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PAUL WEISENFELD

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INTERVIEW

Q: This is Carol Peasley, it is February 16, 2022, and this is interview number one with Paul Weisenfeld. Paul, I'm really pleased to have the chance to talk with you today. If I could start with asking you to talk a little bit about your early background, where you were born, where you grew up and a little bit about your family before we go off into your education.

Childhood, Family, Education, and Early Background

WEISENFELD: Happy to Carol and thank you for this opportunity. It's a pleasure to have this conversation with you. I was born in Brooklyn, New York on October 17, 1963. I was born to a mother who was a West Indian immigrant and a father who was first-generation born in the United States. My father's family came from Eastern Europe. His mother was from Lithuania and his father was from Poland, and my mother's family came from Trinidad and Tobago. I was born, and then my brothers and sisters except for my youngest were all born, in Brooklyn. Then, when I was very young, I think about six years old, we moved out to Queens. We often joke that the neighborhood Park Slope that I was born in was not a very nice neighborhood at the time, and my parents moved to Queens for a more upscale life, but they should have stayed in Park Slope and bought a brownstone and we'd all be in a financially better situation today.

Q: Could never predict those things.

WEISENFELD: Couldn't have predicted the way real estate markets did move, right? I grew up mostly in Queens from the time I was about six years old. The other aspect of my parents fits into a couple of aspects that are interesting. My father's family was Jewish, and his parents emigrated to the US between World War One and World War Two. His mother's family had lived in what was part of the Russian Empire, before the Soviet Union started, and they were able to move around the Soviet empire. Some of her family went to Finland, and then, when Finland became independent, they were the lucky ones who were no longer part of the heart of the Russian Empire/Soviet Union. So, my father still has some family in Finland and his mother went to Lithuania, which at one point became independent much later, and I'm not really sure how she was able to leave Lithuania when it was still under Russian/Soviet kind-of rule and emigrate to the United States.

So, my father was born in the US, but he's the only child of his family. My mother, who is from the Caribbean as I said, has a large family in the United States and Canada and the Caribbean, so I have cousins. We grew up much, much more aware of my mother's side

of the family, also because both of my father's parents died when I was quite young. The neighborhood we grew up in Queens, at the time we moved in, was a predominantly white neighborhood. I understand I was young, so I wasn't really aware of that, but in the late '60s, early '70s, lots of major urban centers in the United States, including New York, went through big, demographic, racial shifts. So, by the time I was in sixth grade, Junior High school, the neighborhood was predominantly a black neighborhood. I had friends from early on, who were white, who moved out as part of white flight, and we went through some really difficult times at that point. The largest desegregation lawsuit for schools in New York City, was launched by my mother and my mother was the named plaintiff in the lawsuit. We were in school at the time. I was in junior high school, moving to high school. I was one of five. Some of us actually went to segregated schools in New York City because our neighborhood became predominantly a black neighborhood, and the next town over in Queens, Rosedale, was predominantly white. We used to share the same junior high school and high school, and the community in Rosedale decided that they were going to build a separate school, an annex school, for only their kids to go to, so it effectively segregated the high school and the junior high school, and that resulted in this desegregation lawsuit that was eventually won and closed the annex. But, during the time, it was kind of a pivotal moment for me, both in terms of being proud of my mother and being ashamed of how I felt, because we were thrust into the limelight in the community, and as someone who was going from junior high school to high school, I thought, "why do we have to do this? Why do we have to be involved in this? Why can't you let other people do this?" Of course, now as an adult, like I said, I have a feeling of shame about how I reacted to that, at the time. In fact, people would call our house and make threats, and we would get threatened on the street if we walked into the neighboring town, because people knew we were associated with this. So, it wasn't comfortable as a kid, but it was something in hindsight, that was pretty incredible that we were, at least my mother was, involved in, and I can't take any credit for any of this. At the end of the day, you know, the challenges of desegregation in the United States, I don't know what it accomplishes, we closed an annex, but the neighborhoods continued to go through white flight, so all of the surrounding neighborhoods are now predominantly black, and all of those schools are predominantly black in that part of Queens, so, 30-40 years later, it's hard to see what it amounted to, in terms of addressing deep racial issues in the United States.

Q: What was your father doing during this period? I assume he was fully supportive of your mother's efforts on this?

WEISENFELD: Yeah, so my father was absolutely fully supportive. So, they got married I think in 1952 or 1953. My sister was born in 1959, my older sister. They were a mixed-race couple; my mother, being from Trinidad, is much, well not everyone from Trinidad, but she's much darker skinned than I am. Being a mixed-race couple in the early to mid 1950s, in the United States was, obviously, not comfortable, even in New York, but then my father was drafted. During the war, he never ended up getting assigned to Korea overseas. He just ended up in bases in the US, but he served in Texas and in New Mexico, and they talk, I don't want to tell their story, but they have lots of horrible stories about things they experienced traveling back and forth between New York and Texas, and

also what they experienced living in Texas and New Mexico at the time, so it was tough, and my father was very, very supportive. In fact, he loves telling, I said I don't want to tell their story, but he loves telling the story that "I couldn't find a place to live in El Paso", and he wrote a letter to the city, arguing that the segregation rules were unfair. I don't remember the language he used, but he still has the letter and he opposed the segregation statutes in El Paso, and his commanding officer called him in and told him "we are guests of the state of Texas in the city of El Paso and you can't offend them, so you're being reassigned." So, they were sent to Albuquerque, New Mexico instead, where it was going to be a little more comfortable for them to live. He was very supportive, and he was out there protesting at the time.

Q: Wow, I knew none of this, your history. I wished I'd asked years ago. No, that is fascinating, and they were really brave people.

WEISENFELD: I'm talking about it because it absolutely, years later, affected my thinking about what I wanted to do with my career.

Q: Yes, absolutely. No, I can see that, and certainly your interest in the law, I suspect, was very much prompted by your mother's actions. What did your dad do? When he was working, with you living in Queens, was he working there, or in the city?

WEISENFELD: When he got out of the army, he took the civil service exam and joined the Civil Service and spent his whole career working for the Social Security Administration.

Q: Ah, okay. Good.

WEISENFELD: My mother, when we were very young, was not working, and then started working as — I think it was, I won't know the year, I would guess the early '70s, and back then, you know, job opportunities for women, she didn't have a college degree. For women who didn't have a college degree, basically, there was being a secretary. So, she started working with a secretary for a nonprofit, International Student Exchange organization. She was there for 20-30 years, I should know — she ended up rising up to an executive level. It was a small NGO, you know, 20 people, but she ended up being one of the senior managers in the organization and managing student exchange programs all around the world. Not Asia for some reason, but she did a lot of work in Latin America and the Middle East and traveled overseas and placed groups of students both ways.

Q: Yes, this picture of your career is getting clearer. No, that is, that's great. When you talked about the schools really remaining segregated just because of the borders. So, you graduated from high school in Queens?

WEISENFELD: I attended and graduated from Springfield Gardens high school in Queens, which no longer exists. I am not going to be able to describe it precisely, but New York went through, I think about 10 years ago and I'm not sure, reform to change the way high schools and junior high schools were structured in order to create smaller

schools as a way to improve scores in schools, so what used to be Springfield Gardens high school, that I went to, was one of the large high schools, ended up being divided up into a number of small schools, and it's particularly in, you know, I didn't grow up in a lower income neighborhood, but it was certainly lower middle income, predominantly black neighborhood where most people worked for state government or city government. It's not a high-income neighborhood, by any means. It's a neighborhood, not like the people I work with now. They'll talk about the first time, their parents bought them a car when they were 16, whereas I didn't know anyone who had a car until they graduated and started working. So, I can't say I grew up in poverty, but it was a different socio-economic class from the people I interact with at this stage in my life.

Q: Yes, right.

WEISENFELD: So, it was a low performing high school that was reconfigured by the city as part of reform efforts, and we had race riots in my high school around the time that this lawsuit was going on. I remember fights on the bus between black kids and white kids, and things would get out of hand. For most of high school, it was about like a 20-minute walk for me, so I just started walking and I didn't take the bus to school anymore.

Q: Yeah. Were you a good student?

WEISENFELD: I was., As the neighborhood was going through white flight at the time, if I had to guess, I'd say the student population was 70-80% black, by the time I was, maybe, a junior, and a lot of New York City schools had these gifted programs. The gifted programs were almost completely white students, the limited number of white students, so I went through school in the gifted programs. New York also has a system if you achieved certain levels, you skipped a grade. You skip ninth grade as you make the transition from junior high to high school. In hindsight, I don't really think that makes a lot of sense, because I was born in October.

Q: You were already young for your grade.

WEISENFELD: I was already young and then I skipped ninth grade and went through the accelerated gifted program. When I registered for college, I went to Queens College. I was only sixteen years old when I started college and turned seventeen two months later. In hindsight, I was absolutely not ready to be in college at 16, but there I was.

Q: Yeah, wow.

WEISENFELD: Yeah, I was a good student, and there's a challenge there because I lived in a neighborhood that was predominantly black, went to a high school that had twenty, maybe thirty percent of students who were white from a neighboring community, but the white students were the ones who I was in classes with all the time. I can think of two other black boys and one black girl who were always in those classes with us, and these were big classes in a New York City high school, so you'd have 40 kids in a class, maybe

there were four or five of us who were not white. I have friends today, I'm jumping around, I have friends today from overseas who look at me and say, "why do you say you're black? You're not dark skinned and your father is white?" Which is a really good question that I never used to reflect on. I reflect on a lot more now because friends I have from other parts of the world – like the Philippines or Venezuela -- don't realize when I grew up in New York, everyone in school would look at me and just assume I was black. There was no question in anyone's mind. That's the way the United States is. You're black or white in the US; there's no colored or mulatto option as there is in some other countries.

But it creates a—you know, for a kid, when you're fourteen, fifteen, sixteen years old, living in a black neighborhood, you have friends in your neighborhood who are black, and then you're in class with predominantly white students. There's a tough dynamic of socialization. You're not seen as part of the black community. You can be accused of "selling out, talking like you're white." So anyways—

Q: Right.

WEISENFELD: Of course, despite these difficulties, it's much better in terms of opportunities growing up where I did than growing up in poverty in places like East New York, but it creates a set of challenging dynamics to navigate as a kid.

Q: Absolutely. Did you discuss this with your father at all, just out of curiosity, or that's too personal?

WEISENFELD: I don't recall, I don't think so. You know, my father was very evangelist about anti-racism, and I don't believe I raised it with him, but I can imagine he would just say, "Oh, ignore them. They're a bunch of idiots."

Q: Interesting... the dilemma of identity and how kids sort through that— and in your circumstances, particularly difficult. So, you're in college at Queen's—

WEISENFELD: —Oh, can I say—sorry, one more thing, I do have very vivid memories of going out when I was a child, with my brothers and sisters, and my dad, and my mother wasn't around, and people—like my dad has taken us someplace and he's holding my hand, or my one of my siblings hand—and people saying "why are you walking around with these black kids?", and him responding to them strongly. I have those memories and, sorry one more, we do these family zoom calls, and my Dad, he's ninety now.

Q: Wonderful.

WEISENFELD: He's going to be ninety in a month or two, in May. He's either ninety or going to be ninety-one, and he said, like a few months ago, just out of the blue, he said "You know, I remember—"and it made me think about him and me going someplace, and us being verbally attacked because he's holding my hand. He said, "I remember when I

was a child, five–six years old, we were walking up stairs and the tenement that his family grew up in, they grew up in Brooklyn, his father was holding his hands and they're Jewish." He said, "We got to a landing on one of the floors, there was no elevator, and the door opened up and this man came out and said, 'When Mussolini takes over, he's gonna kill all of you Jews'", and we all thought, why are you remembering that now? And why did you never tell us that?

Q: Wow...he obviously suppressed a lot of stuff that had happened. You need to do his oral history.

WEISENFELD: He has done it, he has. One of his cousins, who passed away, did an oral history. They have a book that they've put together. They haven't published it.

Q: Fantastic. That's wonderful, but you'd mentioned again, I meant to ask you, you said your father was Jewish. Were you brought up with the Jewish religion?

WEISENFELD: No. We were brought up Catholic. My mother's a Catholic. I don't have any personal knowledge of this because I was too young, but my older sister recalls that my father's mother kind of rejected us and rejected my mother. I'm not exactly sure what form that took, but I don't have any memories of ever seeing my father's mother, but I do know his father would come over occasionally and play with us. I've seen photos of us on his father's lap, but I was still young when his father died, so they're more vague memories.

Q: Yeah. Okay. Interesting. Okay, so you go off to college.

WEISENFELD: I went to Queens College. My dad said, and part of this is like a lack of understanding of opportunities because he grew up quite poor during the Depression. His father worked for the WPA, his father was, as far as I believe, an illiterate immigrant from Poland. I don't think he could read and he didn't speak much English, I believe. I'm not 100 percent sure of that, but I think that's right. I know he worked with the Works Progress Administration and in menial jobs, and they grew up in poverty. My father talks about, I remember asking him once, because I'm really into jazz, and there was a period where I was listening to a lot of the old radio recordings of the Count Basie and Duke Ellington Orchestra, and I said, "Did you listen to that stuff when you were growing up?"

He said, "We couldn't afford a radio", which was really stunning to me.

Q: Right. Absolutely.

WEISENFELD: He didn't really understand that there were opportunities to get funding to go to private schools at the time my older sister, brother and I went to college. My father went to, he's the first person in his family to go to college, he went to CCNY, City College in New York, when it was free. When my sister went to college, she went to Hunter College, part of the city university of New York system, CUNY. That was the first year they charged tuition, and I think it was 200 dollars. So when I was graduating from

high school, he said, oh, and your question about "did I do well?", I got a scholarship from high school from New York City, which wasn't a lot of money, it was a couple of thousand dollars each year, but back then it seemed like a lot, partly because I got, I think when I took the geometry exam, I'm pretty sure I was the only one in New York State who got a hundred on the geometry exam that year. New York did these New York Regents Exams for English and Math classes, so I did well in school. I think I probably would have gotten into a large number of top-quality colleges, but my dad said "You can go to any college you want within the City University System of New York". I only applied to Queens and Hunter. The range of New York City schools, not even New York state schools, because New York state schools cost more. I think my first year the tuition was 750 bucks or something like that, and I covered it with my scholarship, and then as it started to go up, I got some money from my parents and I worked. I worked, usually like one or two jobs throughout the year, to pay for expenses and bus fare.

My brother reminded me that there were times when we, because my older brother went to CCNY, and there were times where we would jump the turnstile because we didn't have enough money to commute to school, because we lived at home, which we didn't think of, but back in the '70s and '80s, the way New York policing was going, that could have completely derailed our careers, we could have been arrested for that, because it was illegal, but we didn't have money to commute. I worked in a private tutoring place in a neighboring town that was also predominantly black but a bit poorer than where we lived, it's kind of North Hollis Queens. Rap music originates from that neighborhood. DMC and those guys are from Hollis. I would take the bus pretty much every night, and tutor kids in math at this tutoring place to make extra money to pay for commuting and expenses for school.

Q: Wow, I should have asked, when you were in high school did you do any extracurricular activities?

WEISENFELD: It's a great question. I'm a frustrated musician, and I really wanted to be a musician, so I played in band and jazz band in high school. I played trumpet at the time, and the reason I went to Queens is because Queens has the best music program within the CUNY system, the Aaron Copland School of Music. A lot of celebrated musicians went there. It's a nationally recognized music school, so I auditioned to get into the music program and in the orchestra, and I didn't make it, but I was still allowed to major in music. I started my first year as a music major studying classical music, which was not what—I wasn't really familiar with, and I was assigned, like, third chair in the orchestra, and by the end of the first year, I switched to political science, for a couple of reasons. One is I realized, you know, there were some people there who were just tremendously talented. I'm a talented musician, and I'm still playing music. I actually play in a band, and we're recording, and I still practice music every day I can. I'm talented, but there are people who are tremendously talented, who I saw, who were graduating, and they were getting jobs just playing in off Broadway orchestras and living in apartments with four other people and struggling to make ends meet, and it just became really apparent to me that the connection between skill and success was not very strong, and even for those who are skilled, and for those who are mediocre-skilled like me, there's just almost no

chance I could be a professional musician. The teachers were telling me at the time what it was like to do off Broadway kind of stuff, playing in orchestra pits, and I thought "that's not what I want to do", so I switched.

Q: Oh, a very smart decision at a young age. I see too many of those movies with the starving musicians in New York City—

WEISENFELD: —and I get great pleasure from music now. You can see, I'll show you. I have a— alright, so I always have my instruments _____.

