

The Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training
Foreign Affairs Oral History Program
Fulbright Stories Project

MARY ANN STANTON

*Interviewed by: Fran Leskovar
Initial interview date: October 25, 2025
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INTERVIEW

Q: All right, today is October 25, 2025 and this is a Fulbright interview. Can you say your name?

STANTON: My name is Mary Ann Stanton.

Q: Perfect. Can you tell me a little bit about yourself? Where did you grow up?

STANTON: I grew up in Edina, Minnesota, which, at that time, was a new suburb south of Minneapolis. My parents built a house there because the school district was highly rated. My father had to drive an hour to his office in Wisconsin so we could have an excellent education.

Q: Where did you go to college?

STANTON: I went to the University of Colorado in Boulder during the disruptive times of the late sixties and early seventies. Part of the reason I selected the U of Colorado was its strong study abroad program. My French teacher in high school told us stories about her year living in France, encouraged us to speak the language, and inspired me to have a similar experience. My junior year of college I went to Bordeaux, France for a year. That was my first international experience. My few family trips were within the United States.

Q: And how did you hear about Fulbright?

STANTON: I first heard about Fulbright in 1972 when I was teaching in Australia from another American who was teaching at the same school in Warragul, Victoria. He was on a Fulbright grant. In 2008, when my daughters were grown up, I saw an ad in the teacher union newspaper that said, "teach abroad." It was a teacher exchange with Fulbright. Since India was one of the locations for an exchange, I applied. I love being in different cultures. I am very curious about other cultures, and I'm really concerned about world peace. I believe living in different cultures and learning about other people promotes peace.

Q: Wow, so what was your project?

STANTON: On my Fulbright Teacher Exchange grant, I taught English to grades 10 and 11 at a public school (what Americans would call a private school), and my exchange teacher taught my classes at a public school in a first-ring suburb of Minneapolis, Minnesota. She taught 10th grade English and a basic English class to immigrant students.

Q: Oh, wow. So what did you learn about, you know, the world, and what did you learn about you know, America through that process of living abroad and teaching abroad as part of the program?

STANTON: I learned that Indian people are very warm, welcoming, and caring. I was invited to several events and meals and treated like I was a member of their community. I learned Indians are interested in and fascinated with America. I had my picture taken by several people just because I was a white American. I learned that the American way of living is not the only way, that other ways exist to accomplish the same goals. I realized how cemented the American way of organizing schools and teaching was ingrained in me. But I also learned that there's a lot of similarities among people. We value education; we love our families and friends, and we help other people.

Q: So what does Fulbright mean to you? What is sort of a meaning that whenever you hear the word Fulbright now that you live through it. What does it mean?

STANTON: "Fulbright" is a good feeling that makes world peace possible. It means that there are people in the world, the entire world, that understand that person to person, people to people connections break all the negative stereotypes and all the misinformation that has been spread. Fulbright means the human connection is universal and very meaningful. It doesn't matter what language you speak or where you live or what religion you are. We are all people with similar values who can live in harmony together.

Q: Do you think that Fulbright matters for American diplomacy and sort of our interests abroad, but also our relations with the world? How do you think that your Fulbright experience contributed to all of that?

STANTON: I think that the Indians that met me and got to know me realize that I don't necessarily fulfill negative stereotypes of Americans. I don't necessarily like some of the decisions that the government makes, and there's a difference between the individual and the structure and decisions of the government. I enjoyed spending time with them, learning about their country and culture. They appreciated my curiosity and enjoyment while living in India.

Q: What are some of the lessons learned from this whole process that you would like to share with the future generations that are considering applying for programs such as Fulbright?

STANTON: We gain a deep understanding of other people when we experience living in their country and being part of their culture. If someone from another country says or does something that you find offensive, it is important to know what they're doing or saying is the way that their culture does things, and it is not intended to be offensive. We had some Indian neighbors and the woman would always boast about what a good cook she was, and the husband would always boast about this, that and the other thing. That's their culture. They don't perceive it as boasting. We do only because we're American and our culture thinks boasting about accomplishments is not appropriate. Also, what you consider normal, might not be considered normal by others who are not Americans, and they might find it offensive. So, rather than being put off by something said or done, to just realize that it might not be meant to be interpreted that way.

One of the things I really gained from my Fulbright was a deep empathy and understanding about how difficult it can be to live in another culture. The smallest thing, like telling the bus driver to stop is not necessarily going to be the way that you do it at home, and you may not know how to communicate that correctly to that bus driver. It's an uncomfortable feeling, and you don't know where you are when you finally get let off. You feel stupid and you feel awkward. Immigrants have experiences like that in the United States, and I am sensitive to that. They may not know the language and do not necessarily know how to navigate their surroundings. They are like a fish out of water. I try to help them. We had some neighbors from France, and since I lived there, I knew how their school system worked. The parents didn't understand homecoming, which their daughter wanted to attend. They didn't understand some of the other celebrations from school, student parent conferences, and the emphasis on after-school activities. I'm sure coming home from school at three o'clock was a big shock for them because their schools go until like five or so in the evening. I had a different perception and connection with them because I knew what their former experience had been.

Then we had new neighbors, and the mother would come to visit for a month and to be with her daughter. The mother didn't speak much English at all, and I just reached out, and we spent time together. I took her to places because visiting her daughter meant being isolated and away from her community. That is lonely. I had heard stories about parents who had come to visit their adult children and families from other countries because the new family in America wanted them there, but they were lonely, so they would go back home. I've learned from that.

Q: Is there anything else you would like to share?

STANTON: In terms of diplomacy, I remember being in Rothenburg ob den Tauber, Germany, a quaint and unique medieval town encircled with city walls you can walk on. During WWII an order was given to a high level US military official to bomb the city, but he didn't do it because his family had a picture on the wall of Rothenburg, and he remembered how much he enjoyed looking at that picture. This officer had a personal connection to the town and did not want to destroy it. To me, that story tells me about how if you know a place, you know the people, you don't want to make them suffer. You

don't want to destroy them. You don't want to be part of any of those decisions that come through the government for whatever reason.

End of interview