone must have mentioned this to your supervisor and said, you really need to counsel this employee about something that has absolutely nothing to do with her work responsibilities. So it's totally out of any kind of appropriate personnel action. And I mean, you kept your cool, but I would have been, if that had happened to me, I would have been astonished and angry because that's a violation of appropriate personnel action. No one should have sat down with you but the public affairs office. And yeah, this is, it was wrong.

SCHNELLER: Yeah, a lot of wrong things happen. So, I mean, at the time, I just remember, I'm a very analytical person and it's sort of like, okay, well, like, what exactly am I, what are we talking here? Somebody is going to come and try to kill me? You know, what are we talking about here, I could tell he felt awkward. You know, he couldn't

really get it. He couldn't really come up with something. I remember, at this point, you know, I'm somebody with PTSD. When I would get triggered, I would start just quivering and shaking uncontrollably. I remember being in his office shaking uncontrollably, just telling him, "Look, you know there is no job in this department that is ever going to be more important than speaking out on this issue, because if I don't speak out on this I won't be able to live with myself. I need to do what I can to help people. I'm prepared to take that risk. I remember him being like, OK, and just kind of shutting up after that.

Q: And your supervisor never explained to you how it was that he came to know that you had made this request.

SCHNELLER: I'm still curious, but that was a long time ago.

Q: Okay, fine. Yeah, I mean, that's pretty shocking. But okay, you do the interviews, there were a few, and you write the article, and yet it's your supervisor who nominates you for the deputy director. And there was a director.

SCHNELLER: She was very supportive of me. I needed to come clean with her pretty early on because I needed to get her approval as my supervisor to take time off for all my medical appointments. And I told her, look, I have PTSD, I'm just telling you this, I have to leave on Tuesdays at five on the dot so I could get to my appointment. And then when I had to file the workers comp, one of the things I had to come up with was a statement from my supervisor saying, yes, I have seen Rachel suffering from PTSD on the job or something like that. And it was difficult because she was my supervisor in the Economic Bureau, but she hadn't been the supervisor when I was in Basra going through the thing that got me the PTSD to begin with. So I was like, which supervisor should I get the same from? In the end, I got it from both of them and thought, okay, at least this way out, my base is covered, you know. And so she was aware of the situation.

Q: The other interesting thing about this, in terms of policy, is if you have any kind of medical condition that requires treatment and, you know, it affects the number of hours or when you need to leave to get the treatment, you are supposed to be able to get it and have no effect on your suitability for service, other than there may be a country where you can't go because you can't get the appropriate treatment if it's a continuing kind of thing. So, you know, all the cautions that this may affect your career were inappropriate at base, but it was the failure to understand what PTSD was and how those symptoms could affect you. that initially created the problem, if I'm understanding correctly.

SCHNELLER: I didn't follow what you just said. Okay, no.

Q: So let's say, for example, I have a chronic condition, diabetes, for example, and I have to go out of the department periodically to get a special treatment. You know, I have monitoring all the time, but periodically I have to go out and get a doctor's visit or a new prescription, or something or other, that requires me to leave the office for a few hours at a time and, you know, you give advance notice and that is not supposed to affect you in any way. Right.

SCHNELLER: Yeah. I mean, that never really became an issue for me.

Q: Okay. You've done your interviews, you've published the article, and your supervisors recognize this. But in all this time, it's going to be an American Foreign Service Association award. That's the association that represents both the foreign services group and individuals with management when there are employee management problems. Did you talk to AFSA about it or did they reach out to you in terms of talking to you about, oh, we understand that you've done this dissent and we want to be helpful and we can offer that?