Q: Yes, I'm looking at some saxophones, is that a flute?

WEISENFELD: There's a flute, an alto sax [saxophone], a tenor sax, and a soprano sax.

Q: Wow, and you said you were doing the trumpet earlier—

WEISENFELD: —After my first year of college, I stopped playing trumpet, and I didn't do music for years.

Q: And then took up the others later?

WEISENFELD: I started playing sax when I was at USAID. I was talking to a friend who played sax and kept going from high school, and I said, you know, I always wanted to play the sax, but now I'm too old, and he said, "Of course you're not too old". I was thirty-five at the time, and he said "Hey, you know, if you play trumpet, you're musical. It'll take you a while to learn the difference, but within five years, you'll be able to play okay." So that was like—I think, actually—I think I was thirty-eight. Right, because it was 20 years ago, so I've now been playing for 20 years, and I play well enough to do gigs with bands, and I've recorded a few things with people, and I am not going to—no, I'm not going to play at Carnegie Hall. I'm not that good, but I play well enough that my friends think I'm a good musician, and I enjoy it.

Q: That's fantastic. I'm going to jump ahead since we're on music, and I have to ask, when you were in South Africa did you have the opportunity to do much or go to clubs where there was wonderful music? I can't remember if during the period you were there, it was feasible, but I remember visiting some fantastic venues in Johannesburg in the late 1980's.

WEISENFELD: Yeah, so every place I've lived I've always spent a lot of time going to clubs, ending up becoming friends with local musicians. South African music is tremendous. I did that in South Africa and Zimbabwe, not as much in Egypt, when I was there. It's not the same music scene, but certainly Peru, Peru has wonderful, wonderful music too that I wasn't aware of before I went there. Yeah.

Q: That's really great to have the opportunity overseas to then engage with a completely different community outside of the International Development Group, which I think has probably huge value in itself.

WEISENFELD: Yeah, you get an eye into the culture that you otherwise wouldn't get.

Q: Yeah, no that's wonderful, so you shifted over from music to political science, and I suspect that began to pave the road to thinking about law school? Or, was it coming out of your mother's old lawsuits and the issues of civil rights that were fermenting in the United States? Or, were you beginning to look at the international aspects of political science as well?

WEISENFELD: So, Reagan was President when I went to college in 1980, and a lot of my friends were musicians. These were New York City musicians—they're all very far to the left, we were all bordering on socialists at the time, and so adamantly opposed to every single thing Ronald Reagan did. The anti-apartheid movement was big at the time, too, and there were protests on campus, and it was that whole milieu, and I got very involved in the anti-apartheid protests, and that ended up defining a lot of my life, because I ended up connected with South Africa for years, including law school, which I'm not sure if you know, I went to South Africa when I was in law school, it was my first time. At the time, I wasn't connecting it to my mother's work, but maybe unconsciously it was there? And so, it was much more what was happening on campus, and the opposition to like... Reagan invaded Grenada, and my family was Caribbean, and we spent time as kids in the Caribbean too, which had a big influence on me, because I was aware that we didn't have—we weren't poor, but we didn't have a lot of fancy things. You know, if we asked for something, if we asked for presents at Christmas, the answer was you get one that wasn't clothing, and it can't cost a lot. But, we would go to Trinidad in the summers and see that we'd have to go to an outhouse to go to the bathroom, and there was no microwave and we'd help my grandmother, you know, wash the clothes in the sink. So, it was totally different—it was an eye-opening experience that there were very different levels of poverty and want. So, I was always aware of that, and the political milieu on campus at the time in the 1980s. I think it was one of those moments where there was just a lot going on. I don't know if that would have been true at Harvard, or Yale, or Berkeley, but certainly New York City campuses at the time, there was a lot of political activism, and I had a bunch of friends who were active in the PLO movements arguing on those issues, so it was just all around you.

Q: Super. So, I suspect that you graduated with great distinction from Queens.

WEISENFELD: So, you know, I should remember what my scores were, but yes, I did very well in school. I remember I had a counselor who said to me, "You can go to any law school in the country, you don't have to limit yourself to local schools", because, similar to my father, I thought, "okay, I can go to some New York City or New York State law school". So, my counselor said, "No, you can go, you can apply anywhere you want, and you'll probably get into the top two or three."

Q: Let's go back, the decision to go to law school, I mean, with a political science degree, you probably were considering multiple options, or had you really decided that law school was what you really wanted to do?

WEISENFELD: I had decided law school was what I wanted, but it wasn't based on a thoughtful analysis. You know, I talk to a lot of friends' kids who are thinking about law school, and I'm amazed at how naive they are, and I was at the time, because my thinking was very superficial. I didn't know anyone who was a lawyer and no one in my family did, but I just had this vague sense that "Oh, if you care about justice, you become a lawyer". I kind of connected it with human rights and advocating for justice, and that's the way to do it, without really understanding what it was about. In fact, I was completely naive, and I didn't even do research at the time on what law school was about, because I remember, when I got to law school, someone said the word tort and I asked what's a tort? I was probably the only idiot in Harvard Law School who didn't know what the word tort was. So, it was naivete, it was just vague notions of justice.

Q: —and doing good. Okay, so you're applying for law schools, and your counselor says, "Apply to anywhere in the country". And—

WEISENFELD: —and you know, you take the LSAT, the law school admissions test, and you have to have the grades, and you have to have a strong LSAT score. I knew I had the grades. Back then you got the LSAT scores in the mail. I remember every day for weeks running to the front door, getting the mail, and I can remember my aunt was visiting us from Canada when I got the LSAT scores. I opened it up and immediately knew I could get into whatever law school I wanted to from this, and I don't remember what the scale was. I don't remember what the score was, but I remember that feeling that "Oh that's it, I can go wherever I want". It was a tough conversation with my parents, because law school doesn't provide financial aid, and my parents couldn't afford for me to go to Harvard. I think I applied to five or six schools, and I did not get into Yale, but got into every other school, and I actually wanted to go to Yale. That was my number one choice, because it was a smaller environment, and I knew that Yale was—well, I can't remember what I thought, but I wanted to go to Yale. So, I took out big student loans, and it affected my financial situation forever, because of the debt. If you remember, interest rates were 13%, back then in the '80s, and I graduated with something like \$60,000 worth of loans at 13%, but while I was in law school, I continued to be involved in the anti-apartheid movement, and got a human rights fellowship at the end of my first year to go to South Africa. So, I spent a little over three months in South Africa working for a law firm, doing depositions of people who were victims of apartheid abuse

Q: And this would have been—

WEISENFELD: —summer of 1985, and it was the last state of emergency, the last big gasp of apartheid.

Q: Right, and that would have been right about the time that the Comprehensive Anti-Apartheid Act was enacted. I think it was in 1986 or 1987, so it was a bit before that.

WEISENFELD: Yeah, there were—it was an explosive time, there were a lot of murders of South African activists, and lots of big funerals and demonstrations, and there was another student who was from NYU Law School who was interning at the same law firm I was, and a lot of people did their internships at Wall Street law firms, and I went to the South African one. The other student was white. Sean...I can't remember his last name, and he and I traveled around, and went to a lot of these mass funeral marches, and we attended a lot of these events where the police attacked folks. And it's, I don't know that I've told my parents any of this to this day, because I had lots of incidents where we were running in large groups away from the police, running away from dogs. He was white and his girlfriend visited him for part of this, and she was also white, and the three of us traveled around, by car, all over South Africa, in 1985, and we got stopped by the police periodically for being a mixed-race group. We had trouble sometimes finding places to stay and slept in the car. In many areas the woman we were working with, gave us names of her friends, so we stayed in people's houses where we could. She ended up becoming very famous globally, Navi Pillay, ...she's a justice on, I guess it was the International Human Rights Court, and I always thought she was disappointed with me because, actually she was the—United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights. Yes, she was the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights from 2008 to 2014, but she's now 80. So, she was hoping that I would become a big human rights lawyer and advocate, and I really remember distinctly, she sent me up to KwaZulu Natal for some depositions, I didn't know what I was doing. I just remember being more engaged by the fact that they had no access to clean water, and they were just struggling to try and plant in hard dirt, and the fact that, you know, they were going to sue the South African government, because a police officer beat up someone in their family, the case wasn't going anywhere, it just seemed kind of pointless. So I left, I went for a human rights fellowship and left thinking, this is kind of pointless, you just need to address the poverty of these people first, which is of course dumb, because you need human rights as well, it's not one or the other, but I was 20 years old, and that's what I thought at that time. I was much more seized with the poverty and it reminded me a lot of going to Trinidad and seeing people who had outhouses and didn't have things that we took for granted. So, I went back to law school, and decided to do my thesis on land tenure issues, because it was also a lot of—a lot of the problems in KwaZulu Natal were that land was taken away from people and they didn't have tenure, right?

So, I then spent the next two years in law school really focused on land tenure. I was planning on writing my thesis on land tenure issues in South Africa, but it was hard, I couldn't get back there, and it was hard to get documentation, so I wrote it on land tenure in Zimbabwe. Actually, I got to visit Zimbabwe, when I was in South Africa, which is jumping ahead a little bit, but I have this very clear, like, defining moment in my life when we were in South Africa, driving around, me and these other two people, you felt the weight of oppression on you constantly in South Africa, and this was 1985, and we crossed the border and went to Zimbabwe and spent maybe a weekend or something, and it felt like you could breathe free air in Zimbabwe, and then when you fast forward to 2002, I was the mission director in Zimbabwe, and I had the opposite experience between those two countries. I felt the weight of oppression in Zimbabwe, and we'd go across the

border to South Africa to breathe free air, and I just couldn't have imagined that things could flip so dramatically in such a short time.

Q: Yes. That's a very interesting point. I also have always felt huge tension in Zimbabwe, that people really tried to disguise what was there and that it would burst out at some point.

WEISENFELD: I feel like I'm all over. You asked me a question, and I just randomly wandered.

Q: No, no, that was all very important. When we get to South Africa, I think we can come back to some of this discussion. When you were in law school, did I also see in your bio that you were on the Harvard Law Review?

WEISENFELD: Yeah. Which also, I mean, it gave me career opportunities that I just couldn't have imagined. At the time I was in law school, officials in the school told me that I was the only student from Queens College ever to go to Harvard Law School. I don't have any way to confirm whether that's true or not, but I was told that from the school, white or black, and it's hard to believe that but that's what I was told—that was 30 years ago. So, I don't know to what extent it's true today, and a lot of my friends, you know, law school was, in many ways, for me a more segregated experience than college. Queens College was a huge melting pot, because it's in Queens, which is the most diverse place on the planet. So, I had friends who are Puerto Rican, and Dominican, and Indian, and White, and Middle Eastern, and African. People really did mix in college, in ways that I had not seen in high school. In law school, I certainly had friends who were white, but the Black Law School Students Association was a stronger organization that I'd experienced in college, and there was a lot more socializing among the black students. Not that we didn't socialize with the white students, but I always think of social groups as concentric circles, so like my closest circle of four, or five, and then the closest circle of ten, and then I had to go beyond the circle of 10, to get to any students who were white. So, within that circle of 10 that I socialized with was Michelle Obama and I kicked myself for not having kept in touch. So yeah, I never would have imagined I would have gotten on Law Review. It's based on a combination of grades and an exam. So, even my law school friends who are predominantly black, most of them came to school from Harvard, or Yale, or UPenn, or Columbia, so there's just a lot of ivy league students who move from college to law school, Ivy League law schools, and I, you know, I mean, it's probably—I don't know, maybe I'll erase this from the transcript, but I think some of them were surprised that I made it onto law review, and they didn't, because I came from the New York City public school system all the way through college. And I was, I don't know that I knew enough to be surprised. I took the exam, and then I got invited to join the Law Review, but it does separate you as among the elite of the school.

Q: Right, and you have to make a conscious decision to do that. I didn't realize there was an exam associated with it as well.

WEISENFELD: Yes, it is an exam. So, it's writing and editing—at least back then, I don't know what it is now, but you have to write a piece, and then they give you a piece of academic work that you have to edit.

Q: Since you had done the human rights work in South Africa during the end of your first year of law school and you were studying tenure issues, did you bring any of those sensitivities to the Harvard Law Review content. I've never seen a Harvard Law Review. So, I don't know what the content is. Did you influence the content at all with your own unique experience?

WEISENFELD: I did not. So, you have the editor of the Law Review, or everyone, Harvard uses terminology where everyone is an editor, and the person who leads it is the president, the president of the Law Review, when I was there it was Elena Kagan actually, who's now on the Supreme Court. Ron Klain was also on Law Review.

Q: Distinguished group.

WEISENFELD: Yeah, it was a very distinguished group. So, the President and the senior staff determine what the content is, and the rest of us are editors, we get to write a piece that we decide on, and well, we don't decide, we get assigned themes, and then we edit pieces that we get assigned, and I never tried to— and I don't know that I would have gotten it, but I never put myself forward to be in the leadership where you get on the editorial board, where you get to decide on content I just—a part of it was, I also volunteered to be an editor on the Black Law Students journal. So, I was doing two journals at the same time, and I just couldn't do more on law review, and as part of the black students' journal, I organized a conference on racial discrimination in the US. So, I actually spent more time doing that other stuff that I don't even put on my resume, because the Harvard Law Review is a more notable accomplishment out in the world. So, I wrote my piece on the Law Review, and I did the editing I was assigned, and it took a lot of late hours, you know, Gannett house is the old building there that they still work out of, so I had two, three, four o'clock in the morning hours at Gannett house all the time because you're trying to do your regular schoolwork and doing these other things.

Q: Okay, well I know that you have another commitment, so I'm going to stop for now.

Q: Hello, this is February 23, 2023, and this is interview number two with Paul Weisenfeld. Paul, as we were finishing up our last conversation, you were getting ready to graduate from law school. Could you please say a few words about the law school experience in general, and how that prepared you for your career. Then we'll talk about what your first job was after you left law school, but your more general thoughts first.

WEISENFELD: Thanks, Carol. So, I went to law school thinking that it was a degree that was going to give me a lot of opportunities in a variety of fields. I think that was probably truer, back in the mid 1980s when I went to law school, than it is today. There's a focus

on specialization in the world today, including in development and diplomacy. What it did provide that I thought was critical because I could see at various points in my career when I moved up were, in many ways, the skills I learned in law school. And in my first job afterwards, analytical skills, the ability to quickly digest large amounts of data and analyze them and understand what was important, and then to communicate it in a concise way for senior decision makers.

I recall when you were the DAA [Deputy Assistant Administrator] for the Africa Bureau, I don't remember what the issue was, but there was some complex issue I sent you an email on. And I remember you responding and saying how much you appreciated that it was digestible and concise, and clearly laid out the complex issue and options. I think in business, in government, and foreign affairs, there's a real premium on that skill set, so it served me well.

Q: We may need you back in government urgently right now, Paul. So, you were finishing up law school, and you did mention in our last conversation that you had taken out a student loan, so I suspect that might have been a factor in determining what you did next when you were leaving law school, but I wonder if you could talk a little bit about that.

WEISENFELD: Yeah, so I remember coming to Washington to interview with various international human rights groups and civil society groups, thinking Washington was where all this policy work was. No one in my family—even today—everyone in my family is still in the New York area. I was the first and only person to really leave although I have a sister who now teaches at Princeton. I also got recruited by law firms in New York and I had I think it was \$60,000 in student debt at 13 percent interest. I remember thinking—trying to do the math and looking at the cost of apartments in DC—“how was I going to be able to afford this with the student loan?” I decided I was going to spend a couple of years in a law firm and use that to pay off my student loans or try to make a big dent in them before leaving law firms. It was predominantly a financial decision. In hindsight, I think it was a great decision because it honed the same skills I just talked about.

Private Sector Law Firm Employment, 1987 - 1991

I was working on banking and finance, originally with White & Case in New York. There really is attention to every detail, and attention to perfection. I remember years later, someone in USAID asked me—who was an early career person—they sent me a memo and I marked all over it with a red pen, and the person said, “Well, how many errors are acceptable in this document?”, and I was just dumbfounded. I said “The answer is zero! Why is that not obvious?” Still, I think the people who are really top notch in USAID always had that perspective. That was never—it's good enough for government work—and that's certainly what you learned at a law firm. I mean, you don't make mistakes. It has to be perfect all the time, which is a lot of pressure, but it doesn't sit on one person. We work in teams. It's not 100 percent on you to go through every issue and make it perfect. You collaborate with others, but the goal is high quality.

