

The Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training  
Foreign Affairs Oral History Project  
American Foreign Service Association Series

**ÁSGEIR SIGFÚSSON**

*Interviewed by: Mark Tauber  
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**INTERVIEW**

*Q: Today is March 14, 2023. This interview with Ásgeir Sigfússon is part of the ADST-AFSA project commemorating the 100<sup>th</sup> year of AFSA. Let's begin with a little background. Where were you born and raised?*

SIGFÚSSON: I was born in Copenhagen, Denmark and raised in Iceland. My family was living temporarily in Denmark at the time, but I am an Icelandic citizen by birth.

*Q: Did you complete all your early education there?*

SIGFÚSSON: I completed all levels of education through high school in Iceland.

*Q: While you were there, did you have any contact with labor unions or the labor establishment, anything that would introduce you to labor management issues?*

SIGFÚSSON: I was, tangentially. I worked in a grocery store when I was a teenager. Even if you're fourteen and only working in a store you were still allowed to join the relevant union, which I did at the time. I still get my regular statements detailing a very miniscule pension that I've earned from there. But yes, I was certainly familiar with the world of unions. And with Iceland being a left-ish social democratic country, labor issues were always a big thing on the news. The biannual negotiations between labor and management were always a big issue because they generally led to strikes. So, I think anyone born in Iceland has a pretty decent understanding of labor versus management and how it can work and often doesn't work.

*Q: What led you to the United States?*

SIGFÚSSON: I always knew I wanted to go to college here. It was solidified when my older brother went to college in Europe, so I said, I can't possibly copy him again. Because up until then we had attended all the same schools. So, I started applying for colleges in my junior year in Iceland and was lucky enough to get accepted. So, here I've been ever since.

*Q: Now, when you were applying to colleges, did you have an idea of what you wanted to study?*

SIGFÚSSON: Yes. I was very clear that I wanted to study English. I was going to finish in three years and move back to Iceland and teach high school.

*Q: You go into college with a clear aspiration but what changed your mind?*

SIGFÚSSON: A lot of things. Exposure to different worlds, different thinking. Realizing that I was going to be in student loan debt for the rest of my life and teaching high school English was probably not going to help much with that. A very helpful college advisor knew that the Icelandic high school system extended for two years further than its U.S. counterpart. As a result, when I arrived at my U.S. college – the University of Pennsylvania – I had placed out of a lot of required courses. So, my college advisor said, “Listen, you have time to do different things. Why don’t you add a second major?” We added international relations, and that sort of became my greater interest.

*Q: While attending the University of Pennsylvania, did you have exposure to labor union activities in the U.S.?*

SIGFÚSSON: Not as such. I do recall that one of my two on-campus jobs for all four years was in the office that handled scholarships and fellowships. These would be Fulbrights, the Rhodes, and all of that. And the office staff there was very much into the on-campus labor movement. They wore the little signs about how much they hated the man in charge of the labor relations for the university and how evil he was. And I remember the whole thing about grad students organizing and striking and that was all happening when I was in college. So, there was some exposure. I didn’t take great note of it, but I certainly remember it still to this day, so I may have noticed it more than I thought I did.

*Q: And then as you’re taking international relations and you’re beginning to think about other careers, where were your aspirations going?*

SIGFÚSSON: I wasn’t sure at the time, quite honestly. I thought for the longest time that maybe I’d want to work for the United Nations, but then it was made clear to me that the UN was a horribly dysfunctional place and I would hate it, so I swiftly backed away from that. I didn’t really know what I wanted to do. I knew that I liked the international-diplomatic-foreign affairs world, it intrigued me, but I hadn’t found my place in it yet. I would have loved to join the Foreign Service at the time, but I was not yet a citizen so I couldn’t, so that was an avenue that was closed off to me. But no, I didn’t have a clear idea of where I wanted to go during my undergrad years.

*Q: After you graduate from Penn (University of Pennsylvania), where did you go next?*

SIGFÚSSON: I went straight to Georgetown, did my graduate studies there in the School of Foreign Service, specifically the German and European studies program. A “recruiter”

had come to campus to talk to a bunch of international relations students when I was a senior and I thought, oh this is interesting, this is good. I knew I wanted to go to grad school immediately because so many of my friends who had graduated had said, if you're going to do it, do it immediately because once you start earning money you don't want to stop. So, I took that advice and I got that done, happily so. And that's where I learned about DC (District of Columbia) and learned how to live in this strange little city.

*Q: While at Georgetown, did you have internships or other kinds of labor experiences?*

SIGFÚSSON: Yes. One of the first things I did on campus was to ask about how I could work. I needed the money. And they pointed me to a physical binder of internships that was located in the office of my program. I leafed through that binder. It had hundreds of internships. One of the few that caught my eye was at the American Foreign Service Association. And I thought, Foreign Service, that's a phrase I know. And I looked at the description. Specifically, it was to work as an intern at *The Foreign Service Journal*. I applied and met Steve Honley, who was the editor at the time. Ultimately, I did not get that internship, but was then immediately contacted by Tom Switzer, who had just joined AFSA as its first director of communications. And he said, "I really need an intern, would you be interested?" At that time, the department was called public affairs. I replied "Sure. I want to do something. This place seems interesting." I continued with that internship for my entire time in graduate school. That opened the doors of 2101 E Street.

*Q: As part of graduate school studies, did you begin to also acquire talents and skills for communications?*

SIGFÚSSON: I think that's when I specifically started a lot of public diplomacy at Georgetown. They had a surprising number of public diplomacy-focused courses. I found that to be really interesting. If I had joined the Foreign Service I almost certainly would have joined as a public diplomacy officer. So, finding this public affairs internship, and having that sort of burgeoning interest in the world of public diplomacy, this all happened at the same time. I eventually came to realize that I found this interesting, and this was a world that I would be willing to be in for a while.

*Q: While you're in the internship, this is now the early 2000s, both internet and email are still in their early years. Did you begin to study all these new means of communication? How to navigate on the internet, how to stay in contact with members of AFSA, and so on?*

SIGFÚSSON: Yes. It was very rudimentary at the time. The AFSA email system was very primitive. A couple of the people in the office were still using WordPerfect. There were a lot of CD-ROMs (Compact Disk Read-Only Memory) around. It's also interesting to note that we still had some Dot Matrix printers. These were the ones where you fed hole-punched paper into the printer and then tore off the serrated edges to get a letter-sized page. AFSA did not have the resources at the time to do much more than that. The website was the barest understanding of that term. So, technically it was very challenging. We did not have the ability to communicate that effectively by email yet.

That came a little bit later. It's been interesting to watch the development of AFSA in terms of its technical and communication abilities.

*Q: During your internship, what did you focus on?*

SIGFÚSSON: We did quite a bit. We had a gentleman by the name of Ward Thompson who was here. He ran our Elderhostel programs at the time, now called Road Scholars. One of the things that I did was to support Ward a bit on that public outreach/public education sector. I also worked on a program that we used to then call Friends of the Foreign Service. And that was our database. "Database" was a very generous term: what we had was literally a binder of paper forms. But people who were willing to do things for us, write op-eds, letters to the editor, speak in their local communities, formed the germ of our current outreach structure, the Speaker's Bureau. Everything we have today really started during those years of the early 2000s to ramp up something that had not existed previously.

*Q: Another aspect of AFSA's public diplomacy are the AFSA awards. They call attention to outstanding work in advancing U.S. foreign policy and values in a variety of fields. Were you involved there as well?*

SIGFÚSSON: I was. Barbara Berger oversaw the portfolio we used to call Professional Issues. That included the awards and plaques programs. If I recall, she was a part-time employee. During my internship, I was asked to help with some of the planning and execution. I do remember going to some of those events when I was an intern. Those were among the first times I was in the State Department building, so I do remember those well. So I've been involved in various ways in the awards programs since the very beginning of my time at AFSA.