SCHNELLER: I did talk to AFSA. I'm trying to remember how it came up. It wasn't something that I did straight off the bat because, like I said, I came back, it was a medical issue. I needed to get stabilized. I was reintegrating into things and it was only later on down the road, that a time came that it was sort of like wait a second, this isn't right. I want to fix things. I really resisted being used as a tool through AFSA. It felt like there was this group of us within the State Department that had opposed our going into Iraq had opposed going from the beginning. And we're looking at anything they can possibly get their hands on to use to, you know, protest us policy in Iraq. And I did not want any part of that. I actually was not dissenting on our policy. In the sense that I could see how what we had done had been massively destructive, but it was done. And so what's the use of protesting it now? Now we have to look at how we fix it. And I didn't want to be drawn into that line of policy debate. I didn't want to be seen as somebody who disagreed with our Iraq policy. And so sometimes I felt like in AFSA, they were, you know, obviously they were also probably representing the interests of diplomats who didn't want to go to Iraq and, you know, had conscientious objections to going and, you know, we're looking at it from that angle, but I didn't, I actually didn't want any part of that.

Q: Yeah. Yeah. Did you also know in terms of the assignment of people being assigned to Iraq, initially there was what was called the Iraq tax where I know my onward assignment in Brussels was eliminated because of that tax.

SCHNELLER: I paid that tax many times over.

Q: A lot of people outside the department won't quite understand what that term meant, which is why I brought it up. In other words, embassies, especially in countries where the assignments are pleasant and there are no conflicts, Western Europe and Tokyo and so on, were forced to give up positions so that individuals, at least from those positions or others who might have been on those positions, had to go to Iraq. These were required or directed assignments. But over time, even the department and the secretary and the Human Resources Office began to realize there are people who can't go. They're not suitable for going. They're more at risk for PTSD or other problems that make them not, that make that particular assignment not a good one for them, and therefore also bad for the department because they can't fulfill the responsibilities that the department wants to do.

SCHNELLER: Let's just be honest, if you force somebody to go to any position that they don't really want to go to, they're not going to be happy, they're not going to do a good job, they're going to live for any opportunity to leave. job, they're going to look for any opportunity to leave. And if you're trying to force somebody to go to a place like Iraq, and they don't want to go, it's massively counterproductive. They don't want to be there. They're not going to work well. They're probably going to get drunk every day. They're going to be miserable. They're going to look for any opportunity to leave as soon as possible. It's not in the department's interest.

Q: And eventually, Foreign Service officers began to consider Iraq as an acceptable assignment, and they began to be able to fill the positions with people who actually were willing to go. So I'm not trying to link that decision directly to what you were doing, but I think somehow in the background, what you did also began to kind of percolate up to the top level decision makers, and they were sort of beginning to understand, we need to be a bit more thoughtful about who we send. Did you get that sense?

SCHNELLER: Yeah, I mean, I got the sense that like, the department was trying to, I think they would take the tact of like finding people who had Arabic or regional expertise and going to them and saying like, look, we think you'd be a great, we think you'd do a great job at this great position, it'll be great for your career. Some people would say, well, you know, yeah, other people would be down right now, but some people are in the middle and they'd be like, well, let me think about it. And then the department would be like, well, you know, let me make this offer even more attractive. Or, you know, it tried various tasks without having to actually force anybody to go, to get people to, you know, I mean, it's basically, I'm an economist, it's like opportunity costs. It's like everybody's got their price, right? But like for some people it's like, well, if you pay me more, I'll go. For other people it's like, well, if it's an interesting job, I'll go. For other people it's something else, you know. And when you, and the department has a number of these like incentives, you like incentives that they offer depending on the situation and what's required in order to motivate people to willingly and enthusiastically do positions they might not otherwise have considered. But I talked to a lot of people who were like, yeah, I did one year in Iraq and paid off my student loans. Or, you know, and they were very happy to go, don't care if they ever go back, and don't really care about Iraq. But, you know, when they went, they did a good job, they were invested, they were very happy with their experience. So, you know.

Q: So now, as we begin to get to the conclusion of the interview. As you look back, were there difficulties in your professional life that continued? Or how did, in other words, how did you come out of the PTSD experience and move on? Did the ultimate support that the department offered you actually help in that regard?