So, the law firm experience, which is very—I don't know what it's like today, but in the late—I started in White & Case in 1987—it was not a nurturing experience, the work environment back then. Government was considerably nicer. It was foul-mouthed, and in many ways abusive, and they treated people in ways that would result in lawsuits today. In White & Case, when I started, there were different bathrooms for partners and associates, and it was like a normal day to be screamed at. On my very first day, it was on Sixth Avenue, and—I forget what street—it was in the '50°s—no, in the '40°s—'46th street°, I think. My very first day in the office, I was stopped by security, and asked for my ID. I showed them my ID, and they called the head of security who came by who said, "Well, we got a report that there was a black man walking around the halls," and that was my introduction to corporate life.

I thought—you know my father was a mid-level civil servant in the Social Security Administration in Queens, and it was a typical kind of government office outside of Washington. It was a rental space, and it was not very nice at all. Where White & Case's offices on Sixth Avenue looked like something out of the movie *Wall Street*; you felt like you were in the seat of power. I had never in my life been in an office like that. I remember just thinking—you know everyone talks about imposter syndrome, but thinking I'm not—someone's going to find out that I don't really belong here. The fact that security asked to see my ID just kind of reinforced it.

Q: Oh, goodness. So, you said you were working on legal issues related to banks and stuff?

WEISENFELD: So, at the time, our biggest client was Bank of America, I guess. It was so long ago, sorry. We were just doing the legal work on all sorts of transactions that Bank of America did.

Q: Yeah, I was just going to say that I suspect a lot of that was actually helpful when you joined AID [United States Agency of International Development] in terms of private sector development strategies, especially since finance and banking usually plays an important role in USAID's private sector programs. This is also something most people in USAID don't really understand.

WEISENFELD: So, we'll get to being hired at AID, but absolutely. I was assigned to what was back then the Private Enterprise Bureau because of that experience. I spent two years in White & Case and then moved to DC. I got married, moved to DC. I was still in White & Case, and then I thought—two things that happened that were critical. I'll do it in reverse chronological order. One, I decided to move to a DC law firm because I realized that you're kind of out of sight, out of mind if you're in the satellite office of a law firm. It didn't seem to be good for my career to be in the satellite office of the New York based law firm, so I switched to a DC law firm.

But the other thing in October of 1987—so I started in 1987 in August, I believe—was Black Monday. It's one of the biggest stock market crashes in history. I was really young, because I got to college and law school young, so I would have been like twenty-three, I

think. I was too naive and dumb to really understand what was going on. I didn't really read the papers back then—rarely—which is just amazing to me because I devour multiple papers today. I knew there was a big stock market crash. I didn't think about what the implications were but lots of people got fired in the banking industry: the commercial banking, the venture capital, all sorts of banking, and necessarily, therefore, the law firms.

So, the work I was doing quickly dried up and a partner came into my office and said, "We've got some great work for you in trade," doing GATT work [General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade] (which no longer exists). I thought that was just such boring work. I wasn't interested in it and it's not why I picked White & Case. I picked White & Case because they did this other financial work I was interested in. I was too naive and stupid to realize he was creating a job for me, ensuring that I continued to have work to do, and I should just shut up and accept it because the work I wanted to do had dried up. And I have that experience today, with early career people who work for me now. They work on a project, the project goes away, and we have something else we want to divert them to, and they don't get it. That's ensuring that they continue to work, and I have sympathy for them because I was there.

Q: But did you then start working on GATT issues?

WEISENFELD: —I did start working on GATT issues, and that requires a tremendous level of precision, working in the trade area, I think even more than finance. The partner I worked for was a woman, and it was the first time I worked for a woman, because back then, I can't tell you how many partners were women. There were probably three in the whole firm. There were no partners who were black. Pretty much everyone was a white male except for a tiny handful of women. Life has changed dramatically since then, but it was a great experience working for someone that early in my career who was—because to be a female partner in White & Case back in the mid 1980s—she was really top notch. I remember being a little scared of her because she had such high standards and thinking "I had to be completely on top of my game" before I went into her office.

Q: Good. Good training. So, you did move to Washington and move to another firm. What kind of work were you doing with the second firm that you worked for?

WEISENFELD: The second firm was Shaw, Pittman, Potts, & Trowbridge, which has been subject to a merger and it has many of those same names, but in—that's what happens with law firms—a slightly different order. We were doing—because I was still always interested in land issues, as I said before, and in the financial aspects, so they did a lot of real estate development. And I thought at the time—I had a friend who I was in law school with, who went to Shaw & Pittman, and he was doing real estate work, and he kept telling me it was really interesting, and you should be in a firm where the headquarters is where you are.

I wasn't that interested in trade, so I thought I might fall in love with real estate development work. At the time I had given up the idea of international work and human

rights, thinking I'll get into real estate. And it was interesting, and I learned a great deal, actually. It kind of got me back into understanding the finance and private sector and dealing with developers, they're a special crowd, Big Developers. I didn't deal with anyone who was quite like Donald Trump, but there were characters in the DC area.

You know, we would be part of a consortium bidding on development of Tysons and the DC convention center. I remember the biggest project we bid on was the new convention center in DC. So, this was before it was built. The consortium my firm was part of didn't win either of those contracts. But we did—I can still walk around downtown DC and see a whole bunch of buildings where I know, “I did the contracts for construction of that building.”

Q: Oh, that's good. Did you do anything for the Lerner's that own the Washington Nationals, since I'm a baseball fan?

WEISENFELD: No, no.

Q: No? Okay.

WEISENFELD: But it was also different from trade, different from the New York corporate finance, but still very educational and helped continue to crystallize skills that stuck with me. Not that those are the only skills—you know, you can go into a different field and learn a lot of the same skills, but it was helpful for me.

Q: So how did the transition begin to move into international development? How did that transition come about?

WEISENFELD: There was an attorney at White & Case who I became friendly with who was of counsel. I don't know if you know that term. I imagine law firms still use it, so when they bring senior lawyers in from the outside, if they're not an associate, because—

Q: —they're seniors—

WEISENFELD: —for starters, that's a junior lawyer, and they're not a partner. You're not brought in directly as a partner unless you come in with a lot of clients, but if you're senior they have a title, typically of counsel. And maybe you can get to be a partner if you develop a client base. So, there was this guy—Jim Hackney—who was of counsel—and that name might ring a bell. He was of counsel at White & Case. He was black. He was the only senior black person in White & Case, so he was friendly to me. He had me over at his house a couple of times, and he knew that I was interested in international work and had gone to South Africa. He had been a political appointee in the State Legal Office, I can't remember under which administration. I think it was before—it was probably the Carter administration. I'm not certain about that. He was older than I was, and he had been a political appointee in State L, so he had contacts in State L. And even though I had left White & Case and gone to Shaw & Pittman, he remembered that I

was interested in international work, so one day he called me up (because I don't think we had email back then).

Recruitment to USAID and Assignment to General Counsel's Office, 1991 - 1995

He said, "Hey, I was having lunch with a friend of mine named Ed Spriggs, and he said that, "USAID is hiring lawyers. They have a couple of open positions. Are you interested? If so, call this guy," and that was it. That was a life changing call for me. There was no, you know, Internet. There was no applying to this job on the web. It was someone who I knew, who remembered something I said, who talked to someone else. So, I called up Ed, and I went over to—it was the State Department building at the time—I went over to his office in State, and he introduced me to a few people, and then I left my resume, and I got a couple of interviews. It took a long time though, as the USAID process goes, it probably took eight months or ten months.

Q: And the recruitment process was totally done by the General Counsel's Office, is that correct? It really didn't involve anyone else, they decided who they wanted.

WEISENFELD: I don't believe—I don't recall I met anyone outside of GC [Office of the General Counsel]. I remember meeting John Mullen, Mike Kitay, Ed Spriggs, Pat Ramsey, who were on the interview panel, and I'm trying to remember his name—an African American lawyer who was in the Foreign Service, a very elegant guy. Long retired. And the last guy I interviewed with who was the toughest interviewer, an older gentleman. He was not black, he was white. I remember he spent a lot of time in South America and Central America, and he set up offices in Nicaragua and Guatemala. He was kind of the legal guy that they sent around to troubled countries, the fragile states, to set things up, and he ran me through the foreign service panel questions, "Okay, what do you do if—?", kind of all these scenario questions.

Q: —legally based questions, or—?

WEISENFELD: —they were both legally based, but also personnel-type questions and management-type questions. It seemed like standard questions, he was asking me, that they would have asked everyone.

Q: I suspect it's a more rigorous process even now, USAID recruitment. So, it took eight to ten months and then you got an offer?

WEISENFELD: So, I got an offer letter that was contingent on receiving a security clearance and a medical clearance, so I filled out the forms. That took many more months, and then I was notified that they were denying the medical clearance for my wife because she had Glaucoma. I talked to John Mullen at the time, and GC advised me to appeal it because they said, "There are people all over the Foreign Service who have Glaucoma", she had no symptoms, she was a glaucoma suspect with elevated pressure in her eyes, and just took drops. GC thought that was ridiculous. So, I appealed it and went to State MED [Medical Office], and the answer was no. If you're already in the Foreign

Service, they can accommodate that, but they didn't see a reason to allow people to enter who had a family member with that condition. So, I then got an offer to join the civil service instead.

Q: Oh, okay.

WEISENFELD: So, I started in the Civil Service, and the thing that makes no sense is once you're in the system, you can convert without having those same restrictions. So, after three years, I converted to the Foreign Service.

Q: Okay, so GC recruited both foreign service and GS [General Schedule] employees. Very interesting, but you initially started out—your intent was always to be able to go overseas, but you came in initially as GS. Did you know that the conversion to foreign service would be relatively straightforward? Or were you just taking a bit of a gamble?

WEISENFELD: I was taking a chance, and I wasn't certain.

Q: Right. Were there other new people who came in at the same time, other new lawyers? Just wondering how much orientation they give new lawyers. Did you get any general development-related training?

WEISENFELD: So, I went through the new orientation process, including the project development training, which was just tremendous training. I wish I could remember how many weeks, I feel like it was six weeks, it was extensive new entry training. They ran us through the whole project design process and the handbooks. I guess it's now with the ADS [Agency for International Development], but Tamera Fillinger, who was a lawyer And Peter Natiello, who's now a DAA, were in my new entry training class.

Q: But there were new entry people from across the agency, not just lawyers —

WEISENFELD: —people from all backstops.

Q: Okay, and some of them may have been coming in through—I don't remember if at that period of time, they had the intern program, or it could have been PMIs [Presidential Management Interns].

WEISENFELD: Yeah, we had PMIs as well. We had the—what was the intern program called for new entry folks back? It's changed names so many times.

Q: I'm not sure if that's what it was at that period. I am glad to hear that they were doing this kind of new entry training with a broad cross section of employees.

WEISENFELD: Right, we had private sector officers, program officers, controller types, and lawyers, all in the same training.

Q: Oh, that's great. And you were then assigned to the General Counsel's office in Washington?

WEISENFELD: In GC, working for Mike Kitay, and he supported the private enterprise Bureau, which at that point was headed by Henrietta Holsman Fore, before she became administrator. Dale Sorrow was another lawyer in that office. So, Dale and myself—and I think it was Pat Ramsey in that office at the time—as part of that we did a lot of work for the office of housing and urban programs.

Q: Okay, because they were all part of the private sector office. And this was the end of the George H.W. Bush administration, that last year when Henrietta was the assistant administrator.

WEISENFELD: I started in 1991.

Q: Right, were you involved at all in the start-up of the program in the former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe during that 1991 period. I believe that Henrietta Fore was heavily involved because they had a lot of private sector focus in that work, including the enterprise funds.

WEISENFELD: She was, but I was not involved in that. It was her, there was another office in GC headed by her. Drew Luten was in that office for a while. Drew and her, and I remember them interacting with Carlos Pascual all the time. Carlos used to be running in and out, and we were in the State Department building at that point. Carlos used to run in and out of the GC office. They were in the same suite I was in so I'd see a lot of them working.

Q: Right, right. I see here it talks about the Housing Guarantee Program, which you've mentioned. The DCA [Development Credit Authority], was that done during that period that you were in Washington? Was that something that was done in 1991-92?

WEISENFELD: So, I was intimately involved in the creation of that. Mike Kitay and Peter Kim were the visionaries behind creating the DCA. Mike clearly had made that argument for years before—the development impacts of using credit as a tool. And there were a lot of people in the agency who had a view that credit is a debt trap, and it's a bad thing to do. Mike's vision saw it as a tool in the toolkit and there are opportunities where it stimulates private investment, crowds in other money; we're not talking about saddling countries with sovereign debt. The office got very caught up in a GAO [Government Accountability Office] audit of the housing program, which was focused on the sovereign debt aspects.

Peter Kim in the housing office really got criticized on the Hill for that, where—you know what it's like to work in government—they were following the legislative mandate, which the program was set up with sovereign debt. They didn't decide on their own, that was the best thing to do, and they were trying to use the money in a way that it had a development impact, but they would have preferred to not have it be sovereign debt.

Anyway, so I was tasked with supporting Mike and Peter on the DCA—we didn't have the name DCA at the time—I suggested a name that really was not a winner. It'll come back to me at some point. It was not a good name! I attended a lot of meetings, took a lot of notes, and then I was left to be the person to write up the request. I was almost the principal or nearly sole author of the request to the Hill and to OMB [Office of Management and Budget], to create DCA.

Q: Right. And it was a guarantee program, is that correct? It is private lending to banks. Is that correct?

WEISENFELD: Loan guarantees to private banks. Mike and Peter did a lot of editing, but I was like a junior associate. They had the vision, and I was told to go write it up.

Q: That experience you had in the law firm, obviously, was very helpful in doing this—were you involved with the consultations on The Hill at all?

WEISENFELD: I was.

Q: I'm wondering what your early thoughts were of being taken up to the Hill and trying to explain potentially complex issues, but in an environment where there's often a lot between the lines, which has nothing to do with what you're proposing. If so, how did you manage this?

WEISENFELD: We first had to get through OMB, and I had no idea, as someone who was in government, year two, what OMB was and why they were so powerful, and what was the point of it. It was a great education for understanding the interagency. In both OMB and the Hill, my impression of both of them was—it was just stunning to me that this was something that we thought was such a vital tool that was going to help us in the offices I was supporting, and for them, it was, "Okay, you have ten minutes, because we have fifteen other issues on the agenda for the next hour." So that was a real wakeup call about how much attention even all of USAID would garner among some of these people.

Q: Right, and again, being able to concisely and clearly lay out what you're proposing, and what you need from someone is obviously a critical skill. Was OMB's concern the need to have some level of appropriated funds to back up the guarantees, so they were always wanting to minimize that, as I recall.

WEISENFELD: And the OMB discussions, there were a lot more meetings, there was a lot more discussion about data and numbers that neither Mike nor I—as lawyers—were really equipped to answer. And we had to—I recall having to go back and multiple meetings and bringing in financial people from USAID because we were kind of thinking in conceptual terms and they wanted hard numbers

Q: Right. When you say financial people is that people from the private enterprise bureau or the financial management people or the people who might be more on the programmatic side?

WEISENFELD: It was both. On the financial management side, the controllers: folks who managed the housing guaranty program. The trick with DCA is you have to do a complex assessment of the likelihood of losses, and they really wanted to understand the formulas behind that—the risk analysis and how we were doing it. And for me as a lawyer—and I think this is not true for lawyers today—but I think back then lawyers would approach this much more from a conceptual frame. We weren't the people with the calculators figuring it out. Where I think today your lawyers doing finance are probably more adept at the financial aspects than we were expected to be back in the '80s and '90s.

Q: Yes. Important work. At some point I know you—I believe—maybe it was when you converted to the Foreign Service, but you shifted over to backstopping the Africa Bureau. Was that when you converted from GS to Foreign Service?

WEISENFELD: Right. So, I spent four years in Washington. After three years, I was assigned to the GC Africa. At the time, I think Drew Luten was in charge of it. I think we were three—I think it was Drew, Mary Alice Kleinjan and myself. I spent just a year there before going overseas.

Q: I certainly had experience working with you in the mid-1990s. Did they have the office divided up by sub-region so that you were covering Southern Africa, or was it divided up by subject matter? Do you recall? Just curious. I ask in part because I know that there were at least some programs and projects that were still reviewed back in Washington at that time. Also, strategies were reviewed in Washington. The GC folks working on Africa often made important contributions to those review meetings. I'm assuming you participated in those meetings?

WEISENFELD: There was a period where Ed Sprigs was the GC for Africa. And I think it might have been Ed and then it switched to Drew, when I was there. I'm not sure at what point that switch happened.

Q: I think Ed left by 1993 or so; believe he went off to Zimbabwe.