*Q: How about the outreach to students, the essay program, and so on.*

SIGFÚSSON: Same. My colleague Perri Green was a contractor at the time. Her only portfolio was the essay contest, and she was a seasonal part-time contractor on that, and I was one of the ones who provided support on that with any work that had to be done. And then we brought her in house as a regular staff member, expanded her portfolio, which still included the essay contests. So I've always been involved in the essay contest, more and more as either support or working directly on judging essays, working to bring in sponsors and liaise with the sponsors and things like that. I have been lucky enough to be involved in what as well.

*Q: Once you began work in the communications section, did you have more contact with Steve Honley and the Foreign Service Journal?*

SIGFÚSSON: Yes. I mean, it was a much smaller office back in the day. AFSA, the building has always been in the same place, but before we renovated it in 2009, the office space itself was small. I was on the second floor with Tom Switzer, with Barbara Berger, and the Journal team. So I've been around the publications folks from the very beginning.

*Q: How did you move from intern to your first job with AFSA in 2003?*

SIGFÚSSON: I graduated from Georgetown and the folks at AFSA were aware that I would be looking for permanent employment. I can't remember if it was right before graduation or right after, but they asked me if I wanted a job. And I thought, well that was easier than I thought it was going to be. I don't have to wait. At the same time, all of my cohort that graduated from the same program were still looking for jobs, and I was very happy to be able to be the first one to say, "Hey, I got a job." So, I had to go home because I had to leave and start my OPT, my Optional Practical Training for a year, and I started up in July of 2003 at the USAID office.

*Q: Was there anything significant about that training that helped you in the AFSA job?*

SIGFÚSSON: The optional practical training, that is the twelve-month period that is essentially given to any international graduate of an American university. So, you're given twelve months to work in the U.S. as long as it's related to your field of study. But to start it, you have to leave the country and come back in on that particular visa. So, I graduated, went home to Iceland, for about a month, came back to the U.S., started my OPT, which was twelve months and then AFSA was tremendously generous to sponsor me with an H-1B visa so that I could stay.

*Q: As you arrive in AFSA's office of communications, how do your responsibilities change?*

SIGFÚSSON: I actually did not work on communications until 2009. In 2003 my position was assistant in the USAID (United States Agency for International Development) labor management office in the Ronald Reagan building. My first years as a regular AFSA employee were very much labor management focused. I worked on intake cases, grievances, ADS (Automated Directives Systems), which is the USAID version of the FAM (Foreign Affairs Manual) chapter revisions, paperwork, meetings with HR (human resources). Very labor management focused. While there was a lot to do, it was not a full forty hour a week job, which is what I had been hired for, so I reached out to the folks at Headquarters and said "Hey, I have time, is there anything that I can be working on?" And at that time, Ward Thompson had just decided to retire and move to California, so they needed someone to take on the Elderhostel portfolio. I jumped at the opportunity.

*Q: What did it require of you while you're also working at USAID?*

SIGFÚSSON: The Road Scholar work was seasonal. We had a spring season and a fall season. We used to do a lot more of those programs back then. Since then, the Road Scholar program has diminished as a national group and our offerings have been reduced as well. We used to do up to fourteen programs a year all over the country, mostly in DC. About six to eight a year in DC. A couple of programs up in Chautauqua in New York. And then we used to have sort of one-off programs in Tucson, Colorado Springs, Florida,

New Hampshire, California. So, there was a lot to do. I really enjoyed that work because it was like creating a curriculum. Each program was a new course, so you choose a theme and then you populate it with speakers who are almost exclusively retired Foreign Service members. That was how I got to know a lot of people in the Foreign Service: By reaching out to them and saying, we need a speaker for our California program, you're in California. We need someone to speak specifically on X, Y, or Z and you are an expert in that, would you be interested in doing that? So, that was a lot of fun. You meet people, you talk to people—interesting people—you learn about what they did because obviously it involves discovering what people know, what they can talk about. And that was something I did for a long time and really enjoyed building that portfolio and making it more robust and building in new things into the programs themselves. That's really how I got to know a lot of the AFSA members and a lot of the many Foreign Service luminaries, most of whom probably have an ADST (Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training) oral history somewhere in the archives.

That was enjoyable. They sort of left me to myself. They just said, if you can pull off the first two programs you can basically just go do it, and I did that by myself for some time, and then they brought in a couple of retired Foreign Service officers to work with me so that there could be two of us doing this. First it was Janice Bay, then Bernie Alter, really wonderful people both. But that was interesting work to do.

*Q: Was it principally with retirees?*

SIGFÚSSON: Yes. It's just always been easier. We always did try to include one or two active-duty people as speakers, but it's so hard to get them to commit. Some of them are nervous about clearance. Well, you know, this is a public function, you're not giving a top-secret briefing. And they would often be the ones that would drop out the day before, which would be very frustrating. So, we learned to build a deep bench of wonderful, talented, knowledgeable speakers. Not just people who knew their area of expertise but were good at communicating it. They weren't the droners at the top of the room, they engaged and spoke well. So, we were very proud to build this into a highly rated program. And the national Road Scholar office always said we never want to lose the AFSA program because they're so highly rated, they're always full. So, that was rewarding. It was good because we always got immediate feedback, which you don't always get with your work.

*Q: This work must have helped you develop a network for you of people who could also answer questions related to some of the labor management issues from their recollections. Did that serve you well? is there an example of how those connections helped later in your overall work in AFSA?*

SIGFÚSSON: I think so. Those were the building blocks of what has become my personal network within the Foreign Service. And in doing other work for AFSA, it's easy to find those common connections. I'll be connected to someone, and I'll say, "Oh, I've heard X speak about you, so I know who you are. I know you were together in Saudi Arabia in 1979." And that's a good way to create an instant connection that generally is

positive. I think it can be tremendously useful. Even just dealing with folks over at State, there are often people who are in that group of people that I know from those types of connections. Even just meeting them for the first time we can say we have this person in common. And that has generally worked to our advantage, I think.

*Q: As programs like Road Scholar diminished, what was AFSA talking to you about in terms of expanding your portfolio or what were your ambitions about expanding your portfolio?*

SIGFÚSSON: Around this time, AFSA has a philosophical discussion internally. The question was this: what is AFSA's role and responsibility when it comes to doing real, sustained outreach and public education? Just as with public diplomacy, it's hard to measure results. But is it something that we should be doing nonetheless? The new board that came in in 2009 thought yes, and I had a conversation with Ian Houston, the executive director at the time. We made the decision to bring me over from AID to work on a communications portfolio, with the idea of doing more in that realm. So, I kept the Road Scholar work. I basically took over the speaker's bureau. I was given the website as part of my portfolio as well. One of the first things I did within a year and a half was to make sure we had a new website. I talked AFSA management into moving into social media. So, I started the Facebook page in 2009. That got us on social media fairly early. I was also asked to work on regularizing and standardizing some of the fundraising operations, which had been haphazard. Those were the main things I was asked to work on when I came over in 2009.

*Q: Creating and managing a website takes a great deal of technical prowess, especially since websites were just expanding in different ways. How did you pick up those skills?*

SIGFÚSSON: I picked up basic HTML (Hyper Text Markup Language) skills, which was all I needed for the existing website. It was incredibly basic. FileZilla, I believe, is the program we used to update the website at the time, and we did it through the use of very basic HTML commands. When I got the green light to change things and get a new website, I found a trove of existing RFPs (Request for Proposals) for website services. I was able to utilize those for a lot of what we needed. We issued the RFP and found a very good partner, and with them we developed what we needed. What we discovered very early on is the best thing to have when you want to organize a website you really need a library scientist, but the best alternative is someone who is highly organized with a slight degree of OCD (obsessive-compulsive disorder). So, they found the right person in me. I asked the right questions. What are people coming to our website for? What is a must-have? What is nice to have? What is useful? What are we uniquely positioned to provide to people that they can't find somewhere else?