SCHNELLER: I don't know how to answer that question. I mean, it was miserable, to be honest. Like, there's no happy ending here. I think, you know, I did that CNN interview against advice. I was still suffering from PTSD. I was having breakdowns in the office. I took a few months off. I was able to finally get the agreement to take my home leave. And this was like a year and a half after I'd come back, but I took three months off. I went

to New York. I did a month long yoga teacher's training. It reset my chemistry a little bit. And then when I got back to the office, I felt like I was in a much better place, but was immediately being asked to take on a lot of extra work. I got to the point where I was no longer willing to do that. I was like, no. In order for me to be able to sleep through the night, I need to leave my work behind, I need to have three hours minimum between the time I leave work and the time that I go to bed. So if I'm working till eight o'clock every night, I'm not going to be able to, this isn't going to work. So I was being asked by my office to take on an extra project and I just basically said, no, I'm not going to do it. And they weren't happy about that.

Then for my EER, my final EER in that office, my supervisor, the same one who nominated me for this award, wrote me a rating statement. That was fine, but then she put that my area for improvement was interpersonal skills, that I had all these personal problems. At the time, when I read that, I had actually extended and was planning to do a third year in that office. I was upset at that EER. I remember talking to her about it and she was like, no, we're going to have to stick with this and you know, some of the things I was looking at and I was like, this isn't really making sense to me. You know, you're supposed to, I don't know, I don't want to get into the details, but so what happened was all I did was not sign the EER. I said, I'm not signing this EER because my counseling sessions did not take place because they hadn't really. Then it went to the panel and the panel came back because there are those places where if you know the EER, my supervisor put in dates. She basically made up dates and put those dates in. I didn't do anything. It went to panel. Panel came back. Unfortunately for my supervisor, one of the dates that she put in was a Sunday. Another one of those dates was a U.S. holiday. And so it was clear that she had actually just got in a lot of trouble for that. Then she quit the department soon afterwards.

So, although she nominated me for this award, I almost turned it down, because I didn't ask for this award. I didn't know I was getting it. I don't even understand why I'm getting it. I don't even see what I'm doing as dissent. It wasn't until I read her nomination. I'm like, oh, okay, I guess. Then she wrote me this EER and I didn't like it. I didn't, I accepted it. All I did was point out that the counseling sessions hadn't taken place and she got dinged. I got promoted immediately. Then she left the department. So it was, when I looked at accepting the award, I felt conflicted about it. In the end there's this whole other story I haven't even begun to talk about. This whole time, part of my healing process, I was trying to get local staff out of the country, get them refugee status, get them to the States, writing them referrals, all of this stuff. At the end of the day, I was like, okay, I'm going to accept this award and accept the money. I think it was like \$2,500 at the time and send all of that money to my local staff to help them. That's how I could justify accepting the award. I don't necessarily see what I did as dissent. I'm conflicted about the award, but I would have liked to have been nominated for the dissent award because of the work that I did to try to get. There was this whole other issue of like the SIVs for Iraqis who had worked for us. I worked very hard on that behind the scenes.

Q: Special immigrant visas.

SCHNELLER: I was working very hard on that issue behind the scenes. I was pushing it as hard as I could. And that's what I would have wanted the dissent award for. And so the way I justified it in my mind was like, I will take this award, but I am going to donate all the money to the Iraqi refugees.

Q: Yeah. It's interesting that you mentioned this because when I reviewed your article in the Foreign Service Journal, the photo of you with your local employees, it says, Mountaha, the woman who you were photographing, yeah, who was assassinated. And then the other two local employees were both living in the US when the photo was taken, one in Tennessee and one, I forget the other. And as soon as I looked at that photo, I thought you must have had some effect, you must have had some influence.

SCHNELLER: I did a lot, yeah. I gave them thousands of dollars so they could survive. I wrote them referrals.