WEISENFELD: Okay. Because I remember working—maybe I was still covering the private enterprise stuff when I was there. But I remember working with Ed. So I don't honestly remember if it was assigned geographically. I do think to your point that sitting through those project approval meetings—where mission director, program officer, and the technical office director would kind of rotate through Washington, and they'd sit through a meeting where the AA [Assistant Administrator] or the DAA and the regional bureau would kind of oversee or review—was one of the most educational things I had in my entire career in USAID. I learned so much just sitting in those meetings. Even when I was working for Mike Kitay, if a project came in that related to the private sector, we would participate from that bureau. I sat in on them occasionally. That last year spent in GC Africa, it was constant. I got to meet a lot of people; I remember meeting Cap Dean at that point; John Wooten who was the program officer in South Africa before I got out

there. I met Mission Directors from all over. It probably was regional because I don't remember having any involvement in West Africa.

Q: Yes. It may have been the main benefit of those meetings. I'm hopeful we may have improved some of the programs. But regardless of that, they were incredible opportunities for learning, and I think all of us who participated at whatever level learned a lot. So very valuable. One of the issues that—

WEISENFELD: —that development but also, I think about organizational leadership.

Q: Yes, right. One of the issues that I recall working with you on was a difficult situation in South Africa in which there were allegations of reverse discrimination following the election in 1994 and even in the lead up once Mandela was released from prison. The program in South Africa began to change a bit from supporting anti-apartheid groups to doing a lot of other things. There were allegations made of, quote, "reverse discrimination." It became very political in the United States, and the Hill became very involved.

There were allegations flying right and left and a lot of difficult issues. At the Africa Bureau, we were tasked with having to do some reporting. We sent a team out led by Aaron Williams to assess what was going on. Congressional staffers also went. I was tasked with trying to summarize the issue and any actions USAID would be taking; it was then to be sent to Senator Jesse Helms and the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. It was one of my least favorite tasks ever, but I remember working with you on this, and how much help you provided as we went through this nest of difficult issues. I'm wondering if you recall very much from this experience.

USAID/South Africa, Regional Legal Advisor (1995 – 1999)

WEISENFELD: Yeah, I would say it occupied a significant chunk of my South Africa experience, for better or worse. I remember working on it before going to South Africa. While I was there—for more than the first year it took up a significant amount of time because we ended up having an IG [Inspector General] review on it, and a GAO review. It was a gift that kept on giving; it never seemed to go away. I would say, it provided a lot of lessons for me because I think it raised my profile in the agency and made people—I don't want to say to the extent people thought highly of me, it was because of my work on this—but it raised my profile. People at senior levels were more aware of me, and I think it helped propel my career. There's something in my mind that's always been a little sad about that because it's work defending the agency rather than work advancing development. Of course, you want to defend the agency, but it seemed a little strange to me that that's how I got noticed and continued to move ahead. But absolutely, I remember it very well.

I think, in many ways, we were victims of circumstance; they did not predict the big shift brought by the congressional elections in 1994 that represented a change in direction. There was a very clear direction to the USAID/South Africa mission before 1994 to

support black empowerment and then it shifted. I think they should have been a little more nuanced, frankly, before and after. It would have been easier to justify some of what they did. I think, unfortunately, they set themselves up for criticism by just being very explicit about counting numbers of people on the board by race. But I think supporting an agenda of the disadvantaged groups was obviously the right thing to do from a development perspective.

Q: Right. As you said, it did also get caught up in domestic politics as well. It's interesting now in line with the discussions of localization. In the early days in South Africa, the mission was working only with South African entities. All the grants were to South African community-based organizations and NGOs. Once the program increased, there was then more interest on the part of American groups. That, I think, raised some of the political profiles, which is interesting, because the early architects of the program tried to keep U.S. [United States] entities out of the picture.

WEISENFELD: It's a little bit of a wakeup call for everyone who joins USAID because they want to focus on development. You can end up being part of political pinball. There are some people on the Hill who will want to use anything they can grab to take potshots at the opposition. Yeah. That's part of what happened here.

Q: Right. After the election of Nelson Mandela in 1994 and around the time of your arrival in South Africa, the mission changed its strategy to do some work directly with the government as well as try to maintain some of its work with community-based organizations and local groups. I suspect that was a very difficult period for the mission to try to sort through these strategic changes. Do you recall it at all?

WEISENFELD: Oh, yeah. So, I recall going to lots of meetings with—gosh, Aaron Williams, who is older than I am, is so much better at recalling names. I'm sure he's able to tell you. Aaron will say to me, “Do you remember the meeting we had in 1996 with so and so in June?” I'm not as good as he is, but I recall, starting off with Cap Dean and then with Aaron, and then with Stacy Rhodes going to repeated meetings with the government ministry charged with coordinating donor assistance, which in the very early days with Cap was—the government counterparts were a few people trying to figure out what their job was and then over time became a bigger bureaucracy. In the early days, there was a lot of suspicion, and we would hear comments that were nearly saying, “Why should we talk to you guys? You are on the wrong side. You didn't support us. Ronald Reagan's policy was against the anti-apartheid movement. You considered us terrorists.” So, the early days of dialogue were very difficult to just establish trust and allow them to see us as a group that was there to help support their development agenda.

My role was to negotiate the—gosh, I should remember this specifically. We were trying to negotiate the bilateral framework agreement. I would sit through a lot of meetings: somewhere I was kind of running the meeting talking about the details of the bilateral framework; others were Aaron or Cap before him having a much more kind of conceptual development conversation. I was just a listener.

Q: Did the bilateral agreement get signed while you were there?

WEISENFELD: I believe so.

Q: I was just curious and I assume that would have involved the State Department as well and State Department lawyers?

WEISENFELD: Yeah, I recall having lots of discussions with them and with the embassy. Relations for the embassy back then with—there were two ambassadors, Princeton Lyman. I adored Princeton Lyman. I remember as a side note, I was in the embassy doing something. I think I was going to the health unit or something and I got a call on my cell phone. This was the first year I'd ever had a cell phone, I remember. They were still relatively new. It was the ambassador's office saying you have to come to the ambassador's office. And I said, "Well, I'm right here in the embassy because the AID mission was not near the embassy," so I just walked over there. And the ambassador's secretary said, "You can't go in, you don't have a jacket." I said, "Well, I was called over here. I was in the embassy to go to the health unit." She says, "Well, it doesn't matter. You can't go in." "But the ambassador asked for me!" She wouldn't let me.

Q: So, you didn't get in?

WEISENFELD: No.

Q: Oh, my goodness gracious. That's a wonderful story. I can't imagine that was Princeton's rule.

WEISENFELD: No, I cannot imagine it was Princeton's rule; everyone adored him. So under Princeton and the later political appointee, Jim Joseph—the relations at that level were very good. But they were often tense at the level of the political office because they were also trying to develop relationships with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. They wanted to control the dialogue about development. And we had a lot of tense meetings with them about what should be on the agenda for these conversations, and should we be allowed to go to these meetings without them?

Q: Interesting? And as I recall a number of people that the AID mission had worked with who had been part of anti-apartheid groups did end up in government as well. And I think that the AID mission had relationships that the Embassy didn't have.

WEISENFELD: I think that absolutely helped. I don't recall the timeline. I remember that very explicitly, that over time we had people who we had known and had relationships with, but I can very distinctly remember in the early days, the interlocutors were several people who were antagonistic. In some ways, there were people who recently came out of prison and had a different view of the role the United States played.

Q: Yes, I'm sure about that. You would have been also taking the lead in any kind of agreements that were signed with the government. I'm assuming they did some project

agreements with the government as well, and I believe that some of the early work was done with the Ministry of Justice, perhaps. But there's a lot of standard language, you would say to agreements. And I'm wondering, was that challenging to try to work through some of that with South African counterparts?

WEISENFELD: Your memory is so much better than mine, or else you've done your research, and I didn't in advance for this call. So the early work was with justice, and it was the general conversations about development and bilateral framework. But we had a lot of conversations with the Ministry of Justice. Luis Coronado, was the USAID officer at the time, and he had very close relationships with the new Minister of Justice who had been in—as you pointed out in civil society—and we had a relationship with him before. And I think that enabled the justice work to move forward. I can't remember the name of that minister. He was South African of Indian extraction. He'd also had some time in prison, but we had had a relationship with him in civil society.

We worked on program agreements in the justice sector to obligate the money with the ministry, and then sub-obligated to NGOs. And that was new for us in South Africa; that hadn't been done before. We did that with the housing ministry as well. I absolutely spent a lot of time working on those agreements and negotiations with the two ministries. Because, as you point out, we had relationships with these ministers—prior relationships—it facilitated getting those agreements through. But we did have to have discussions with the Ministry of Finance—I think it was the Ministry of Finance that was the overall coordinator. We did have to have discussions about standard clauses that they weren't comfortable with.

Q: Yes, I'm sure they were difficult. One of the other big things that took place during that period was Vice President Gore and his commission with Vice President Mbeki. Were you involved at all with some of the Gore- Mbeki Commission work? I think that also involved a lot of dialogue with government on agreements and things

WEISENFELD: Yeah, we signed a whole series of MOUs [Memorandum of Understanding] around each of Gore's visits. I would get involved in doing initial drafts of a lot of those documents. It would then have to go through State L and the White House. We were still sending cables back then actually, I can remember. Maybe they still do. I remember Cap Dean—the Gore-Mbeki Commission was after Cap—when we started getting emails thinking of it as a cable and thinking that he needed to approve every email before it went out.

Q: Yes, that would have been interesting.

WEISENFELD: I remember sending cables back with draft text of these MOUs for the Gore-Mbeki Commission. I would have to run over to the State Department and hopefully have my jacket if I was called to a meeting.

Q: Right, did you attend any of the committee meetings or anything that involved the Commission? Because it was a big song and dance when the meetings took place.

WEISENFELD: I don't recall attending the actual meetings. I remember, as you would know very well, doing—what do you call it? What's the officer who manages the visit? I remember there was control officer work, and preparing memos and making sure the room was at that level of support, but I don't believe I was in the room for any of those meetings.

Q: Right, in terms of high-level visits, I believe Hillary Clinton visited in 1997 and President Clinton in 1998.

WEISENFELD: —So I could pause and go back for a minute. This looks like a mirror, but it's just a coaster. This is from Al Gore that I got on one of those visits; it's been on my desk ever since.

Q: Very nice. Gee, I never got one of those

WEISENFELD: It's really scratched up. It's a mess. You have to look at it hard. But I remember being on the receiving line when Al Gore came on one of the visits and I got this.

Q: Very nice. That's great. There was a lot of work. Speaking of a lot of work, when Hillary Clinton made her first visit, and then when she and the President went back to South Africa—in I think 1998—were you involved at all in those visits? Did you have any responsibilities?

WEISENFELD: Nothing serious. It was the same kind of lower-level control office functions and support. I do recall kind of shaking Clinton's hand. But I did not meet Hillary at the time. And you know, it was a big deal when Bill went to the embassy, or I don't remember if it was the embassy or if it was a site visit, and just being in a line of people and having him greet us and thank us. But it was—I remember Pam White.

Q: She was very actively involved in the planning.

WEISENFELD: Yeah, so Pam White was one of the chief control officers and I remember just being in a supporting role.

Q: Yeah, okay. So you didn't have a site that you had responsibility for? Okay, that's fine. One other thing I wanted to ask you about that I suspect might have required some legal advice. That was when Amy Beal who worked for NDI [National Democratic Institute] was killed, and there was an effort by her family to create an NGO in South Africa to continue to do work on peacebuilding. And I know the AID mission decided to support it. I was just wondering about the legal aspects that you were involved in. If there are any lessons learned on how you go about doing something that's a little bit outside of the box but important, and yet also potentially political as well.

WEISENFELD: Yeah, so it's no longer the case, but back then lawyers worked on grants to local organizations rather than contracting officers. Which was a great education for me because even before the Amy Biehl grant, South Africa was doing several hundred local grants a year. As you pointed out, before the end of apartheid, it was all local grants. Even after the end of apartheid, in a relationship with the government, the budget increased, but we continued to maintain hundreds of local grants. And I was the one who was doing the paperwork on those and preparing them for the mission director's signature. I think when I talk to people in AID today, they think that's crazy because it gets done by the contracting office. Frankly, I don't think it was the right decision to have the legal office do that, but it was hugely educational for me, it got me deeply involved in the program.

So yeah, I was absolutely very involved in the grant to the Amy Biehl Foundation. There was a lot of political pressure right away to do it. I recall, the timeline is a little vague, but I know that we spent a lot of time talking to the family about how to set up the basic organizational structures and oversight so they could meet our requirements. And I do remember some difficult meetings with them where we tried to convey that the worst outcome is that they get a grant and they haven't done enough advanced work, so there's later an audit that says, "There are unexplained costs."

I know you know this as well as I do, but if people hear unexplained costs, they immediately assume that means fraud, and it's not the same thing as fraud. But in the public mind, and in the mind of the Hill, I'd had that experience about some people on Hill from one party looking for whatever they could beat the other party up with. I don't recall how long it took. I just remember it being painful and political pressure constantly coming down to get it done. I think that Aaron was the mission director at the time, and he was very firm that we were going to push them to set up the right structure so they can comply.

Q: Yeah, right. That's an important lesson. Something you need to do, but you need to do it right as well. Sometimes people forget that latter part. I see it is time for us. I will stop right now, and when we reconvene, we can finish up on South Africa. There are a couple of other questions I might have on it. Maybe even talking a little bit about the local grants—any thoughts you have on how that relates to USAID's current priority on localization. When we come back to our session. I might ask you again another topic that was very prominent during the period you were in South Africa is HIV/AIDS, and I'm wondering if you had any exposure to the mission's thinking on that issue.

Q: This is Carol Peasley and it is March 3, 2022, and this is interview number three with Paul Weisenfeld. Paul, thank you again, it's great to be talking with you. When we finished up last time, we were getting close to the end of your time in South Africa, but there were a couple of other things we wanted to discuss. One of them you had mentioned was the large number of grants that the mission had with local civil society groups and NGOs in South Africa, which had long been part of the program there. I'm wondering if

any of that experience with so many local South African entities gave you some insights on localization, which is something that AID [United States Agency for International Development] is very much concentrating on right now?

WEISENFELD: Yeah, thanks. Thanks for asking that. And thanks again, Carol, for this opportunity. It's amazing to me that anyone will be interested in hearing about me personally. It is an honor. If I remember the number correctly, I think we were doing somewhere around 300 local grants. For a year I was the regional legal advisor at the time, and back then lawyers were involved in preparing the grants—not contracting officers—which I think was a good move to switch that to the contracting office. But it gave me a great education about the programs.

The U.S. [United States] government program for giving out grants is essentially the same, regardless of whether it's the grants being given by the Department of Health and Human Services, or USAID. The AID-R as we call it now—well AID-R is for contracts—but AID has its own regulations that add some bells and whistles on top of it, and some of them are additional restrictions that are particular to functioning overseas. But there's not a big effort to reduce the oversight. The overwhelming amount of attention I found on managing the grants was from a compliance perspective. It just seemed to me a little bit—and it still does—wrongheaded that we talk about increasing the capacity of local organizations to get funding directly from AID, where what we're doing is teaching them how to comply with this incredibly voluminous system of U.S. government regulations. When the U.S. government is not likely to be a permanent funder of them—there are good institutional strengthening aspects if you understand how to account for resources, how to document things, and ensure that your systems are in place. I don't want to minimize that.

There is an overall kind of professionalization that has to happen in organizations to get funding from USAID, but so much of it is U.S. government specific compliance. I had a boss, Mike Kitay, who used to say, “It doesn't make you a better person to know the AID-R, and it doesn't make them better organizations to know U.S. government specific regulations that aren't going to help them in the long term. I thought it was a distraction from some of the important work in meaningful ways, notwithstanding the professionalization benefits where I personally tried at the time to push, and the agency really wasn't ready to go there. And I think GC [Office of the General Counsel] GC was—I think it wasn't just me—in favor. What we used to call a fixed amount obligation agreement, and now they're called fixed amount agreements. There's a slight change in the name, but it's something similar where it's basically like a fixed price contract where you set out the goals, you make an estimate of the budget, and if they accomplish the goals, you pay them. And you don't worry about, “Did they get their laundry done while they were staying in a conference in a hotel overseas because it's allowed in the United States but not allowed overseas?”