So that was the organizing principle for the new website that we finally launched in 2011. And quite honestly, the basic architecture of that 2011 website is still what we have today. We've made tweaks, we've given it three or four face-lifts since, but the basic informational organizational architecture from the 2011 website is still there because we got it pretty much right the first time. Our statistics show that what we thought people

were coming to the website for is exactly what people are coming to the website for. So, that's what we push, that's what we emphasize. In 2014 we decided to publish the Journal online, so that became a whole new section of the website. We had not published it online until then. So, now, from 2014 on, everything was published online. We went back and did everything we could and now we have the archive dating back to 1919. So, that's a whole different trove of information. We've done different tests on the website. When we brought in a new crop of interns, we tested the website on them. We said go find this, go find this if you think this is there. And that's helped us understand how people who are completely new to the organization, to the Foreign Service, what they're looking for and how they would find it. So, we've been able to sort of fix that, do cross-links. Nothing's perfect, but it's obvious to us from the analytics that what we always assumed people would be looking for is what they're looking for, and they seem to be finding it. I think that's the basic function of a website.

*Q: You talked about The Foreign Service Journal going online. Often the medium is the message. How did the Foreign Service Journal itself change once it recognized that it was going online and how did you advise them?*

SIGFÚSSON: It was very simple: more pictures. If you look at sort of the pre—so, I think 2014 is when the big redesign happened so if you look at the pre-2014 journals there are not a lot of pictures. There are graphics, sort of stock graphics, but there was not a lot of emphasis on color pictures of relevant content. People doing things in the field, pictures of our authors. So, that was one of the big changes. I think if you look at the last issue before the redesign and the last issue after the redesign, you'll see it was a tremendous change in how we presented the Journal. I was lucky enough to be on the committee that worked on that redesign, that was exciting and fun because we talked through everything. Endless brainstorming on what we wanted to do. We brought in all these designers to help us launch the redesign. It was very creatively interesting. But I'd argue it's a completely different magazine. I mean, the content didn't change a lot initially, but the way we presented it and showed it to people and put it online was very different from what it had been. I'd argue that the content has evolved a lot since then, just in terms of I think it's better than it's ever been. We've never had as many people want to write for the Journal. It used to be us going out and asking people to write and now we actually have the luxury of saying oh, we don't have space for this. And I think that's entirely due to looking at the Journal in a different way and realizing that we can do more with it than we were. And I think that redesign in 2014 really was the turning point for that. Kudos to the Journal team for their forward thinking.

*Q: So, a website and the Journal are two major parts of outreach and representation of AFSA. Also, the book that Shawn Dorman authored on how an embassy works and its subsequent additions. Did you also have a role to play there?*

SIGFÚSSON: Very limited. I helped with some marketing ideas. I had a campaign for them when we reached out to international relations, political science, history departments around the country to tell them the book existed, that it might be good for them to adopt as course material. But that was really it. It's remarkable how much that



book has just done its own work. The 2005 version was great. I think that 2011 version is really where it became sort of a juggernaut. I mean, the sales numbers for this book are ridiculous and it keeps selling. We did sort of an initial push to get it out there to people we thought should know that it existed, and it's just chugged along on its own since then. We have not really had to spend a lot of money or effort on it since it came out twelve years ago.

*Q: Something I'm curious about. The book, obviously sold in the U.S., but did you find that it had foreign buyers?*

SIGFÚSSON: Yes. That book was translated into Chinese and exists in China available for sale. Otherwise, I think most of the buyers are people who want to join the Foreign Service or families of people in the Foreign Service so they can understand just what their family members are doing when they're in, for example, Abidjan. We do sell a lot to military schools and academies because obviously a lot of those people work within embassies throughout their careers. State buys a bunch for recruitment purposes. But I think it's primarily a U.S. audience.

*Q: You also said that your portfolio expanded into development and fundraising? Did those networks you created earlier help?*

SIGFÚSSON: To begin with, I had to do a lot of research. I had never worked on fundraising previously, so I just read, what do you do? How do you do this? And at the time AFSA actually had five different funds that we raised money for. Which is a lot for a non-profit. And we essentially had seasons for each. We had one fund at the start of the year then spring another fund, summer another fund, fall, and then at the end of the year. And once I'd been doing this for a couple of years, it was very clear to me that the funds were cannibalizing one another. If you're hitting people up five times a year, maybe people are not reading well enough to realize that these are all separate and distinct funds with separate and distinct mandates and missions. And we quickly did away with one of the funds, which was the legislative action fund, which essentially paid for our congressional advocacy efforts or defrayed the costs of the salaries of those working on those issues. The decision was made to instead budget for this and put this particular fund to rest. So, that left us with four funds, which we still have.

By 2016 we stopped fundraising actively for the scholarships because they had risen to such a level that we looked at them and realized they would be self-sustaining for fifty years if we never raised another cent, barring a complete market wipeout. So, we paused active fundraising for that. Since about 2015 we've only done annual solicitations for the Fund for American Diplomacy, which is the arm that funds all the outreach and public education, and the PAC (Political Action Committee). Those have been our main stays. Obviously, we did the legal defense fund around the impeachment, but that had not necessarily been an annual effort until then. It was interesting to realize how you did fundraising. How you make a pitch depends on who you're talking to, what do you want from them. We professionalized it in terms of creating a new pitch for each fund every year. We made sure we weren't always saying the same thing. We made sure that at the

start of every month we would send thank you letters to everyone who had donated the previous month to make sure that they knew that they had been supporting us. And we started recording donations more properly in our database. When we switched databases around 2012 our ability to record that on people's individual records became a lot better. So, now we can look at someone and say, okay, this person donates regularly to this, so let's make sure to reach back out to them. So, it was more about cleaning up a little bit and professionalizing and maybe not bothering people quite as often about supporting AFSA.

*Q: Development and fundraising look at both organizational donors and individuals. Was that also a part of your development work?*

SIGFÚSSON: It was a small part of it. The executive director at the time, Ian Houston, was really interested in doing that specific type of work. We would often talk about possible—I don't want to say targets because that seems like a very nefarious word—but possible donors, whether individuals or organizations or companies. And we would work on a pitch, and he would be the one who would go and make it, sometimes accompanied by the president if it was appropriate. If they were an active-duty person, then they can't really pitch that much. But he really took on the larger part of asking hey, would you like to give \$10,000 for this event or you're a retired Foreign Service person who's done very well with various board seats and such, maybe you want to consider either supporting AFSA right now or making a bequest or something. But that was mostly Ian. We talked about it and we came up with ideas and basic pitches, but he did the last few steps.

*Q: Now, a question about the internal organization of AFSA. As you are working into the website, public affairs, and development, how did AFSA change as an organization?*

SIGFÚSSON: It changed a lot. When I walked in here—I've said this before—it had a little bit of the feel of a mom-and-pop place. The building was older, on the verge of becoming a little dilapidated. There were mouse droppings on my desk pretty much every day and the staff was small. A lot of the things we do today didn't even exist. It was labor management, the Foreign Service Journal, scholarships, accounting and member services. That was what the organization did when I walked in. Everything else has happened afterwards. And even the departments that existed back then have expanded a lot in the interim because we're asked to do more because there are more opportunities and more options. So, we've grown into a lot of things that we didn't used to do.