Q: Yeah, okay. I know, I understand. And similarly, you had to provide background and support for other local employees who qualified as refugees.

SCHNELLER: Yeah.

Q: And this was happening principally from when you got back from Iraq, not there. Yeah. Okay. Once you completed all of the statements and the article and so on, there were some immediate consequences that the department took or some immediate decisions. But as you look back, were there other things that continued to happen that you were aware of as a result of your action?

SCHNELLER: I mean, the State Department really got its act together in terms of PTSD. There had always been this high threat, after you come back, you go to this debrief session, and then they beefed up the bit about seeking help, advised people how to get help for PTSD, showed them how to file a workers comp claim. People automatically got home leave. I mean, just getting the leave, giving the rest is really important. I mean, right after I got the Rivkin award in June, like the next day, I went on six months of LWOP. Which I can do because I had the workers comp. 'Cause I just needed a complete factory reset of my nervous system at that point. I mean, I had been working and all of this fighting for what I thought was right was helpful. Like it helped me fight. It helped me get through the freeze and get over like stuff is happening to me and I can't make a difference. Yes, I've made a difference, but I'm exhausted. And I can't hardly walk into the State Department without being completely on hyper vigilance. And even on the best of days when I would go in and then people were constantly like coming to me and telling me their PTSD stories or asking me for advice. Here I was, I was still trying to recover. It was exhausting. It was draining. I needed that six months to just not have to deal with the State Department at all.

Q: Yeah. Your experience in terms of what could be called constructive dissent or approaching every possible angle to get treatment and then also to help change the policy so that others could get treatment. As you look back, how would you advise anyone else

who is in a similar situation where it's affecting them, but it's also as a result of the way the department is operating? How would you advise them to address that?

SCHNELLER: I have several of what I call Rachel's rules of diplomacy. And they're kind of like basic guidelines that work in almost every situation. The number one is the person who waits the longest wins. What that means is be patient, let the process take its course. For me, it was more about the process. I wasn't looking for a particular outcome. I was saying, this is not right. You're saying that I don't get home leave because I was posted to the United States, but in fact I was in Iraq. So how, how do we reconcile this? I wasn't saying, you have to give me home leave. I was like, does this make sense? And people hoped that I would just lose interest or give up and would stonewall a lot. Like, oh, it's under review. OK, great. Review. Review. Two weeks later. Have you had time to review? No, we haven't reviewed, but we will get back to you. Three weeks later. How about now? You know. And because I was, I didn't give up, I was very patient, but persistent, I won.

You said you were going to review and give me an answer. So what's my answer? And that's the first rule, just be patient, ask the questions, be persistent, don't be in a rush. Anybody who's in a rush, it gets used against them. This happens in diplomacy, too. Countries use it against the United States all the time, because we have this four-year presidential cycle. And they're like, oh, we'll just out wait this president and see what the next president says. And usually it doesn't really work out for them because they don't realize oh, well, you know, the president actually doesn't get to change things immediately all at once. That's my first rule.

The second rule is that things can always get worse. I feel like that is the, you know, one of the things that we all learned out of Iraq. We thought we were going in and we're going to fix it. We're going to take out Saddam Hussein. That will fix all the problems. We took him out. Guess what? Things got worse. Like you go in and try to fix something, but you might fix that one thing, but things can always get worse overall. So whenever it comes to disagreeing with policy, you know, in terms of dissent, I think the dissent channel is great and we need to have that. But for me, I'm like, I don't know, because I've seen I see a lot of problems with a lot of our policies, but things could get worse. Before I advise or suggest an alternative policy, I want to be sure that I really think this would actually improve the situation, not just make it worse, but fix one little problem. And so there had been other, you know, dissent, you know, dissenting against the "Muslim ban" and dissenting against this. And I just always felt like that was dissent for show, like dissent for making a stand and where people almost were sure that their dissent cable was going to get leaked to the press. Then it became this big policy thing and nothing changed in my view because it's like, well, have you really thought this through? Are you dissenting just because you don't like our president or because you don't like this particular policy? Do you really understand what you're dissenting and what the consequences are and what are you proposing in response? And so I don't believe in dissent for the sake of dissent just to be contrary. It can make things worse too.