We've had in my current job contract proposals we've submitted to USAID for \$60 million, and we get a question about, “Why are you budgeting \$20 for printer cartridges in a satellite office? And I think, really is that it?” The rules get you into unimportant

minutiae, and I think focusing on the end result, paying them for the end result, not worrying about little things, I think is the way to go. And I've heard Don Steinberg, who's a senior adviser, talk about moving more towards those agreements, but they're not something that USAID has used as much as I think they should.

Q: Thank you. That's very helpful. And a good point to get people focusing on what the results are and the reasons for giving the grant in the first place.

WEISENFELD: Not to belabor this point, but I think it relates to political issues that we talked about before that because of the political context of AID, there's kind of zero tolerance for a penny misspent. We've done work at RTI [Research Triangle Institute, where Weisenfeld is now Executive Vice President of International Development] for the old Canadian Development Agency (CIDA), and the World Bank and the Gates Foundation, and they pay attention to compliance issues and fraud, but not at the level of accounting for every penny. It's much more focused on the end result.

Q: Something for USAID to learn. Again, on South Africa, I know that because the program was very political, and you were beginning to work with a government that was a new majority led government, you became very much a key instrument in U.S. foreign policy. I assume there was a lot of coordination with the State Department. We may have talked about that a little bit the last time. I'm wondering how much contact you might have had with the political section, in particular, since they presumably were interested in the kind of contacts that you all had?

WEISENFELD: Yeah, I had a lot of individual contact with various people in the embassy: DG [Democracy and Governance], the econ section, the political section, the DCM [Deputy Chief of Mission], the ambassador. I think given the size of the USAID program, and the size of the embassy, and the importance of reestablishing a strong relationship, it was kind of ridiculous that there was only one regional legal advisor at the time. I left South Africa and went to Egypt, which we'll talk about, and there were three and at one point four of us. The money was bigger in Egypt, but the demands were in many ways bigger in South Africa. I was blessed because I got involved in everything. It was a huge education, but in some respects, there were some things I could only get involved in superficially because there was just so much going on.

Hindsight is 20/20: I think the agency should have had two lawyers. Some would have argued it was my first overseas post, so maybe I was too junior to do it. So yes, we got involved. The Embassy political section in particular, really, really wanted to get involved in everything happening in the governance space. Steve Brent was the head of the USAID governance office for much of the time I was there. There was someone else for a little bit, I guess Luis Coronado. I don't remember if he was in charge at one point, but Luis Coronado was there, Steve Brent was there. I think I told you the story when we weren't recording about a meeting Steve Brent and I had with the head of the political section in the embassy whose name escapes me, who was arguing against whatever Steve wanted to do.

I don't remember the details because this is now twenty-five years ago, but I remember the interchange and the tension very well. And I'm very clear that the political counselor was being quite abusive and yelling and using foul language and raising his voice and mistreating us. I think I was thirty-one or something at the time, and really didn't have the level of professional maturity to know how to respond. So, I was sitting there kind of dumbfounded. Steve said—and I'm pretty sure that this is an exact quote even though it's twenty-five years ago because it had such an impression on me, “That's a really interesting way that you deal with people, have you found it to be effective?” The political counselor just started mumbling and was unable to finish his sentences and the entire tenor of the meeting changed to be much more collaborative. It was just an important lesson for me in so many ways about being a professional in a difficult situation. And I wonder if Steve remembers that. Stephen probably pulled that out of his hat many times, and it may not have had the impression for him than it did for me.

Q: Yes, that's a catchphrase we should all learn to use. That's a very, very good lesson learned. Lastly, on the South Africa front, and we talked about this in some sense before, there was so much interest in the United States on what was happening in South Africa and groups wanting to become involved. Mandela had just become president; it was one of the most exciting things going on in the world. Lots of folks in the United States wanted to become involved in that, and I think that probably put a lot of pressure on the mission. I'm wondering if you were able to observe how senior management handled it when your mission becomes the sexiest new toy on the block? How do you manage that attention?

WEISENFELD: Yeah, I remember being in many meetings with—I wish I had remembered exactly when Aaron Williams got there, because I was there over three directors: Cap Dean, Aaron Williams and Stacy Rhodes. I feel like Aaron got there pretty early in Mandela's tenure.

Q: Yes, he came shortly after the transition right after the new strategy was approved because Aaron attended the strategy meetings in Washington before going to post.

WEISENFELD: Yes, so I doubt that makes sense because I don't really recall having to deal with that with Cap. I think with Cap, it was the more sensitive issues around black empowerment. Aaron kind of pulled me into a lot of meetings with the South African government counterparts and with USAID in Washington. Henry Reynolds was the deputy at the time, both real pros, experienced professionals. And I learned a lot from watching the two of them: they were very insistent on always keeping USAID Washington informed constantly about what was going on with those kinds of high-profile relationships. Subsequently in my career, I've seen other mission directors who tried to keep USAID and Washington at bay, they wanted to be in charge. And Aaron, maybe because he had worked so many years in Washington, was insistent that we weren't going to do anything on any high-profile issue unless we were in alignment with Washington. So that was one thing that we did.

On the ground, I know that we were very clear on encouraging U.S. entities that were highly connected to come in and find local partners and not do anything on their own,

and make sure that they were following the lead of local partners. I can't remember the details of so many of them, but I'm sure some of that worked out well and some of it worked out horribly, some were open to advice, and some were not. In development, there's a book from years ago called *More Than Good Intentions*, and there are a lot of people who just thought, "The fact that I want to do the right thing and I jump in is good enough." And it's not good enough, particularly if you don't understand the local context.

Q: Two other quick thoughts before we leave South Africa that just occurred to me. One is related to the Foreign Service nationals, the South African staff. Do you have any observations on the role that they played and whether or not we made sufficient use of them?

WEISENFELD: I think we absolutely did make sufficient use: Harold Motswane, Naomi, Farooq Mangera. I'm not remembering last names of people, but those three in particular come to mind as people who were absolutely critical in helping us understand which organizations were going to be effective, and were representative and inclusive. They had very senior influential roles, and we didn't make key moves without them. As you know very well, one of the challenges we had there is we couldn't bring them to certain meetings in the embassy that were in the secure zone. And they couldn't get access to classified information. So, there was always a balancing act. I experienced this in Zimbabwe years later where the embassy in Zimbabwe said, "We're the United States government. We make decisions in the interest of the government. We're not going to be led by locals when we're not sure exactly what their interests are." So, you have to balance that out and make independent assessments, but they were hugely influential on certain key people. On the health side, HIV was starting out to be a much more known threat back then. That was the early days of HIV.

Q: Yes. Then just one final question on living in Pretoria, whether that presented any special challenges. I mean, you weren't in Joburg, which was a more liberal progressive city than Pretoria. I'm just curious whether that presented any challenges that you want to talk about or not?

WEISENFELD: So, you know, in the United States, I grew up with people just considering me black. And in other countries, people look at me and say, "Why do you think you're black?" So, in South Africa, people would look at me and assume I was colored. My wife at the time was Haitian-American, who is much more identifiably Black, much more of an African look. She had a harder time than I did because we lived in an Afrikaans neighborhood in Pretoria, where we were the only people who were not white. So, we never made any friends in the neighborhood, people weren't really friendly to us. We'd regularly have nothing that was a threatening incident, but people would consider us a mixed-race couple, which was not considered appropriate. And that was a little bizarre to us because we didn't think of ourselves that way. We had a lot of incidents where we were out with my daughter, who is closer to my complexion, and people would assume that my wife was the housekeeper. I don't know that she was more uncomfortable, but she dealt with more circumstances like that than I did.

Q: Did the embassy or the AID mission provide any sort of counsel to folks because I know they wanted to have people with diverse backgrounds to work there. And I'm just curious whether they ever helped people deal with it.

WEISENFELD: No, no one ever raised it. I never heard anyone raise it or ask a question about it. I would imagine the world is different today and people would today. It's something that I certainly talked to Aaron about and Henry Reynolds who were both African American. I would talk to the local staff, but aside from Aaron and Henry, for a long time there weren't any other people of color in the USAID mission. There was Don Keene, who was my predecessor, but he wasn't there any longer. I got to know Don because he was still living in South Africa and he would tell stories about his experiences there. He was there years before so they were worse.

Q: I was just curious about the degree to which support was provided. I know it was an issue for some of our staff, even in Moscow in the 1990s. I don't think that the embassy or anybody provided any—

WEISENFELD: —I never overlapped with Alonzo Fulgham, but at senior levels in the agency, there were very few people of color. We all knew each other, and people would reach out to each other and commiserate about their experiences, but there was no counseling. It was kind of joint commiseration rather than official counseling.

Q: Okay, maybe we will have to figure out how to talk some more about that, get that network talking. So, you were in South Africa for four years, and as it became time to leave, you moved on to Egypt in the general counsel's office. Does the general counsel's office decide where it wants to send its lawyers, or is it done through the open bidding process?

WEISENFELD: I don't actually think I know the answer to that question because I feel I was just told where I was going.

Q: I think that's probably the way it worked for the attorneys.

WEISENFELD: I suspect it was the general counsel's office who worked it out with HR. I don't know what it's like today, but it was on the open bidding. I did submit bids, and then there were a lot of conversations. My suspicion is they decided, but you did have to bid.

Q: So, the general counsel's office decided that Egypt was the best place for you to go, and this would have been the summer of 1999?

USAID/Egypt, Regional Legal Advisor, 1999 – 2002

WEISENFELD: That's right. Interestingly, two other families that we were with in South Africa who we were close with also moved to Egypt at the same time. The Brents—Steve Brent and Michelle Brent— and Jim Harmon and his wife Sahar also moved. We've all

stayed friends ever since having served two consecutive posts together. My daughter told me just last week she was staying over at Elizabeth Harmon's house for the weekend.

Q: That's wonderful. I think we should be getting some of the kids to do their oral histories of growing up as AID kids. So you go off to Egypt, which was a very different program from South Africa. Everything about it was different, so how was that experience?

WEISENFELD: On the side, I'm a history buff. I mostly read history when I'm reading. Before I got to South Africa, I read like a dozen books on South African history and literature even though I was familiar with South Africa. And then I did the same for Egypt. I read—what's his name—Naguib Mahfouz, the Nobel Prize winning author. I read his trilogy, the *Cairo* trilogy, and I read several of the history books. Egypt is just a tremendous, magical place with an unbelievable history, so I got really into Egypt to the point that Stacey Rhodes, who is mission director in South Africa, came to Egypt and I spent a weekend showing him around and ever since then, he's called me "the tour guide."

I can describe details about the temples and the pyramids. I loved it. I could see the pyramids, a tiny sliver of the pyramids from my office. I got there shortly after the bombings, maybe it was six months, eight months after the bombings in Nairobi and Tanzania. USAID had been in a commercial space downtown, and they were moved out before I got there. A new building was being constructed, and we were in a converted warehouse out in the desert in the middle of nowhere. But I spent a lot of time involved in participating in contracts and issues for construction of the new facility.

Q: Now you went into the general counsel's office there. You earlier said there were three or four lawyers there. Where were you in the pecking order?

WEISENFELD: So, I went in as the senior lawyer.

Bill Pearson was the second mission director. Dick Brown was the director when I arrived and Tony Christiansen Wagner was the deputy mission director. Dick went to Winrock [Winrock International] after he retired.

And Bill Pearson came after Dick. Like I said, Tony Christianson Wagner was the deputy. In many ways, it was very familiar because it was a very high-profile mission. One of the Intifadas, the first or second [the second], was going on in Israel and Palestine. There were close negotiations with Egypt. Ambassador [Daniel] Kurtzer was our ambassador. He was a super high, powerful guy in the State Department bureaucracy. I got to go to meetings with him several times. It was kind of the State Department operating in my mind at its absolute most professional. They really sent top notch people there. Couple of interesting stories I could tell is that the administration changed when we were there. There was a big change overnight after September 11, 2001.

Q: Why don't we start with what happened with 9/11? Because that would have been the change of administration. Had they already started or were most of the changes after 9/11?

WEISENFELD: Most of them were after. There were a few changes before, but most of them were after. One of the things I really learned—the portfolio was big and we divided it up. I maintained the infrastructure work under me, which was very high profile. Given my background in law firms, that's what I was interested in personally and I learned a huge amount about energy: energy sector in particular, but infrastructure in general. And that was a big portfolio. And then I worked with Roberta Mahoney who was the head of the economic office at the time on the policy reform programs, which was very high profile where we were doing cash transfers for macroeconomic policy reforms to the tune of about \$200 million a year.

Q: Right, and those were disbursements tied to different kinds of policy conditionality. The mythology is that disbursements were made in spite of the fact that conditions were not met. Can you talk about that at all? And the degree to which changes were in fact made and disbursements made? Or were there pressures to do disbursements?

WEISENFELD: Yeah, that's the big change that happened after 9/11. I was very involved in negotiating the precise language with the Ministry of Economy. And then it had to be approved through the State Department in Washington. But we were the people on the ground negotiating, “You need to change this policy in this ministry, and it's worth how much?”

Q: And negotiations with Washington as well. Did you negotiate with Washington before you took it to the government?

WEISENFELD: There were kind of general conversations, much more high-level conversations with Washington, before discussions with the government, and then there was a lot of back and forth. My sense—this is also a long time ago, and Roberta would be a good person to talk to as well—we were often told, “You have to disperse money, you can't have a big pipeline.” So, there's pressure from Washington, “Get the money out the door,” and then there's pressure, “Don't disperse money if there's no meaningful change.” So, you're trying to meet somewhere in the middle, and we were often told, “You're being too easy. You need to have more stringent conditions.” So, we'd negotiate more stringent conditions. Not all the time, but as you're trying to balance the objectives of not too big a pipeline, maintain a good relationship with a key partner while this Intifada is going on, and stimulate meaningful change, you're trying to be rigorous.

Q: Do you recall any of the kinds of conditions or reforms? Do you recall any of the specifics??

WEISENFELD: I wish I could. I probably will if I keep thinking about it. Some of them were certainly in the labor field. And there were certainly things that kind of predated the whole doing business concept, the World Bank doing business report. I'm certain some of

them were kind of in that vein about regulations on businesses. I believe somewhere on subsidies for agriculture or energy, and that was highly, highly sensitive, but I can't swear to that.

Q: Okay.

WEISENFELD: I know we talked about those issues. I don't remember if they ended up in the documents. And a lot of these documents may have been classified at some point. I don't know to what extent I really should be talking about it. There was an absolute shift in tone from "You're being too easy on them" to "You're being too hard on them" after 9/11. Because once 911 happened, there were two big changes. One is when the Bush administration came in, there was a feeling that, which I think often happens, "All of you career people are holdovers from the old administration, we need to review everything you're doing because we don't trust you." And the person who was sent out to review what we were doing was Liz Cheney.

Q: I think that's important to mention. I've heard about it from others.

WEISENFELD: So, I very vividly recall being in a meeting with the Senior Staff Bill Pearson and Tony Christensen Wagner, Roberta Mahoney, David McLeod—I can't remember who else—where Liz Cheney read us the riot act and, "You don't know what you're doing. Egypt hasn't moved in the right direction in"—I don't know if she said 1,000 years but something like that. My view then and now is that there's a lot of truth to what she said about Egypt hasn't moved in the right direction, but the idea that it was our fault was far-fetched. And there's almost too excessive a belief in the power of development assistance to completely transform a country. Not recognizing that at best we can help them if they want to go in that direction. I think Korea is the example of that, right, they move in the right direction, but if Egypt doesn't want to change, there's nothing we can do. People were despondent.

There's another great lesson in leadership that I still use to this day After she left the USAID office—I think we were in our new offices at this point, which were very luxurious, and did not send the right impression in some ways. The new offices were paid for from local currency generation that we had to spend, but it's hard to explain that to people. She left, went back to the embassy, or wherever she went. She was still in the country, and I remember we had a follow up meeting with Bill Pearson there, and everyone on the senior staff was just whining and complaining, "This is unfair, she doesn't know what we're doing. She doesn't understand the challenges. We're trying to balance and deal with the Egyptians," so people were just complaining. And Bill Pearson said—I don't know if you know Bill—"Okay, are you done? Are you done whining?" And then he said something like—I've used this in meetings over the rest of my career, but I don't remember the exact words—"When you leave this room, I don't want to hear a single one of you whine. I don't want to hear one word out of your mouth whining because this is an opportunity to demonstrate that we are the smartest, the most effective people in development, that we know what we're doing, that our programs are going in the right direction. And that's what we're gonna do. We use this as an opportunity, and if

you leave here whining, it's gonna affect morale. You need to demonstrate to the staff that this is a great opportunity.” And in many ways, I thought that’s what leadership is about.

Q: Very good. That's a wonderful approach, I think. Did you hear whining from some of those people later?

WEISENFELD: I’m sure there was.