Obviously, the decision to completely strip our building in 2009 and rebuild it was very consequential. That changed a lot because our space modernized immediately. Brighter, more open, clutter was gone, people had their own spaces, and it's just a more professional looking space. I think your professional surroundings have a lot to do with the way you feel about your work and the way you do your work, so I think it changed a lot. We're able to host nice events in our building now because we have a fully functional conference area on our first floor that we can now use for ourselves or rent out.

We created new departments, we have a professional policy issues department now, which did not exist before. Our congressional advocacy has expanded significantly. Our publications department is larger than it ever has been because it's working on e-books, it's working on regular books. The expanded mission of the Journal. Our labor management has probably doubled since I started. The communications and outreach function is completely new from when I started. That really did not exist when I first came in here in 2001 since Tom Switzer had just come on board. So, there are a lot of things that we do today that we did not do at all back then. We have forty staff members now, which I think may be a literal doubling of what it was when I came here.

*Q: One major development for AFSA funding came, I believe, with Tom Boyatt taking a second look at the entire financial portfolio and how the finances were managed. This is in the first decade of the 2000s. How did that affect the overall activities of AFSA?*

SIGFUSSON: I think I only realized the effect of that in the mid-2010s when that work became closer to the work that I was doing, and I saw the impact. I recall, I was very junior, I was over in the Reagan building for most of the 2000s, but I do remember people grumbling about Tom because he had a reputation as being quite tight-fisted. I mean, he held on to that money very religiously. He did not want to spend money that didn't have to be spent. He was never happy with any type of generous staff raises through the years. He tried to really rein that in. But obviously it worked. He ran a very fiscally conservative house for about ten years as treasurer. And it's because of him that we have, rather than having six months of reserves available in case of calamity, we have nine to ten months of that. Well beyond what is recommended for a non-profit. Much of what we have built on his ability to keep that all together and keep us on that track for about ten years.

And when Tom left the treasurer's chair our finances were in great shape. He'd gotten both the operational reserves and the scholarship fund to the point that they were essentially self-running at that point. The scholarship fund more so than the operational reserve, but the operational reserve was in fantastic shape and has been really ever since. I mean, it was so good that when we borrowed from the scholarship fund to fund the renovation of the building, we paid that loan off well ahead of time because we could. Which not many nonprofits can really say. And the fact that we weathered Covid as well as we did also really owe its thanks to the work that Tom did twenty years ago.

*Q: Before we get the changes wrought by COVID, you mentioned the value of bringing in interns. How did interns assist?*

SIGFUSSON: I loved doing the internship programs. We used to have up to eight or ten interns per semester. We always had plenty of people who wanted to work for us. They were really great kids from all over the world. We had a lot of international students. They bring a fresh perspective, they're excited. Just walking through your place of work on a regular basis with someone who's new is helpful because sometimes it makes you reconsider how you do things. A number of interns remained as permanent staff. We did hire some of them and then they move on to other things. But they've been a wonderful source of ready-to-go entry level staff. They always created their own community when

they were here. It was a really nice way of helping people find their footing professionally in a field they might be interested in. The work they did was always helpful and useful, and they supported a lot of the things we did. We would use all of them to help us with the award ceremonies and the plaque ceremonies and all that work, and they got the opportunity to go over to State and have interesting experiences. And we would organize briefings and meetings for them. Now, this has mostly gone away. COVID put a real spanner in the works on this. We've done some virtual interns, but honestly the DC law about minimum wage is really what killed the internship program for us. Because as much as we would love to have interns, we can't afford essentially five or six new full-time employees a year at minimum wage. I mean, I think it's a wonderful law and I completely support it, but it has made it very difficult for us to offer the robust internship program that we used to.

*Q: Were you able to replace some of that with virtual interns?*

SIGFÚSSON: We had some virtual interns through COVID. That really helped. It was a concept we borrowed from the virtual student Foreign Service internship program, which is a great idea. There are a lot of things that can be done remotely, and we did. But again, the salary law has also really done away with that for us.

*Q: Because you were working in the Reagan building and close to USAID, did you work individually with the AFSA vice-presidents for all the different foreign affairs agencies represented by AFSA? How did that work?*

SIGFÚSSON: I was located in the same office as the USAID vice president, so I worked with Bill Carter, I worked with Francisco Zamora. They were my day-to-day supervisors. I did not really interact beyond board meetings with the FCS (Foreign Commercial Service) or FAS (Foreign Agricultural Service) VPs at the time. I was really focused on the USAID labor management side.

As I've been working more with the board, these are the people I work with daily. The State VP is the one we tend to work with the most, as it's the largest agency. That person has traditionally led the labor management staff. The others we want to work with as well, obviously. They're all different. Some of them are very independent and do their own work, which is fine. After all, they're elected to make sure their constituency is taken care of. How they do it is entirely up to them. The USAID VP is generally someone who is better plugged into HQ than the FCS and FAS folks. It is the second largest active-duty constituency. And I have a soft spot for the USAID folks given my time in that office, so I'm always solicitous of what they need. We tend to say "State" in our communications, when we mean the Foreign Service, and Foreign Service officer when we mean the Foreign Service as a whole. So, I'm the guy who's always like no, change that. Because I remember being in the office and feeling that sometimes the writing was exclusionary, so let's change that. But I work with the entire board. Some people are more engaged than others, but certainly in this position it's my job to work with all of them.

*Q: Since you worked so closely with USAID, did that allow you to acquire skills or insights about how to do your job? Because of course USAID's role is so much program-oriented for developing countries?*

SIGFÚSSON: It's funny, we never really—inside AFSA—we don't really think about the individual missions of our agencies because we just look at the Foreign Service. We don't really care what agency you're in, you're a member of the Foreign Service, period. I think the USAID time has helped me because again, like I said, I'm less State-focused by nature because of that, and I think that's probably not a bad thing for someone who has a leadership role at AFSA. We're so often accused of being State and Foreign Service officer focused, so having someone who always pushes back on that I think is good. But that time also means that I understand the labor management side a lot better than most people at HQ may do. Because I've worked within the grievance system, I've worked on preparing submissions to the grievance board, I've been in meetings with HR (Human Resources), I've talked to people who are dealing with individual issues that they come to AFSA for. So, I know what they work on over there at the LM (labor management) office every day. Most of us have a basic understanding, but I understand the day-to-day operations of what they have to deal with. I think that has really stood me in good stead in this position because when I talk to them, they know what I know. They know that I worked on the grievances, they know that I understand the steps that they must take to go where they need to go with each case. I think having that background is helpful for someone in my position. Especially because those offices are physically separate from HQ, so they often feel like a separate fiefdom, but at least I feel that my experience working within the labor management world makes it easier for me to speak their language.

*Q: It sounds like you also acquired some understanding of the laws and regulations governing Foreign Service personnel, and whether there is parity with civilian and military counterparts. Was that helpful for you as well?*

SIGFÚSSON: It's obviously all useful. The Foreign Service Act is something that I basically absorbed into my being during my years at USAID because it's something we refer to constantly. Working on the submissions to the Foreign Service Grievance Board, I noticed that we kept referring to the same sort of U.S. codes and other laws, so I would look them up and say okay, now I understand what this means. A lot of this is buried somewhere inside my DNA. Again, it's useful to have that context. Even though this is nothing that I have to work on in my daily job here, but having that context means that I don't necessarily have to interrogate people on the work they're doing because I understand when they say I'm working on this I say, okay, I understand what that means. So, we don't have to waste time on you explaining it to me. I understand what you must do, I just hope you will come back and let me know when you have failed or succeeded. Ideally succeeded. Institutional understanding and memory are very useful in this position. We always say AFSA is a very unusual place. Even in the world of nonprofits we're unusual in being a professional association and a labor union that then has both a PAC and two separate 501(c)(3)s under it. It's a very uncommon construct. But having

the basic understanding of the legal regulatory framework that guides our world, I think at least for me has been exceptionally useful.