Q: Sure.

SCHNELLER: So I'm probably not your best example of, you know, what you're looking for in terms of dissent. Because I'm like, I don't even really know if I, I don't consider what I did dissent. I see some of the things that people do to dissent. And I think it's kind of for show more than for actually changing anything. Yeah.

Q: Are there other rules?

SCHNELLER: I do. They don't necessarily make, you know, pertain to this, but I would say my third rule is when in doubt, don't do anything.

Q: Okay.

SCHNELLER: When in doubt, do nothing. If you don't know what to say, don't say anything.

Q: Sounds good. Yeah, plenty.

SCHNELLER: And then I would say like my last rule is sometimes in diplomacy, sometimes all you have to do is show up.

Q: The foreign service and U.S. diplomacy is there to maintain the dialogue. Even when the dialogue becomes difficult, angry, whatever, people are still there maintaining the relationships for a time when maybe the friction will end and we will find a lot of common cause, or people in the foreign government will change and so will the policy and we will still have those relationships to rebuild. And, you know, as you say, sometimes the best thing is simply to be there, be available, and maintain what we've got, even in very negative or conflictual circumstances. Summing up then, as we're coming to the end of the interview, are there any last thoughts about your experience, what skills or talents you took to this work that you were doing, that you look back on, that you might advise somebody to develop the cautions you've just mentioned, but are there other parting thoughts?

SCHNELLER: I got to the point in my recovery from PTSD where I actually was grateful for what I had been through. I got to the point where I realized I went through a lot and I've recovered from it. I mean, I still have PTSD. I still get triggered. I still have issues, but I can function. I'm not dead. I didn't drink myself to death or commit suicide or wind up in prison for assaulting somebody out of training session. And because I have gotten to the point where I'm like, I understand that at any given moment, this could be my last moment on earth, last day on earth, that, you know, what is really meaningful for me? I had many days where I was like, State Department is driving me nuts. Like it's destroying, it's eating its own people. It's sending us into war zones. And then I was like, well, I could leave, I could quit. And, you know, some people have quit because of what they've been through, or for other reasons in the State Department. But I did a lot of soul searching, and it came down to, I loved the work. I love the work. I love the work I did in Iraq. I still believe in what you just said, diplomacy is there to keep the conversation

going. It's in the best interest of the United States that our policymakers have the best information and the most accurate information of what's going on in areas of concern possible. But this is work I love and deeply believe in. And that, yes, I could die, I could be sent somewhere for my job and I might die in the line of action, but I'm going to die somewhere and sometime, sometime. And if it's doing the work that I love and something I deeply believe in, then I'm okay with that. And so I'm not angry. I don't have any anger or— I got to a place where I believe deeply, I know I believe deeply in the work that I do and I'm committed to it and it's worth it to me. It's even worth my life. I feel like it's been so freeing in the State Department where people are so concerned about their careers and picking the right job and moving up and getting promoted and getting leadership, they're getting credit. Sure, of course, I feel these things too. But in the end, it doesn't matter to me. It's so freeing. And when I said, I'm just going to do the work that I love doing, I can't do a staff assistant job. Same thing with assistance. I can't do it. I don't have the mentality for it. I don't have the mentality to sit behind a desk and make sure that all the fonts are in the right type size. I need to be doing something meaningful. I have a job. I feel so lucky. I know so many people who have a job that pays the bills, but they don't love it. It's just something they do. I have a job that I love. It's meaningful. I think it's meaningful. I am grateful for every single day. I don't need more than that. I'm not looking for anything more than that.

Q: Lovely. Sure. All right. Then what I'm going to do is pause the recording and we'll talk about the next steps.

End of interview