Q: But this was before, so this started before 9/11.

WEISENFELD: That was before 9/11. And then 9/11 happened, and the word was “Why are you being so hard on Egypt,” because [Egyptian President Hosni] Mubarak called [U.S. President George W.] Bush and said the Egyptian economy is in a freefall, and we need help, and the fastest thing they could do was disperse the \$200 million that we were sitting on because we've been told to sit on it until they made real changes. I've never told the story in public. Roberta and I went back in and renegotiated the agreement to try to thread the needle on something that we could say that they were doing. Not that we could say that they were doing that: we can recognize changes that they could make in a short order that were legitimate, and we could disperse the money because this was all going to be audited. And it was very hard to get some people—the USAID folks—I can’t remember who was the Assistant Administrator—they understood the issue. It was not going to help anyone that we dispersed this money and then the papers had an audit. No one wanted an audit that ends up in the press making us all look bad. Gosh, why can't I remember the Assistant Administrator? People in the White House just seemed incapable of understanding that, which to me was a fairly straightforward, simple issue that you have to make this solid to withstand audit scrutiny.

Q: Absolutely. I think that's an important lesson. If you have to disburse, then you try to work out the kinds of conditions that are doable. That also helps the reformists within government who also want to be pushing at least some change, even if it's not as much as they would like. It's important. Now, at the same time, not to belabor Liz Cheney's role, but at the same time, she was a DAS as I recall, a Deputy Assistant Secretary in the State Department. She was the force behind creating the Middle East Partnership Initiative [MEPI], which ended up getting a lot of money itself to fund programs. Once she had her own pot of money to do the kind of programming that she thought was most effective, did she back off a little bit from the AID mission then?

WEISENFELD: No, she kept reviewing programs and wanting to review disbursements. What needed to be approved in Washington has changed over time, as you know. I think at one point it was at the individual project level she wanted to approve every project before we signed an agreement. I think that moved up to a higher level, if I recall correctly, but she was still requiring some kind of oversight and approval by her on a broad range of things.

Q: Do you recall having to try to figure out what MEPI would be funding? Were they doing things in Egypt as well?

WEISENFELD: I don't, I was not involved in that.

Q: Maybe they weren't even working in Egypt. It may have been just in other parts of the Middle East. Or just through regional programs. Just curious.

WEISENFELD: Yeah, it could have been, but I wasn't involved in that. I'm aware of it.

Q: As time went on, human rights concerns became an important part of the dialogue with Egypt. Was that it all during the period you were there? Were there discussions of concerns on that front?

WEISENFELD: Yes, I recall some meetings and concerns about that and us funding local civil society organizations. I can see in my head the face of the local staff person who was in charge of that area, but I can't recall her name. There were some concerns about it, but I distinctly remember her and that team feeling that they just didn't have enough resources, that there wasn't enough attention to it. Dana was the American person who was in charge of that issue. She was a DG officer. She was American.

Q: And did the State Department consult when doing their annual Human Rights Report? Was there any interagency discussions on those issues that you were aware of?

WEISENFELD: I'm sure there were. Not that I was involved in. There was a period of—could have been as long as six or eight months where I was the acting Deputy Director. Was it before Bill came or after Bill left? Where Tony was the acting director and I was the acting Deputy Director? Tony was out of town, I would go to country team meetings, and I was still thirty-five or thirty-six at the time. I remember being frightened to go, “Oh, my gosh, I have to go to a country team meeting with Dan Kurtzer.” He's just a powerhouse and I was always worried he would ask me something I didn't know the answer to. It was a stretch of maybe six-to-eight months, so I had insight into that level of embassy conversations back then. I recall human rights issues being discussed, but not as not as the overriding concern. The overall issue was keeping Egypt on sides on how we were dealing with the Intifada that was going on and recovering from 9/11.

Q: One other thing that took place within that first year. I'm curious how you all planned for Y2K? Do you remember how we all thought the world was going to come to an end at the end of January 1, 2000? I'm wondering what it was like in Egypt. Did people evacuate? I know there were authorized departures from missions around the world for people and I'm just curious again, at the cradle of civilization, how you all handled the new millennium.

WEISENFELD: I don't recall anyone evacuating; I do recall a lot, a lot of hype about Y2K, and it's going to bring down computer systems, and the whole world's going to collapse. The Egyptians were very nonchalant about it. I remember meetings trying to impress on them the importance of dealing with the issue. I distinctly remember some Egyptians, government officials saying, “Welcome to our fifth millennium!”

Q: We have experienced this! It may be new to you, but—

WEISENFELD: There's a lot of frantic effort preparing for it at the embassy and at the AID mission. We were still in a separate building at that time. I guess they still are probably because I can't imagine they abandoned that beautiful building they built. It didn't affect me in the legal office that much. So, I would hear in meetings, the IT [information technology] folks being kind of being frantic about it. But as you know, it just didn't turn out to be as devastating in any respect as people thought.

Q: Okay, go back again to the economic policy reform programs a little bit. I recall hearing that the mission was supporting some Egyptian think tanks that were key to identifying some of the policy reforms, am I correct? It was one of Mubarak's sons who was the head of one of those think tanks, I believe.

WEISENFELD: I believe so I can't swear to that. I think I would not have remembered that, but now that you said that, that sounds right. But I can't swear to it; I can't confirm.

Q: Okay. We'll follow up with that when we talk to Roberta Mahoney because I think that's my source on this. Were there other things in Egypt? You mentioned the infrastructure program. Was there any conditionality linked to any of the infrastructure support work we were doing? Did you recall financing and things like that?

WEISENFELD: So, I don't believe there was a direct link. The infrastructure program was funded separately, but because we were doing a lot in energy, I think there were conditionality aspects in energy that were conditions for release of the policy money but wouldn't delay the release of the energy money. Now, when I was there, we did a rebuild of the control systems for the Aswan High Dam, which is one of the most fascinating projects I've ever worked on in my whole life. And the timeline for that was based on the tide of the Nile. So, once you agree, you're doing it, you've got to meet this schedule. Otherwise, you would bring down the electrical production system for half the country or something like that. And they pulled out the old control system. I remember doing multiple tours and visits with the engineers. The control system before we started the project was the original system put in by the Russians in the 1950s. And they had to rip out the whole thing without affecting the dam and energy production, and do it only during low tide and then have the new system put in and up and running before high tide came in several months later.

Q: Wow. I had never heard that we had worked on that. The big infrastructure project that I've always heard about was the water in Alexandria, the water and sewage system.

WEISENFELD: So, in Alexandria, in the big city in the south where the temples are—Aswan? I can't remember. I should; I'll Google it. And then we did Cairo wastewater one and two, which at the time, were done before I got there. But the litigation around Cairo wastewater went on for something like ten years. The entire time I was there, I had to get involved in litigation on Cairo wastewater. There were some

people who were killed during the construction, and their families were suing, and there were subcontractors who were suing. It's 20 years later, it wouldn't surprise me if it's still going on. But at the time, that was the biggest single project in USAID's history. It's now I'm sure been dwarfed by Afghanistan and Iraq issues.

Q: So was the work done by Egyptian contractors.

WEISENFELD: The work was done by Egyptian contractors, because they were host country contractors, but in some cases, people will try to sue the U.S. government as well. Cairo wastewater is just a fascinating story about development because the data I saw—it was done before I got there—the before and after health conditions was stunningly dramatic. I mean, the numbers of deaths from waterborne diseases just plummeted. The difference was night and day. But it was very difficult because the project took something like ten years. People didn't make the connection, like, “Oh, it's happened because of this!” The timeline was so long, and it was all underground. And I remember Ambassador Kurtzer complaining about this, “The Japanese built the [Cairo] Opera House, and everyone thanks them, and we saved you know, how many hundreds of thousands of people from dying from waterborne diseases and no one recognizes our work. This is a standard story about development, whether you're doing capacity building, or even when we are doing infrastructure, we're doing kind of foundational infrastructure, not the opera house.

Q: That's an important insight to add. The infrastructure work in Egypt was probably quite profound. And I think most Egyptians and most Americans don't know that at all. Don't know the story at all.

WEISENFELD: Yeah, so I was in—it was Aswan. I was in Aswan, walking through a construction site for the sewer system when the planes hit the World Trade Center. And I recall—I was with Jim Harmon, who I don't know if you know him—our driver came running out and said, “You have to come, you have to come with me!” He didn't speak very good English, and Jim and I both spoke poor Arabic. His was a little better because his wife is Egyptian. We were in the middle of a meeting; I've never had an experience where a driver pulls us out of a site visit. After like a minute, we realize this must be something very serious because otherwise he's not going to do this. Then we got in the car and he kept telling us the World Trade Center was attacked. There's a big complex in downtown Cairo called the World Trade Center and terrorist attacks were not uncommon there. So, we thought, “Wow, it must be a really big attack for him to pull us out of a meeting in Aswan.” But we just assumed it was happening in Cairo. And he took us to a hotel and everyone in the hotel—hundreds of people—were watching a TV. And we kind of walked in and looked at the TV and realized it was the World Trade Center in New York. And we got in the hotel early enough to see the building collapse, the first tower collapse, and then flights immediately started to get canceled, and we had a big scramble to get back to Cairo, and then everything went on lockdown, and people were frightened—Sorry, I'm starting to get emotional.

Q: Yes, I can't quite imagine sitting in Aswan and watching the towers go down.

WEISENFELD: So, I was trying to call my family because my family is all in New York and my brother at the time was the head of emergency services for the power company Con Edison, and he went to the building. You couldn't get in touch with anyone, so there was a long time we didn't know if he was okay. His boss actually died: went into the building and he was standing outside the building. At the time, I also remember every Egyptian friend calling and saying, "We're with you."

Q: What did they do? Did they close missions in the region, or did they take any actions with regard to staff in certain countries?

WEISENFELD: My recollection is that we were kind of on lockdown and stayed at home for a bit. They had additional reminders when we went back to work about varying new routes and "Don't come in unless you have to." People didn't work remotely back then, so there wasn't the ability to just keep working from home. Yeah, it's funny. What I remember more is just the outpouring of support from local colleagues. I remember that a lot less than what the official response was, what we had to do.

Q: From that day, policies in Egypt and strategies and approaches, and a lot changed.

WEISENFELD: Yeah.

Q: Again, on FSNs [Foreign Service Nationals], the Egyptian employees in the AID mission. I know that there were many very strong Egyptian employees, and a couple of them have done oral history interviews as well. But do you have any thoughts on the roles that they played, and perhaps even the degree to which they were involved in some of the policy work that you were doing with the government, you and Roberta?

WEISENFELD: Ali Kamel was at the highest FSN level and then there's another gentleman who was in the health area who passed away. He was just a wonderful person.

Q: Yeah. Ali has done his oral history, actually.

WEISENFELD: So, Ali was a brilliant economist and had great relations with the Egyptians and was a huge influence on our thinking. I can't remember who was there before Roberta. Oh, yes, I do. What was his name? He had glasses. And I ran into him a few years ago.

Anyway, Ali was a huge influence. We had the same issues: we couldn't bring Ali to certain meetings in the embassy. I think the embassy was always wanting to insist that, okay, we want his advice, but we're making decisions based on what's in our interests. That was even more on steroids when I got to Zimbabwe than anyplace else. But Ali was a huge influence. Abdul _____ was the health person who similarly really kind of chartered our course in the health sector. In the infrastructure area, which was huge, it was quite different because the senior FSNs were engineers. And it was much more

architecture/engineering oversight of plans rather than decisions on what sectors—they weren't contributing to strategic decisions. It was much more project level oversight.

Q: You mentioned that the infrastructure contracts were host country contracts. I'm wondering if you have any thoughts about host country contracting and the pluses and minuses?

WEISENFELD: It's a lot of work to get in place because the host government is doing the contracting but they still have to follow our rules and procedures. So, there's a lot of oversight and sitting over their shoulder creates opportunities for tension where they think that we're telling them what to do. And it's fundamentally so we can be in a position of being able to say to Congress or the IG [Inspectors General of USAID] with confidence that the contracting was done in a way that was free and fair. It takes more time. It does absolutely generate more local ownership.

I said it was a local company, but I think there was a French company that won the Aswan High Dam. So, it's not limited to local companies. Lots of opportunities—yeah, I'm sorry, I misled you there. Because now that I think about it, I'm glad you asked, there are a lot of opportunities for the U.S. companies to complain to the Hill to Washington, “Why do we have to deal with the Egyptians in this contracting process?” So you have the hand holding and oversight of the local and country authorities, which creates potential tensions, and then you've got to deal with Bechtel [Corporation, engineering company] or _Alston, two large companies, or whoever's complaining about the process from their side. And that doesn't end once it's in place. There are nonstop complaints about invoices because to get an invoice paid can be complex—and these are big invoices for construction. I'm building a house now personally, so I'm going through this with a custom house builder where I'm managing the construction payment approval schedule. So approving every payment can be tough, and if you're building something like a sewage system, individual payments are huge. So when you get an invoice, there's a lot of work to review and approve that invoice. That's not typical for a USAID program because this involves on-site inspections and all sorts of stuff. Every invoice payment is an opportunity for tension between all of those parties.

Q: We had to approve each of those, the disbursements against the invoices. So, I'm sure you've had a very large Egyptian staff doing all those inspections,

WEISENFELD: Yeah, it's very educational, you know, I learned a huge amount from it.

Q: You can manage your own construction now. I'm an intellectual supporter of host country contracting, but I also know that I've never managed it or borne the brunt of the increased workload associated with it.

WEISENFELD: At the end of the day I'm a supporter as well. I know in my current role, now, if I say to my staff, let's go after something that the host country contracts, my contracting people will say, “Oh, my gosh, do we really want to do that?” Because they're just worried about being immersed in details rather than the larger development benefits.

Q: When you were doing that in Egypt, were there AID staff on the selection panels, as well as Egyptian staff?

WEISENFELD: Yeah. There were. We have a host country contract for a large program in India, a water program, right now. It's funded by the World Bank, so we're dealing with exactly those issues.

Q: Right. I assume the World Bank almost exclusively does host country contracting. Are there other things about Egypt that it's important to cover? I'm trying to think while looking at my notes. On the management front, was this your first job in which you were managing other people?

WEISENFELD: Yup.

Q: Did you get any training? Did you participate in any of the management training that AID had or were you learning while doing?

WEISENFELD: The answer is yes, I did. And I wish I could remember exactly when it happened. I went to one of those first-generation FEI [Federal Executive Institute] courses out in Virginia. It was before they shortened it because I believe it was very long. It was more than a month I believe. And I think one of the pieces of feedback we gave them is it was way too long. Not because the content wasn't good, but because it's difficult to get a lot of people who can devote that much time. Maybe I'm exaggerating. Maybe it wasn't over a month, but it feels like it was.

I remember we had an entire week on communications. That was fabulous. I now think of public speaking and dealing with the press as a relative strength of mine. Not that it went from night and day in that course, but that got me on a path that I think has served me well for the rest of my career. I think it was right before I left Egypt, before I went to Zimbabwe, so it wasn't early enough to affect my supervision of staff in Egypt.

Q: But getting you ready to take on a much bigger, much bigger assignment. It's interesting that the idea of training on communications, because I think that there's very little of that, in general in AID. Was that the only time that you received training on communications?

WEISENFELD: I still remember this and we've brought this to RTI. So, I've done it again, recently, a couple of years ago. I think we had one day at RTI, but they had a film crew come in, and they would film us in various kinds of interviews, one where we would be told, "Okay, you have overnight to prepare a fifteen-twenty minute speech." They'd give us a topic. So, it was a pre-prepared speech. Then they had another exercise where you have five minutes, you're going to be interviewed on something. And then they had differences with the satellite interview versus an interview in person, which is very different. If you're in a satellite interview, we were in a room by ourselves. You just see a camera, you don't see a person. And they filmed all of this and played it in front of

everyone in the class. Everyone got to critique everyone else. And you can see what your tics are.

Q: Yeah, that's important, and probably something that we all need to invest more time and effort in to learn. Anything else in Cairo? In 2002, you went off to Zimbabwe to be mission director. Did you take the first step to throw your name into the hopper for Senior Management Group positions or were you approached by people to consider bidding on a position? Do you remember how that all started?

WEISENFELD: I think I did. I think I started, but can I tell you one little last story of Cairo?

Q: Okay.