*Q: Along the same lines, do you interact with congressional staff given your fluency with legislative language and some of the most recent legislative history?*

SIGFÚSSON: I don't. Because I'm not a registered lobbyist, we decided early on to limit the number of registered lobbyists that AFSA has. I'm part of the conversations in our internal meetings, but I have great faith in our professional team. I think our director of advocacy right now, Kim Greenplate is the—we've had fantastic people in this job, but I think she is the very best we've ever had, and I completely trust her and her team to do what needs to be done on the Hill. She's very diligent about making sure that the AFSA president and the appropriate constituency VPs go up with her, depending on who they're talking to and what they're talking about. I'm interested in the congressional element, so I like being part of the conversations when we're planning. Funny enough, one of the things that I took over years ago and always work on myself is AFSA's ambassador tracker, which remains very popular. My niche congressional interest is the flow of confirmations and nominations. So, yeah, I have an interest in it, but it's not part of my daily work. And honestly, I avoid going up there as much as possible because I know I won't do as good of a job as Kim and her team can do.

*Q: I'm glad you mentioned the ambassador tracker because it does take us back for a moment to when AFSA was developing the request and the insistence that there be a public document that shows the suitability of either political appointees or career appointees for ambassadorships. Were you involved in that development?*

SIGFÚSSON: I was. That was when Bob Silverman was president. One of the things we decided to focus on—because there had been a slew of what we thought were absolutely terrible nominations of political ambassadors, all but one of whom were confirmed anyway—but we said listen, here's the law, look at the law, the Foreign Service Act again. A certificate of demonstrated competency must exist, must be provided to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, and we ran the campaign to have them made public on the State Department website. Which they did. I mean, you look at these things, they're not—it's a bit of a nothing burger, really. It's just a resume. Because of this resume, X is great for this job. Okay, whatever. They've satisfied the legal requirement of having one of these and they're posting it online, which is lovely for transparency. Didn't make a huge difference in the end, quite honestly, because if you read these, they're not useful at all. It's literally just a resume. But it was a good win to notch at the time because there were some (A) terrible candidates, and (B) tremendous delays in getting people confirmed by Congress. It was part of our effort to shine a light on this constant problem of endless political appointees and then why is Congress taking six to nine months to confirm career ambassadors. It was nonsensical in every way. It was good in terms of getting the media to pay attention to it, and honestly the press has done so ever since. Probably the number one or two thing we get media comments on is hey, what about this ambassadorship, why is it taking so long? So, that's been a sustained interest, which was a good outcome from that. But the certificates themselves are kind of bleh.

*Q: This example leads to a larger question. AFSA is both a professional organization that tries to develop the professional skills of Foreign Service officers consistent with the needs of the Service. But it is also a labor representation and advocacy group. Over the years you've been there, how do you see those two aspects as changing?*

SIGFÚSSON: I don't think it's changed very much. We are very much aware of our two-fold nature. We always look at, okay, this building (AFSA Headquarters at 2101 E St NW) is the professional association, and the LM (Labor Management) offices are the labor union operation. It's a very simplified way of putting it, but it's generally true. The only real change in this is how each president approaches the role. Some people come in with a greater interest in labor issues, some come in with less interest in labor issues, but a greater desire to focus on and strengthen the professional association side. It goes up and down. But overall, I think it's a good equilibrium. Obviously, I think the reason most people join AFSA when they're active duty is for the labor union side. When you get into retirement the labor union side diminishes somewhat because as you retire, you're not in the bargaining unit so we're not really your union, so you're essentially a member of the professional association. So, the idea is to have both sides be strong and useful for our members. They do it very differently, but we think both are important to have.

*Q: Does your work also cause you to have consultations or connections with the civil service labor representation, or the broader federal service representation?*

SIGFÚSSON: We try to work with AFGE (American Federation of Government Employees), our counterparts at State. That mostly goes through the State VP who is our primary contact with them, and the AFSA president always has regular meetings with the same list of counterparts. We have also worked with the Civil Service Association, which is an employee affiliation group at State, led by the wonderful and indefatigable Tommye Grant.

*Q: Talking about internal partnerships, a lot of communities of interest grew over time while you've been there. Have you interacted with them or is there something about their development and their interaction overall with AFSA that you think is consequential?*

SIGFÚSSON: We love them. I mean, we call them our sister organizations. We love working with them. We encourage them in every way we can, we participate everywhere we can. If we can provide financial assistance, we do. DACOR (Diplomatic and Consular Officers Retired), FSYF (Foreign Service Youth Foundation), AAD (American Academy of Diplomacy), ADST, we love working with these organizations. This is our natural affinity community. And if we can find common cause in any way we pretty much always accept. And obviously we work with them on a regular basis. As you know, our president sits on the ADST board, the AFSA president sits on the Diplomacy Center Foundation Board, we work with AAD very regularly, FSYF we support as much as we can. John Naland, our retiree VP, is president of FSYF. We work with them on the annual youth awards ceremony every year over at State. So, that's one place where we work with

them. AAFSW (Associates of the American Foreign Service Worldwide), anything we can to promote anything they're doing. Any new initiative or anything.

Whenever we can and are able to work with these organizations, we do. Because they often service parts of the Foreign Service community that we're not necessarily supposed to do. We would love to do more for EFMs (Eligible Family Members), but the agencies don't recognize AFSA as someone who speaks for them. They are not members of AFSA, they are not in a bargaining unit, so we are not able to—we can say, you really should do this, but we don't have recognized standing to advocate for that group of people. AAFSW can. Same with Foreign Service kids. We can say, you really should do this, but FSYP can go and say hey, this is our group of people, you need to do X, Y, and Z. So, wherever we can help and amplify we absolutely do. Having these communities around us is very useful because it creates a full net of the Foreign Service world. We've been here a hundred years and we have more money, we're sort of the nucleus, but having this support system has been extraordinarily useful and honestly there could be more, and we'd be okay with that. There are communities that probably still need representation and service that neither we nor the existing groups can provide. But we find this to be the most natural collaborators for the work that we do.

*Q: And I was also interested in the smaller communities of interest within the Foreign Service agencies, women's groups, African Americans, Asians, and so on. How has their growth affected AFSA from your point of view?*

SIGFÚSSON: It is completely positive. We often take our cue from what we should be working on from our members. And if there is a focused group of members that really looks after the needs of a specific group, that's a bigger voice to tell us we need to work on something. So, the AFSA president and State VP regularly meet with the heads of all the employer organizations, both at State and USAID and if they have some others in the agencies we do. The one thing we must remind them is they can't negotiate with State or the agencies on their own behalf, we must do that. So, we have to be looped in and that's generally been perfectly fine. But no, it's good because particularly when you don't come from a particular experience you may not necessarily think about it, it may not be top of mind when you're thinking about a certain topic. So, having those sort of—it's a person to tell you to think about things that you don't necessarily have in your mind. We can go back to them and say, hey, State's come to us with this, what do you think? I don't know if you know about the assignments restrictions issue that we keep working on. That was brought to us and has been pushed almost exclusively by the Asian American group because it affects them most of all. Anything to do with the diplomatic accreditation of same-sex spouses, that's GLIFAA. Obviously, we know about these things, but having someone that reminds us and is able to distill the issue into something that we can work on and then push is nothing but helpful.

*Q: Great. As you're beginning then to move up to the executive director position, is there anything I've missed in terms of the skills and talents you acquired for that position?*



SIGFÚSSON: I think I benefited from having touched so many aspects of AFSA's work: the labor management, the outreach, communications, fundraising. I work with the Journal a lot. I think it's helped. I think having that experience can only help a person who takes on this role. I really do think someone coming in cold into this position just due to the unusual nature of AFSA, I think they're at a disadvantage. We've had wonderful people in this role who came from outside, like Susan Reardon, who was executive director when I came in. She is an amazing person who did fantastic work for this organization. She didn't have a Foreign Service background or AFSA background. But I think it's only done me a favor having now been in this role for a while.

So, my length of tenure with AFSA, and the variety of activities I engaged in were sufficient for AFSA management to hire me. But the process of hiring was not typical. My predecessor died unexpectedly. The board asked me to take on the role on an emergency basis until they were able to figure out what they wanted to do. That was in August 2019. I wasn't privy to the internal conversations on the board. This occurred just as Eric Rubin's first board was coming in, literally the first month of his arrival. Eventually, I think, the board saw that I was already functioning in the job, it seemed to be working well, everybody knew me, the staff was comfortable with me, so they voted and that was the outcome. In November 2019 I took on the position permanently.

*Q: Okay. The board also establishes your work requirements. Did those change or were they in some way reorganized as you were coming in?*

SIGFÚSSON: They changed the title from—my predecessor had been chief operating officer, which was a departure from his predecessor, Ian Houston, who was executive director. They decided to revert to the executive director title. I think they wanted to de-emphasize the operating part because it felt sort of bureaucratic—someone who's mired in numbers and spreadsheets all day. They wanted to indicate that this person was supposed to work across all departments and work with everyone. So, that was one change they made. I never saw my predecessor's specific work requirements because I didn't feel that they were necessarily useful for me. Once I realized that this was something that I might be put into permanently I had my own ideas and I wanted to go from there. I had some conversations with Eric Rubin, the incoming president, and some board members about my ideas and what I would like to focus on to begin with. And that got worked into my first year, so I had five or six specific work objectives for that first full year, 2020. It seemed to have worked out. We've been able to work on a lot of internal issues in AFSA, change things a lot. I hope for the better. It has been very collaborative in terms of what I would like to do and what they want to see happen. It's been a good mix of that.

*Q: From the time you started as executive director—because we move very quickly from 2019 into Covid—did the board reallocate portfolios for you? In essence, did they say, "Okay, you have all this background, we're going to give you X portfolio or Y portfolio?"*

SIGFÚSSON: What I asked for was the leeway to really look at the way we did things internally: our employment policies, hiring policies. Things that I and a lot of people who

have been here for a long time—when you start on the ground, you spend a lot of your career saying this is terrible, if I ever get to change it I will. And those were some of the things that I wanted to do. A lot of it was focused on how we do things internally and the various policies and procedures we have. That was what I asked for to begin with. That was what I really wanted to do first. And thankfully that worked. It's the type of work that doesn't get interrupted by us sitting at home. I could still work on that even during Covid. And that's what I spent my first year working on. With good help from several colleagues. But that was exciting. It's nice to see changes happening quickly and generally I think people have been pleased with them. Obviously, whatever the board priorities are become part of my job and what I push, but I would really like to take this and make it mine. And that was really interesting.

*Q: Have you been satisfied with outcomes in that area, recognizing the limitations placed on you by Covid?*

SIGFÚSSON: Yeah. I think we did a lot of things right. My joke is that I'm trying to slowly turn AFSA into a small European state because that is my background. But I really tried to look at things that are not costly to AFSA but have a huge impact on morale, satisfaction, retention, and our ability to hire. What makes AFSA a good place to come to and then stay with. That first year we immediately had to think about what telework would look like. Because we hadn't offered telework at AFSA, people just came to work, and they went home. That happened immediately. We had to get the technology ready, get more computers immediately, which we were lucky to do before the supply chains went to hell and back. The first big tackle was the telework. And we spent a couple years fine-tuning that, and obviously we had to rework that once we started coming back to work, but the legacy of that is we have an actual telework policy in place, it's reviewed once a year, it's approved by the supervisory chain. We know where everybody is supposed to be every day. And people have told me that if they still had to commute every day post-Covid, they might not have stayed. Because the idea of going back to spending four to eight hours commuting every week is something they never want to do again. Having the opportunity to work from home two to three days a week I think has changed the way a lot of people approach this. And that's something that was already on my list, but it jumped up the list when Covid happened, so that was the first thing we really took on.

We did a wholesale review of the employee handbook as well and changed a lot of policies. The most recent thing we did just this year is we doubled our parental leave from four to eight weeks. Which is great because we have three employees taking that leave right now. It was immediately useful to 10% of the staff, which is wonderful. And it's things like that that we're trying to do. We have a diversity and inclusion clause in our handbook and our hiring practices now for the first time. We are better at keeping statistics on our DEIA (Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Accessibility) metrics. It's these types of internal things that we're really doing our best to make work not just for our staff but for our members as well.

*Q: We've already begun a discussion of what happened with Covid. Why don't we start with what AFSA and your initial reaction was when the State Department decided to reduce the staff presence in its buildings because of Covid restrictions?*

SIGFÚSSON: I think we actually anticipated it. It so happens I have a very good friend who works in global health, and she called me and said listen, this is coming. I'm looking at the numbers, you're in DC, this will get to DC on March 16. So, I talked to Eric, and he said, "Alright, let's close the office for a couple of weeks. Friday, March 13, will be the last day in the office. After that, people will work from home for two weeks. Let's see what happens."

So that's what we did. We shut everything down on March 13. March 16 was the first work from home day and my friend was exactly right. That's exactly when Covid hit DC for real. We quickly realized that we had to extend the initial period of telework, and we kept extending and we kept extending. We ended up being away for a year and a half, all said and done. We didn't really open properly until after Labor Day 2021. During that time, we'd do socially distanced masked drop-offs and handoffs of laptops and technology that people needed. But we slipped into telework quickly. This building was empty for months on end. I came in every two weeks to sign checks because we still do that here for some of our payments. So, people were coming intermittently for very basic required work, but we disappeared into telework pretty fast.

*Q: Since you are now relying so much on telework, are there concerns in AFSA about cybersecurity?*

SIGFÚSSON: There are concerns about cybersecurity. This is one of the things we have had to address. Probably 2021 is when we really took a good look at cybersecurity. We had someone do a penetration test to see how that might go, and it was pretty positive. There were weaknesses because we're a non-profit and don't really expect people to be super interested in what we have in our files. We have our membership database, which thankfully is protected by the people who own and run that software, so that's a separate layer of security. But we did decide to seek cybersecurity insurance. To get that, we had to pass several tests to ensure that we were already secure enough that our insurance company was willing to do business with us. We did in fact pass those tests and we have the insurance today. So, yes, we realized pretty early on that this was definitely a door that someone would possibly want to open and walk through at some point, so we tried to get ahead of that.

*Q: Now, speaking of both the cybersecurity and working online, do you in your executive director position, or does AFSA in general, have more contact with the American Foreign Service Protective Association, the health insurer?*

SIGFÚSSON: Sure. AFSPA is another part of that Foreign Service community firmament. We used to be the same organization back in the day. We have a regular conversation with them. We are often confused with one another. I have lunch with Paula Jakub and Kyle Longton, the leaders over there, on a regular basis. The AFSA president

and Paula meet on a regular basis. She presents for us. We meet with them a lot. But thankfully AFSA got out of the insurance business completely about twelve years ago and left that world to others who are better equipped to handle it, mostly obviously including AFSPA.