WEISENFELD: So, I can't remember if this was before I was assigned or while I was in the process of getting assigned to be director in Zimbabwe. At the time, I was very ambitious. I thought, you know, "I want to be a mission director and I want to do it when I'm still quite young." And then I had a health incident in my last year in Egypt where I was having a lot of stomach pains, and my wife kept telling me to go to the doctor, and I kept ignoring it. I went on a trip to Alexandria to visit an infrastructure project, and I was just horribly sick, and threw up in the hotel room the whole time. I came back to Cairo, and I felt better, so I didn't go to the doctor. And then the next morning, I was found unconscious on the floor of my office. And I was taken to the doctor and was told that my appendix had burst three days before.

Q: Oh my goodness.

WEISENFELD: And I was not really appreciating the impact of it at the time because the doctor said—my wife was there with me at the time—and he said, "Well, we need to operate, your appendix is burst." Well, I took out my calendar and said, "When can we schedule it?" And he said, "You don't understand. You don't have time to go home and get a bag. You could die from this any minute because it's been burst for several days. We have to go like this second to the hospital and do immediate surgery." And I said, "I have to tell the embassy because the health unit has to approve it. So the embassy delayed the surgery by several hours because they were trying to get me MedEvac [Medical evacuation] to Germany. And the doctors in Germany agreed with the surgeon in Egypt that I needed to be operated on immediately, and that they shouldn't have waited these hours to go back and forth. I was very nervous because he was an Egyptian doctor I didn't know. So I was in the hospital for maybe a month, I had to have multiple surgeries.

Q: Wow.

WEISENFELD: Because they couldn't clean everything out. I had peritonitis. And it took multiple surgeries to clean everything out. And it was a big life changer. I've kind of focused more on things other than professional ambition after that. That's kind of when I started playing music again and started thinking about other things.

Q: Wow. Goodness gracious. There is a moral here about one going to the doctors when you have problems, but the other is having perhaps more confidence in local medical resources.

WEISENFELD: The doctor was fabulous. I was seen by a doctor from the embassy afterwards, and they said, “Wow, this guy was really top notch.” I was in a private hospital in Egypt, that was a level of personal care that you don't get in America. It was a hospital for wealthy Egyptians.

Q: Yeah, I mean, hopefully the embassy has those kinds of relationships, so that they can deal with emergencies, rather than evacuating people out,

WEISENFELD: Yeah.

Q: So you began playing music and being less ambitious, but meanwhile, you'd been assigned to Zimbabwe?

WEISENFELD: Yeah.

Q: You said late in your time in Cairo that last year, you went to the FEI [Federal Executive Institute], senior management training course? Was there any other kind of special training or anything that you got before going off as mission director?

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WEISENFELD: I recall a mission director training, but I think I was already in Zimbabwe at least a year. It was kind of a new mission director training. I was still pretty early in my tenure there. I remember Jane (I can't recall her last name) being in the training with me. A lot of people who are first time mission directors. You may have come in and spoken to us. I mean, they had DAAs [Deputy Assistant Administrators], and AAs [Assistant Administrators] and other mission directors come in and speak.

Q: So, you left Egypt, you probably went on home leave? And then you did a consultation in Washington? Was there much attention in your discussions in Washington with you being a first-time mission director? I'm just curious whether anyone in the Africa bureau or elsewhere spent any time talking to you about what you were about to embark on.

WEISENFELD: Keith Brown was someone who spent a lot of time talking to me by phone. He started calling me and talking to me about it when I was still in Egypt before I left. I had several good phone conversations with Keith.

Q: And at that point he was one of the DAAs overseeing Southern Africa, right?

WEISENFELD: Keith also called me when I was in the hospital, I remember. And I think he said, “What the hell are you doing? You're in the hospital. Take care of yourself.”

Q: And his wife's a doctor; he should have sent her.

WEISENFELD: I remember there was such a lot of attention on Zimbabwe. I kind of felt like I kept going from the frying pan into the fire into the frying pan into the fire from South Africa to Egypt to Zimbabwe. There was a lot of attention on Zimbabwe. I would get calls from [Andrew] Natsios [the USAID Administrator] when I was in Zimbabwe, and I would get pulled back for more frequent consultations. I saw Natsios every time. Elliott Abrams of the National Security Council wanted to talk to me every time I was back in the country. For a small country, given what was happening with the farm takings and [Zimbabwean President Robert] Mugabe turning the country into a kind of an autocratic state, Washington was paying a lot of attention.

Q: Right. Obviously, the land issues had been there since the time Zimbabwe became independent, but they hadn't really expropriated large amounts of property. It was always there as a threat, but by 2001-2002 Mugabe began to implement expropriation of farms.

WEISENFELD: The big takings and throwing people off land happened before I got there, may even have started in late 2000, but I think most of it was 2001. So, when I got there, people were still reeling from it, and they were still talking. They were still doing some land takings in my early days, but the large numbers had happened before. What was happening when I got there was the big clampdown on civil society. Because people were reacting to what had happened. And then he started clamping down on civil society. And then all of this resulted in the food crisis. It's so hard to remember the timelines, but I believe a lot of my first two years were spent dealing with overseeing food crisis issues.

Q: And the food crisis because the land was expropriated, and then it was no longer growing—

WEISENFELD: —combined with the drought, they had a historic drought. And the issue quickly became a kind of political football around GMO because Mugabe said, “It's Frankenstein food and we're not going to take it and we only want non-GMO food.” The U.S. Department of Agriculture refused to label food GMO or non-GMO. And Mugabe's government said we'll only take you if you certify that it's non-GMO. USAID was absolutely caught in the middle of that debate. At the time, I was just thinking, for goodness sakes, can't we just say non-GMO and figure out what it is and get it in here? The response made sense because we don't consider GMO a problem or an issue. The U.S. farm system doesn't track it. GMO, non-GMO corn is all blended together. Farmer A has GMO corn, farmer B doesn't, it all goes to a silo, and it's blended together, so there's no way to certify. At the end of the day, they did find a way to certify. We did get shipments in beforehand, and it was months and months of negotiation, so for many years, I had one of those USAID food bags I had framed on my wall for many years just to remind myself that I spent months of my life working on that issue. The head of the World Food Program would come down regularly as well as senior people from the

Department of Agriculture. Natsios was calling all the time, and from a USAID perspective, we all felt, “People are starving! Why are we taking months to figure this out?”

Q: Did they do any third country purchase of food because I know that at various times, we've had the authorization to be able to buy food locally, for example, in South Africa and be able to bring that in.

WEISENFELD: We weren't doing that. WFP [UN World Food Program] was bringing in food from elsewhere as well. There were just so many issues. At the time there was not good collaboration between OFDA [Office of U.S. Foreign Disaster Assistance], Food for Peace and the mission. Everyone had their own strategies. And I remember calling a strategy session at my house because OFDA, and Food for Peace people were based in South Africa, and they would kind of fly in periodically and meet with local partners and give instructions and leave. I wouldn't know what they were doing, and then the ambassador would yell at me about something he heard from someone. The ambassador was Joe Sullivan at the time. Then the next ambassador was Chris Dell: both very brilliant, but both tremendously challenging personalities and strong personalities. I remember calling a big strategy session and insisting that OFDA and Food for Peace and the mission econ office come and meet. We spent like two days at my house kind of hammering out a strategy. I didn't know anything about humanitarian assistance at the time, but that was my education. We had the highest rate of HIV in the world, so we had big HIV programs. We had the big civil society programs supporting local democracy efforts, and then this massive food aid program. And that was kind of everything we were doing. Everything else was kind of put on hold at the time.

Q: Some of the issues revolved around the land issue. Did you all ever engage with the government on the land issue itself, including options for agrarian reform that would not destroy the economy? Or, perhaps the British were doing this.

WEISENFELD: Yeah, but not from an assistance perspective. I was in a lot of meetings with the ambassador where we would raise that from a policy perspective about improving relations and improving their macroeconomic conditions. One of the things I've always found frustrating about USAID outside of Egypt was we didn't really have the kind of macroeconomic conversations that made sense to have as a development agency. In Egypt, we had a big economic reform program. We had economists and we were engaged in that dialogue. Everyplace else I've served, we kind of ceded the ground to the World Bank and the IMF. We talk at kind of a sub sector or project level or sector level. It was really the embassy having those conversations rather than us. The head of the country director for the UK office at the time was a guy named John Barrett who I just had the highest respect for, and he became a good friend. I forget where he went right after Zimbabwe, but after his next country, he became the head of the research and policy office for DFID. Then he retired and now he works with me at RTI.

Q: Very good! You were there at a difficult time. I think at the very beginning of the program in Zimbabwe, there were discussions with the government about economic policy, but it's never been a priority there. It is unfortunate.

WEISENFELD: In Zimbabwe, Peru, and Egypt, all of them are countries where I would regularly experience, as you're driving around, you see evidence of USAID investments that have improved the country. It's the grain silos with the USAID logo on them. I remember in Peru going to university—the top private university in finance—we were doing some event there and the president of the university took me into a room and showed me a plaque from the 1940s saying that it was founded with U.S. government assistance. It still had the handshake, it wasn't USAID. You saw that all over Zimbabwe at the same time that they were tearing the country apart.

Q: Yes. You mentioned HIV/AIDS. You were in Zimbabwe at the beginning of PEPFAR. And I assume that Zimbabwe was one of the original fourteen PEPFAR [United States President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief] priorities. Or perhaps not because of the political concerns in the country.

WEISENFELD: That was a very, very difficult issue.

Mugabe would call the ambassador and say essentially, “This is evidence of American hypocrisy that we are not included in PEPFAR. You don't really care about the people” The Minister of Health—the hospital was named after him—Parirenyatwa, his father was the first African doctor in Zimbabwe, and he became a doctor and became minister of health. He was the minister, and the main hospital had his last name on it. He would berate me in private and in public about this when PEPFAR was first announced. It was in the papers first before we got any kind of official communication from Washington. Shortly after I first heard about it I immediately got a call from the minister, and I wasn't able to explain exactly how it would work in Zimbabwe—at that point, I had no idea whether Zimbabwe was going to be included in the list of targeted countries. I just promised to get back to him. And then we had to work very sensitively on a letter explaining why they were not included despite the fact that they had the highest infection rate in the world at the time.

Q: And how did you explain this?

WEISENFELD: I don't recall the details. I recall drafting a letter. I think my health officer—whose name escapes me—wrote it and I rewrote it. I don't remember, I can't remember what the argument was.

Q: Did the letter go from you? Or did it go from the ambassador?

WEISENFELD: It went from me.

Q: Were you engaged with Washington at all trying to make the case to be one of the fourteen countries? Who were you arguing with and who were you trying to convince?

WEISENFELD: The answer is yes. I believe the response from Washington was, which wasn't an unreasonable response, was essentially we have questions about whether the money is going to be used effectively in Zimbabwe given the kind of the overall disarray. The Bush administration was bringing in PEPFAR and MCC [Millennium Challenge Corporation] as new initiatives. The idea was to focus on targeting assistance in a limited number of countries where it could have the most impact and be effective, and is Zimbabwe going to be effective? It's not, they're the neediest, but under these principles that wasn't sufficient. So, I imagine my letter made some reference to that point without saying you're incompetent, trying to say that sensitively. I am not going to remember the names of the people who we were talking to, but it was the Global Health Bureau in the Africa Bureau. And as much as the Zimbabwean government was losing staff and key talent, there were a lot of high-capacity civil society organizations that could effectively use the money in Zimbabwe to respond to human needs. But we weren't successful.

Q: But you weren't successful, right.

WEISENFELD: That's not to say we didn't have a significant budget.

Q: You still were using development assistance funds for HIV/AIDS. Were most of your partners local partners or were they U.S. entities? Do you recall?

WEISENFELD: We had a mix. Pact was there. PSI [Population Services International] in the health space. We were doing lots of social behavior change work. The joke we always had is that the head of the PSI program was Andrew Boehner. And he would introduce himself, "Yes, my name is Boehner and I sell condoms for a living." He was a great guy and very effective as a Chief of Party.

Q: As I recall, when PEPFAR started out, and they focused on the ABC strategy [Abstinence, Being faithful, and Condoms], they really wanted to make sure it was a balanced effort. There was a lot of focus on A and B. And I know that there were lots of debates within the global health community vis-à-vis the PEPFAR program, and I'm wondering if those debates also affected other HIV/AIDS programming that wasn't PEPFAR. Did you all feel constrained in any way by what the policy choices were being made under PEPFAR? Or was that just something your health officer would have handled?

WEISENFELD: Absolutely, we were all subject to the PEPFAR policies whether we received PEPFAR funding. And I was absolutely kind of dragged into a lot of those conversations. What effectively we did is we added a new range of partners that were religious organizations. I left before the data was in—Back then we weren't as good about collecting and analyzing data on effectiveness as I think development programs are today. It's a great opportunity for some sort of study on what was the impact of the organizations that were only pushing abstinence versus other organizations. But we started funding a lot of local religious groups that would do abstinence campaigns.

Q: So, the PEPFAR policies affected all HIV/AIDS programming.

WEISENFELD: Yeah, I remember the head of the health office was Peter Halpert back then. We still had the big agreements with PSI where we're doing condom distribution, and we're doing social behavior change campaigns. There were billboards and radio spots that we did. We did a soap opera radio show at the time that had pretty high viewership. Some of it was about abstinence, but we focused on behavior change messages for HIV prevention. What was I going to say about HIV? Another point—

Q: Was it affecting your local staff?

WEISENFELD: In South Africa, we started to see that early on, and in Zimbabwe, absolutely. We had several staff who passed away from HIV at that point. Oh I remember now what I was going to say. The big issue that came up toward the end of my tour was when antiretroviral drugs started to become available. And President Bush pushed for them to be distributed. I heard from the field that the experts, including Andrew Natsios—remember Andrew Natsios saying at the time, “Well you have to take the drugs on a certain schedule—that Africans don't have watches, they can't tell time.” Or, whatever he said. It was always believed that he said Africans can't tell time. I don't know if that's true. The story we heard was that all the experts said, “This isn't going to work,” and that President Bush personally said “It's the right thing to do; we're going to do it.” I distinctly remember my expert colleagues, the epidemiologists in both CDC and USAID, saying, “This is a dumb idea. It's not going to work. It's going to divert resources from other stuff that's more cost effective.” The story is they were all wrong. President Bush was right. It was the game changer that he expected it to be.

Q: Yes; that's right. For cost reasons, USAID was arguing against a treatment strategy. My understanding is that it was Dr. Fauci who was pushing for treatment.

WEISENFELD: Wow.

Q: USAID was apparently going to meetings and arguing against it.

WEISENFELD: You know, the history of the agency could have been different because I think that led to, “You need MCC outside of AID.”

Q: Yes; the main issue, I think, was cost. It would not have worked if they hadn't been able to negotiate the reduced costs with the pharmaceutical companies.

WEISENFELD: Yeah. But my understanding is that the Clinton Foundation was key in order to—

Q: —Yes, right. There were a lot of people involved. An interesting time to have been in Zimbabwe.

You had mentioned one of the ongoing parts of the Zimbabwe program was support for democracy and governance. Do you recall the kinds of things you all were doing? Was there an election during the period you were there?

WEISENFELD: Yeah, I was an election observer. I traveled to remote parts of the country during one of the elections that Mugabe stole. I remember being mistreated by the police as we tried to get into polls. I was charge d'affaires when [opposition leader of Movement for Democratic Change and challenger to the 2002 Zimbabwean presidential election] Morgan Tsvangirai's treason trial was going on. I had instructions from Washington to go to the trial and a whole bunch of ambassadors were going from most of the big European countries. The Canadians and us are going, I remember being the only person who was not white among the group of ambassadors. And the police came out and said, "You can't go in." I don't think I spoke—one of us said, "We're a group of ambassadors," and someone said what we were there for. The police officer knocked me down. I always assumed he knocked me down because he probably assumed I wasn't an ambassador but was there accompanying them because everyone else was far older than I was. I was still in my thirties.

Q: Wunderkind here!

WEISENFELD: Combination of skin color and age. I remember there was a conversation about whether we should file a formal complaint that the Zimbabwean government had accosted the charge d'affaires. I don't know that I would remember all these stories until you start asking questions. It's kind of amazing the things you experience in the Foreign Service over your career.

Q: Did you get into the trial ultimately?

WEISENFELD: No.

Q: No, no you didn't. And he was the opposition candidate, right? So, he was arrested after the election? To make sure that he would be quiet.

WEISENFELD: We were supporting groups that were supportive of the opposition. We couldn't directly fund the opposition, obviously. We would meet with them, you know. I had Morgan over to my house several times. The opposition eventually splintered, but at that point they were not splintered. I had meetings with several of these people. We wouldn't meet in the offices; they'd come to the ambassador's house or my house. The kind of official position is we're meeting with a whole range of political groups: the government and other groups. But the government took it as we were working actively against them with the opposition. And I think that's the position they probably would have taken no matter what we did. I was told at the time by security that I was probably under surveillance. It certainly affected me because I felt tense and anxious the whole time I was there, but I don't know that I ever saw anyone following me. I couldn't tell if someone was listening on the phone or something, but I was always told that I had to assume that.