*Q: I'm almost sorry to ask this, but was there anything about the way AFSA functions that was lost due to Covid and the permanency of telework?*

SIGFÚSSON: It's a good question to ask. That has always been the number one concern that everyone cited. People just missed the community. A lot of us have worked here for a long time. We know each other very well. We're very used to being around one another. The people I felt worst for were the people we had hired right before Covid and the couple of people we hired during Covid because they never had that community. And it turns out those are the people who have already left. Possibly because they never had that community. But yes, that's what we missed. I think the hardest part for us was the loss of the in-person lunches for the incoming classes. Obviously, member dues are our number one income stream and having those people in here for lunch was always good. Our joke was always we lock the door and hand them a form. (They aren't locked!) But the yield from in-person lunches was always very high. That's why we have 80% of the active-duty Foreign Service that signs up for AFSA. That dropped a lot during the virtual classes. We dropped down to between 55 and 60%. And obviously in the long-term, if we don't recoup that 20% that usually joins—we've diligently pursued them and obviously been able to sign a lot of them up in the intervening period—but if you never get them back that's a loss of income that reverberates throughout those people's entire career plus retirement. That's income we don't get. So, that was the biggest effect.

Everything else went on as usual. The magazine came out every month, we had all our board meetings and committee meetings, scholarships were given, awards were given. We didn't have the ceremonies, but we had awards. We moved our events online. The only thing that really didn't happen anymore was in-person events. We used to always do our happy hours and obviously the lunches for the classes. That's the only thing that really stopped. Everything else carried on as scheduled. But the community and the ability to convince people that AFSA is a great value proposition in-person, those were the two big misses.

*Q: So, we're into the last few years now. You've become executive director. Eric Rubin is the president. Aside from the changes due to Covid, how did focus and top goals change?*

SIGFÚSSON: Eric came in. He was recruited by Barbara Stephenson, his predecessor. So, it was a smooth handoff. I really enjoyed working with both of them, but they're very different people.

I would say that Eric's first six months were a fairly straight-line continuation of what Barbara had been working on. Because you're getting familiar with AFSA, and then you start developing oh, this is interesting, I want to do this and this. The board always had a different personality every time they come in. And a good part of our work is affected by

that. Some of the work AFSA does is completely independent of the board. Our member services happen no matter what, our labor management services happen no matter what. We give scholarships, awards, we do the plaques. So, a lot of work happens really no matter who is in the driver's seat.

But sure, there's a different focus on how we want to deal with management, how do we talk to Congress, what is our public posture in terms of media and the public. Those are the aspects that change the most. Since I'm still wearing the director of communications hat, the public posture thing is part of what I do. Eric, being a former journalist, understands that world. He's very comfortable dealing with media. So, it's been quite easy to work with him on the media front. He is always ready to talk to media. He knows the environment.

I'd say the biggest change is in the work of our advocacy and professional policy issue folks. We focus on the Board's plans, what their agenda is, that's generally the folks that deal with the most. That's how we interact with our members and management and that's how we interact with Congress. It does influence them. Obviously, the board personalities can influence the way I do my work. I work with the treasurer very much, so who's in that role matters to me because the approach of how we do the budgeting and how we do our financials and investments and all that, that affects my work. But it is less than you might think. I've only really had one real transition in terms of president to president in this role. I'm about to have another. But so far, it's not been disruptive to the work that I need to do.

*Q: Since you've been involved with AFSA's communications, have you developed social media platforms and strategy?*

SIGFÚSSON: Yeah. It's been interesting. We started—I started, I should say really because there was no one else in the department except for me and Tom Switzer at the time—I started our Facebook page. We joined Twitter, I want to say, in 2011, 2012. We joined LinkedIn maybe three years ago. We keep figuring out new ways to communicate with people. We do look at platforms and consider what makes sense for us. Where do we need to be? Where can we find our members most effectively? When we looked at Instagram ten years ago, we found that the average user profile did not match our target audience. By last year, Instagram's demographic had changed and become more favorable to our users, so we launched on it. In fact, we're discovering that our members are on Instagram more than they are on Facebook. So, we're always trying to figure out where do we find our members, how do we talk to them, and also where do we find people who are not our members and where do we talk to them?

Each one of our social media channels has a different mix of members versus non-members, so that really does modulate the voice we use on each of them. Is it informative in terms of people who are not our members, or can we talk in shorthand because we're talking to the quote unquote family? And yes, we've also changed the platforms we use to send messages to the field. We used to have a very basic system of "press enter and blast out to everybody whether it's relevant to them or not." Now we're

able to segment our audiences a lot better. We're able to say okay, we want to talk to FS-2s in the Foreign Agricultural Service. And we can do that if we want to because we have that information, and our communications platform interacts with our membership database. This is a significant development because if you're constantly blasting everything to everyone, people tune you out. So, our hope has been to do more relevant, targeted communication to the people that need to see that information and not bother those who do not need to see it.

*Q: A half-serious question. Are you on TikTok?*

SIGFÚSSON: We are not on TikTok. We probably won't be because it looks like the government may ban it on government phones. If that happens we definitely don't have to be there. But for us, TikTok, looking at the demographic, it is sort of where Instagram was ten years ago. I think a fifteen-year-old is the average user, but I'm assuming a lot of kids lie and it's probably younger than that. I certainly know that my eight- and eleven-year-old nieces and nephews are on TikTok, so I don't see that as a place we have to be. I also struggle to see what content we would put on TikTok.

*Q: Sure.*

SIGFÚSSON: I don't think that a labor union is supposed to be that "fun."

*Q: The other thing about some of these other platforms is Instagram has also become a location for marketing.*

SIGFÚSSON: Sure.

*Q: Does AFSA conduct marketing through Instagram?*

SIGFÚSSON: Not yet. We're still in what we're calling our soft opening on Instagram. We've been there for six weeks. We're growing our audience, we don't want to spend too much time on creating content because Instagram content takes way more time than content for the other platforms, which is one of the reasons we've been so slow because where do we find the resources to create this content? So, we're building the membership there until we have a critical mass and then we'll do more. But I think there's a lot of options that we will take advantage of. In terms of marketing, there's membership obviously we can market, there's the Foreign Service Journal, there's the books, we have a few knick knacks that we sell, but it's one of those things that we look at and say okay, what will we do here? We always make sure we don't do it just to do it, we have to have a point of doing it, and if we don't see the point yet, let's not do it yet. Like Instagram, we didn't see a point until last year, we thought the demographic has changed, we should probably be on Instagram. So, it's something we'll look at when the time comes.

*Q: This is a lot of the outreach. How has in-reach changed? You mentioned not blasting emails to everyone, but what are the other things that have changed in the way the*

*members talk to you and say, here's what we need from you, maybe on a regular basis or periodically so that we know what you're doing?*

SIGFÚSSON: Sure. We hear a lot from our members, which is great because we want to. Sometimes we've screwed up and we need to fix something, or people say hey, do you know this is happening? What's going on? Or you haven't said anything about this, do you know this is happening? And all of that is helpful. But the way we are able to engage with membership has changed a lot. The professional policy issues department, which really only started in about 2016, is in charge of a lot of the in-reach and the soliciting of information from our membership. All of the surveys are run by that department. We do a lot of surveys to take the temperature of membership on a lot of things. Just in the last couple of months we've done a survey on mental health needs, and also pets because that's constantly an issue in the Foreign Service. So, that's how we gather data and information from our membership on where we need to focus.

We also do town halls where the president meets virtually and all AFSA members are invited. They chat, he talks about what we're working on, he can ask questions. It's a good interaction point. Before Covid, when Barbara Stephenson was president, we actually used to do what we called "structured conversations" where we would invite a really targeted group. For example, we invite FS-1 to FS-3 DS (Diplomatic Security) agents. Ten of them come to lunch. So, we would send a message to that cohort and the first ten people to sign up could come to lunch. And we hear from them specifically what are their specific concerns.

We're able to actually engage with people, draw out more information, get their contact, talk to them later. So, that's how we evolved from a simple email blast to a much more targeted and effective communication method with our members. We can even go down to an individual level like, "Oh, we see you live in Wisconsin. Would you be interested in helping us pass this driver's license law for the Foreign Service in Wisconsin by writing to your representatives in Wisconsin?" That's how we try to engage our members, down to that level if need be.

*Q: Fascinating. PPI (Professional Policy Issues) is a new thing in AFSA. How did it develop and what is it doing now?*

SIGFÚSSON: This was a Barbara Stephenson idea. It started as a data crunching shop. Taking all the disparate points of facts that stream out of State and the various agencies and essentially distilling them into human language. And seeing okay, based on this data, here are deficiencies, here are problems, there's too much of this, there's too little of this, where did this go, why isn't this here. That was the first year and a half of PPI. But it's evolved into the think tank of AFSA. That's where the ideas go. And we often think about PPI and advocacy as the same department because it all flows so easily across the cubicle walls outside my office. I call it the think tank. It's where we develop ideas. If AFSA wrote white papers, that's where they would come from. They take policy issues, they think about them, they look at what can we do, who do we talk to, how do we push this forward. We're seeing a critical mass of comments from members on X, what is the

correct course of action? Who is the correct point of contact at State to push this forward, to fix this? That's where the workforce portfolio really lives. They are the people focused on the workforce, the future of the workforce, the problems of the workforce, how we can make things better basically. Taking pain points and getting rid of them.

*Q: We've gone into Covid and we've gotten out of Covid with all of the changes that required. Have I overlooked something in your work that you would like to discuss?*

SIGFÚSSON: I think one of the things that we're very happy with is the fact that we got through Covid with our finances in good shape, which most non-profits did not. None of the staff that we had before Covid left during Covid. People came back, people seemed to be happy to be back at work. We've designated one day a week when everybody is in, which is Wednesday, so everybody gets to see each other. You know that everybody is here on a Wednesday, so that's nice. Having flexibility is helpful, and we've really come out of Covid with a package of employee policies that are much friendlier to employees but have not really cost AFSA money. It's a delicate balance. We weren't really looking to change things that would put AFSA in the hole in any of this, we just tried to find common sense things that made post-Covid life easier. We started thinking about post-Covid very early on. In fact, the post-Covid AFSA folder in my inbox started in April of 2020. I said listen, at some point this will be over, and we'll go back to the office. What do we need to do? What do we need to be aware of? What needs to change? What can we do when this is over? And people had ideas and we've tried to implement a lot of those ideas. Everything from air purifiers to replacing our HVAC systems so it has better filters to FMLA (Family and Medical Leave Act) policies in effect. I mean, we've really tried to be responsive to what people thought a post-Covid workplace needed to look like. And the board has been highly receptive to these ideas. We've made two major revisions to the employee handbook. We've formalized a lot of things that we didn't really have before. I think internally we're on a solid footing in terms of people's expectations being responded to and people know what to expect. We've talked this through and here's the policy, we anticipated this. So, you know what to expect if you have this situation X, Y, or Z. And generally it is very favorable towards employees. This is a very employee-friendly organization. The handbook is explicit in terms of rights and responsibilities, and there are a lot of rights.

*Q: Sure. As we reach the end of the interview, are there particular anecdotes or moments that stand out in your mind that show how AFSA can adapt to an emergency or reach an important milestone?*

SIGFÚSSON: I think Covid was probably the biggest black swan we've seen in a while, and I think we weathered it shockingly well. If you had asked me to guess beforehand how this would work out, I would not have been as optimistic as the reality turned out to be. I think another moment is the election of Donald Trump. All of our plans, our advocacy plans, our outreach plans, everything was based on Hillary Clinton winning that election, based on the polls. So, we had to throw everything out the next day and we had to pivot very quickly and very hard in essentially everything that we do. And we did. You know, we had to then re-pivot because things were not quite normal. But it only took us



about a week, and we had a solid plan for how to—okay, this a completely new world from what we expected, our advocacy has to change, the way we deal with management has to change, our public posturing has to change for a multitude of reasons. And within about a week we had a very solid footing on how to do that, which was interesting because we spent a long time working on those plans. I mean, we had been working with the board and everything came out of that and it was very comprehensive, and it was useless.

*Q: Then looking ahead from where you are now, what are the initiatives AFSA is looking to take on that it hasn't done yet?*

SIGFÚSSON: Obviously a lot of that is board driven. I suspect we'll see a lot of new things when the new board starts in July. Looks like it'll be—based on the candidates—looks like it will be a 50-50 board, so 50% people who have been on the board previously and 50% new people. So, there will be an infusion of new ideas and new thinking. A new president. So, there will be a change. What that is I don't know. We're often responding to outside events in terms of our posturing and planning and advocacy, so we'll see what happens. Internally we're just going to try to keep working on our internal policies. We're not quite done. We've done very well, but there are a few more things that I would like to work on that we haven't quite gotten to yet. Hopefully next year we can match the federal parental leave up to twelve weeks, that's something I would love to drive towards because it's awkward for us as a union not to offer the same benefit that our members have. And I suspect that that it will not be a problem because the board has been very receptive. But I really do want to keep looking at how we do things. And one of my least favorite sayings is oh, it's because we've always done it that way. I hate when people say that. It's the worst reason to do anything. So, I am very much open to new ways of thinking about how we have done things and how we approach being an employer. I think, like I said, this new world post-Covid plus the new generation of people coming in, there are different expectations of a workplace, and I would like to be ahead of the curve rather than following it. So, we do spend quite a good deal of time talking about okay, let's talk to our young staff, what do they expect? Employees who were born as late as 2002. But the way they look at work is very different from someone like me or someone who is twenty years older than me looks at work. So, we want to be able to rise to that occasion because I think this may be the largest shift in the working world that we'll see in our lifetime, and I think that it would be very good for AFSA to not be a laggard.

*Q: Are there any concluding thoughts you'd like to share?*

SIGFÚSSON: The one thing I really haven't been able to convey is that I think I got lucky because my time at AFSA has coincided with a generational change in the Foreign Service leadership. But I was lucky enough to meet all the people I've met. Tom Boyatt, Bill Harrop, Tex Harris, of course, Ruth Davis, Hank Cohen. All these folks are people that I've worked with during my AFSA time, and some a lot more than others. Tom was on the board forever, Tex basically lived here. So, I think I benefited greatly from being able to interact with them and get to know them well. It's one of those things you don't

appreciate until later in your career. When you're twenty you may look askance at these "olds" who just keep hanging around. But there's a lot of history and they were never afraid to impart that history and warn people about making mistakes that they had seen before. And I think their actions left an organization that eventually does as well as it does today. In terms of strong financials, in terms of membership, that's based on their work. And having the ability to hang out with those folks and just chat and hear Argentina stories from Tex Harris and Tom Boyatt's many fights with management and how his experience from the hijacking was nothing compared to fighting with management. It's interesting to hear those stories. They came from a very different world, but their perspective has been really helpful to understand how this place has changed. It's gone from a conference room with a bunch of white men to what it is today – a large and diverse organization. It's pretty impressive in fifty years as a union to see that much change.

*Q: That's a perfect way to end. I want to thank you on behalf of ADST and AFSA for helping us see, from the perspective of a long-time AFSA employee, how the organization and its membership have developed during historic changes in U.S. foreign policy.*

END OF INTERVIEW