So, our programs were lawyers for human rights kind of groups, local groups that were advocating for broadening civil society, and free elections. We also brought in NDI [National Democratic Institute] and IRI [International Republican Institute], of course. There was a whole election piece of it, trying to support the process of free and fair elections, and elections monitoring for not just the big presidential but other elections. And then groups that were advocating for full rights for the displaced. One of the big issues I dealt with involved a local community outside of one of the towns on the outskirts of Harare that was protesting a great deal. The community was called Murambatsvina and Mugabe just bulldozed this whole suburb of -- I feel like 30-40,000—a large number of people. And they went to live in the bush. It was just horrific. So, we were doing humanitarian assistance to them, but also supporting advocacy groups against displaced and human rights groups. It was a wide range of support and some of our counterparts would get beaten up and thrown in jail on a regular basis.

Q: Were there political tensions among the Zimbabwean staff, or were they pretty much aligned with those wanting more freedoms?

WEISENFELD: They were 90 percent aligned with those wanting more freedom. There was a small group in the embassy, not in USAID so much, who would argue that there were some reformers in the ZANU-PF [Zimbabwe African National Union-Patriotic Front], Mugabe's political party, and that we should seek out the reformers. Most of the local staff thought they're just a whole corrupt cabal, and there's no one to deal with in that group.

Q: Could you talk a little bit about how you worked with the embassy on interagency relationships on all this. It sounds like you were obviously working very closely with them on this whole array of humanitarian and political issues.

WEISENFELD: It's the closest relationship I've had with the embassy, as much as the ambassadors were challenging to work with. It was daily contact. They were insistent on everything being hand in glove. The ambassadors were reviewing our portfolio at a micro level. Individual grants we were giving out, they wanted to know who the organizations were, and it was much more than I was used to. USAID and Washington's view at the time was this is kind of an unusual circumstance, that the policy from the State Department and the assistance are so closely related in Zimbabwe. That's just the way it's gonna be. I'm still in touch with both of those ambassadors that I worked with. I had a good working relationship with them. Not that we were always in agreement. One, I don't want to go into too much detail, but one of them insisted that one of my staff had to leave the country. And I disagreed and could not get any support from Washington, so the person left and went on to another assignment.

Q: This was an American staff member?

WEISENFELD: Yes, an American. And they had a stronger view than I've seen elsewhere that, yeah, we'll listen to local staff, but they're not going to participate. It was difficult to get some of the local staff in meetings with the senior embassy folks. Deprose Muchena was our most senior FSN. And he was in the democracy area. He's now the head of the Open Society Institute for Eastern Southern Africa. He's a luminary in democracy in the region.

Q: And where's he based? Is he based in South Africa?

WEISENFELD: He's in Joburg.

Q: Yes. I think someone tried to put me in touch with him at one point. We wanted to try to do his own history interview as well.

WEISENFELD: I pulled him into a group called the WILD Forum, Women in Leadership and Development.

Last year, the woman who runs it, Fiona [Macaulay]—someone who I've come to be friends with, put together a panel for the WILD forum last year called the Boys' Club. Because all of the panels in prior conferences have been pretty much all women, this was a panel of only men focused on how we support women's leadership. And she wanted someone from overseas as well, so I pulled Deprose into it. It's the first time I've been on a panel with him since I left Zimbabwe years ago, and he was just not surprisingly fabulous.

Q: That's good. That's great.

WEISENFELD: I had a RHUDO (regional housing and urban development)program there for a while. Chris Milligan was the head of the RHUDO and I used to go support Chris a little bit when I was regional and based in South Africa. We didn't talk about that at all.

Q: I meant to ask whether you were regional. I hadn't realized that you were. You were so busy on South African stuff. My goodness, and we made you regional as well.

WEISENFELD: I was young. I was like thirty-two or something. I don't know how I worked and did everything I did. So I would travel occasionally. I didn't primarily cover Zimbabwe, but occasionally I traveled to Zimbabwe because I had worked for the RHUDO office in Washington. So, I'd support Chris. I closed out the missions in Swaziland and Lesotho with Malika Magagula, who—I don't know if you know Malika, she was a PSC. She's American Ethiopian, but she was a PSC [Personal Services Contractor] in the Swazi mission. She and I let the staff go, sold the properties for both the missions in Swaziland and Lesotho, and then I was the only person covering Angola. I traveled to Angola once a month, and I loved going to Angola. It was a completely different experience. I believe we did the first GDA [Global Development Alliances] in Africa that anyone knew about.

Q: I think you did. I have been talking to Holly Wise and yes, I think it was with Chevron.

WEISENFELD: Yes. I negotiated a deal with Chevron with Nicholas _____ who was the acting mission director who was a wild man.

Q: Yes.

WEISENFELD: There's a lot of inappropriate stories I could say about Nicholas. Nicholas would take me into active demining projects where he'd say, "Don't walk over there!" He was a total cowboy, but I really loved doing that work, going to Angola negotiating the deal with Chevron. I feel like all of these were just completely different learning experiences and the difference from what we were doing in Angola versus South Africa was incredible. And Aaron Williams used to say, constantly, "I want you to support Angola as much as they need you," but then I'd have to travel, he'd say, "Oh, why do you need to go to Angola this week?"

Q: I remember Angola during that period. I was making visits there as well. It was a pretty wild place.

WEISENFELD: And the ambassador, who doesn't remember meeting me at the time was—

Q: —Don Steinberg!

WEISENFELD: I remember him very well. I was in meetings with him talking about the Chevron deal. I had to brief him on it, unlike when I briefed Princeton Lyman—even before I got out to South Africa—I don't think I said that. Sorry to go back and forth. But before I got to South Africa, when I was working for the housing office, I negotiated the housing guarantee agreements with FNB [First National Bank, one of South Africa's "big four" banks] and these two Afrikaner banks that were the first private sector housing guarantee deals ever at USAID. They were specifically to encourage the white Afrikaner banks to do mortgage lending to Black South Africans. But that was before I was assigned to South Africa. I was still in Washington—. I was working with Joel Kolker, who became a great friend.

Q: —It was when you were still in Washington—

WEISENFELD: —supporting the housing office, and I briefed Princeton Lyman on it on several trips out there. And I remember once I went out, maybe four, five, six months after I'd seen him, but only the second time I met him, and I went to the embassy Christmas party. I'd only met him once. He was on the receiving line. I got up to him and he said, "Paul! How's the housing guarantee deal coming?"

Q: Wow. Another wonderful story about Princeton Lyman.

WEISENFELD: He was brilliant.

Q: Did you also have to cover Botswana?

WEISENFELD: Margaret Alexander, who passed away, Margaret was there. She was a dear friend and she was killed as the deputy director in Nepal in a helicopter accident. She was the RLA of Botswana and we would coordinate if I couldn't go to Angola and see if she could go. So, the reasons I would go to Zimbabwe were when Margaret couldn't go and they had alerted me.

Q: So, you were traveling throughout the region, and closing out missions in Lesotho and Swaziland. I think Swaziland was very complicated because of the property, and as I recall, one of the final projects was an effort to try to create a foundation or an endowment of a foundation, which I believe became a legal issue for a long time.

WEISENFELD: It did. I worked on that; I don't remember the details, but I did work on it. And I worked on a South African Enterprise Development Fund as well. Which became a problem.

Q: Yes, yes. Right.

WEISENFELD: That was being pushed from on high, "You will do this."

Q: I was an observer on the Southern Africa Enterprise Development board when I was acting AA. And it was obvious it was going to be problematic. Drew Luton and I were both heavily involved in that on the staff side.

WEISENFELD: I know. I thought it wasn't going to work just from the early days of negotiating and meeting the staff. This reminds me—I tried to get Malika, who's still a good friend, to be hired by USAID in South Africa because she's such a talent. She ended up moving to South Africa and becoming Chief of Party on a PACT grant, so she worked for us in a different way. But the head of the health office in Swaziland was also a spectacular talent, Anita Sampson, and she was hired by USAID South Africa. She had both Swazi and South African citizenship. She might still be there. She was there for many years.

Q: It's interesting that you were working on the close out of those missions because the regional office was headed up by Valerie [Dickson-Horton], who had been the mission director in Swaziland before going to Botswana to head up the regional office. I thought her residual responsibilities were overseeing the closeout of Swaziland. It must be that Margaret had been tied up with other things and you got pulled into it.

WEISENFELD: Yeah, it was a lot of work, but it was tactical. The decisions had already been made. And I'm selling property and firing staff and I was just there to help execute.

Q: Going back to Zimbabwe, you mentioned that you were talking about the housing guarantee work in Zimbabwe that you became familiar with when you were traveling up from South Africa and working with Chris Milligan. Chris was not still there when you got there as mission director; was he not?

WEISENFELD: No, I can't remember who it was. The senior local staff person has since passed away. I believe I can't remember who the American staff member was at that time, but the program was winding down. We were at the point where Washington was saying the country's falling apart, you're gonna focus on humanitarian assistance, democracy, and HIV, and you need to wind this other stuff down. As you know, you can't just turn off ongoing programs, so it took a couple of years to wind them down. And there was a humanitarian aspect of housing anyway because there were people who were displaced. So, there were emergency shelter aspects. So we kept some of the local staff with the housing expertise to work on the humanitarian pieces.

Q: You had mentioned that donor coordination was pretty good. Were there any special working groups vis a vis the democracy stuff that either involved embassies and/or aid missions? Oftentimes you get both an ambassador and an AID director involved in things that other countries have just one person involved. I'm just curious if that was the case in Zimbabwe.

WEISENFELD: The first normal country I've worked in where we had regular UN-run coordination meetings that people came to at high levels. In Peru, there were UN meetings, but these were taken very, very seriously. The head of the UNHCR [United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees]—the UN resident rep called these meetings, there were all the UN agencies. And for lot of countries' ambassadors would come. Our ambassador did not come that frequently, so I was usually the representative. But I'd see the Dutch ambassador there. And things pretty much always lined up with us, and the Canadians and the British and Dutch in total agreement, and everyone else kind of all over the map. It was just so funny how it was so predictable whatever the issue was. I didn't even need to ask the British what they thought. I would know what they think! And I'm still friends with the woman who was the Dutch ambassador at the time.

And John Barrett, who was the British country director. I do remember, however, something that the UN res rep [residential representative], Victor—something—said. He was an Italian guy. He tried for a while to convince me to put my name in the hat to be a UN res rep. He said, "You should leave USAID, you need to be at a higher level." I said, "I don't really think UN res rep is higher level." But he said, "You're talented and you should—." And I thought, "Gosh, the UN would just drive me crazy," because his job was always trying to get other people to give them money to run their programs. But he did have a very important coordination role. He had a voice and access to the government that we didn't have at that point. But I'm sure that's the reason why these meetings were so highly valued and everyone went to them because Mugabe wasn't going to see us, but he was always going to see Victor, and we could try to make sure our views would get represented. I can remember a meeting where people were complaining to Victor about the UN being too soft on Zimbabwe. And Victor said—it's one of those key moments that

I thought, “He's right!”, and it stuck with me forever. He said to all of us, “Zimbabwe is a member of the United Nations in good standing. All of you run the Security Council. You need to use your position on the UN Security Council to give me instructions that they're not a member of good standing, and then I'll treat them differently, but until you do, I can't treat them any differently than I treat any other member.”

Q: That is an important lesson.

WEISENFELD: Okay. Um, yes, but there are principles in the UN Charter that they're violating that we need to stand up for. And does that mean Russia is a member of the UN in good standing right now?

Q: I don't know. It was a pretty resounding vote the other day.

WEISENFELD: Yeah. That's true. There was no kind of UN vote at the time. Maybe there was and I don't recall it, but I don't think there was a UN vote at the time condemning Zimbabwe.

Q: Since this was your first time as a mission director, do you have any lessons coming out of that experience to share?

WEISENFELD: I think part of it is you can't undervalue the importance of relationships, and you have to make the time and effort to establish strong relationships with a wide range of people at the embassy, internally in the USAID mission and then your government counterparts. I didn't have a deputy. When I left, they realized the job was so complex, they needed a deputy there. And you can get sucked in on “administrivia” in a way that makes it difficult for you to step back and see the big picture and kind of set strategy or participate in policy discussions. I think if you don't have a deputy, and there's a lot of that work—I don't know what the answer is. You have to make sure you're allocating time to think. I struggle with that in my job now, trying to allocate time to think because it's easy to get sucked in every minute into the crisis of the day and trying to find ways to avoid that is crucial. And I think it's harder for a first-time mission director to resist the pressure to be oversubscribed. So relationships.

The other thing I think I felt, and maybe there's no way around this, if you're young, I was thirty-eight when I got to Zimbabwe. Most of the people who were in the mission, the Americans, were older than I was, so I felt I had to prove myself, I felt I needed to show I'm the smartest person in the room all the time. What I realized—not just now, I mean, I've realized for a while: it's so present in my current job—whenever I am brought into a meeting on an issue, it's usually because it's gotten to a crisis level. People have been working on it for a while. They're asking me to make a decision, and I'm very much aware I'm the least informed person in the room, but I'm supposed to make the decision. They all understand the issue at a level of detail that I'm just not going to understand. So, your job is not to be the smartest person in the room. It's not to make all the decisions, it's to make sure the right decisions get made, and whether they're by you or by someone else. And that's hard, I think for a first-time director, particularly if you're young, and

you're trying to prove yourself. Self-deprecating humor helps you get around it. I will say explicitly at meetings all the time, "I don't know anything about this issue. I know a lot less than you guys do," and I did. I wouldn't have said that when I was thirty-eight.

Q: Good point. Any thoughts about how a first-time mission director should work with Washington? By the time you were in Zimbabwe, email was well ensconced, and you were probably getting two million emails a day. Given the time difference, you probably arrived at the office each morning with lots of email advice and questions. Any thoughts on how to manage Washington?

WEISENFELD: The best articulation of this I heard was from when I was the USAID Coordinator for the Haiti earthquake response. The SOUTHCOM [United States Southern Command] combatant commander said at a 7:30 AM call with everyone involved in Haiti. He wasn't a combatant commander; he was the field general. He said, "Whenever I see that 10,000-mile-long screwdriver coming to tighten a little screw, I know that I'm not giving them enough information. Feed the beast even more!"

Q: That's a very good one. That's an important one for first-time mission directors.

WEISENFELD: Well, I'm saying don't hide information. Just keep feeding the beast.

Q: Yes, right. Okay, now that's good.

Q: Today is June 1, 2022. This is Carol Peasley for the third interview of Paul Weisenfeld. When we last spoke, you were finishing up your first-time mission director's position in USAID [United States Agency for International Development] Zimbabwe. I was wondering if you have any other final thoughts about your time in Zimbabwe, and then if you could talk a little bit about how you ended up going from Zimbabwe to Peru. The Latin America Bureau is not famous for having mission directors come from outside of the Bureau.

WEISENFELD: Thanks. Zimbabwe was my first time being a mission director. Zimbabwe did not have a large budget or a large staff. There was no deputy director, I think there is now, but it was still a high-profile post because the administrator, Andrew Natsios, would communicate directly with us in Zimbabwe. People on the Hill or in OMB [Office of Management and Budget] were very interested in hearing directly from me.

So, I had two concluding points. One point is, given the profile as a first-time mission director, I did have a strong sense of fear, like, "Oh my gosh, do I really know what I'm doing?" There are a lot of celebrated people who have been in development for a long

time, maybe one of them should have had this job. So, I did have a sense of fear about whether I was ready enough for the challenge. Imposter syndrome.

The second point is it gave me an incorrect sense of how interested people in State and OMB and the NSC [National Security Council] and the Hill were in USAID's work. I just thought, well, that's normal. I came back for consultations, and I spent a lot of time talking with high-level people, like I would talk to Elliott Abrams at the National Security Council and I'd talk to Tim Rieser [senior foreign policy aide to Senator Patrick Leahy] all the time. I just figured all the mission directors did.

Q: Well, you were in for a surprise then. But how did the assignment to Peru happen? Was it simply through the bidding process, or did the Latin America Bureau contact you? Or did you contact them?

WEISENFELD: I was really interested in going to Kenya afterwards, and I had bid on, I'm not going to remember the other countries, but I'm sure I bid on Kenya as my number one choice. I had conversations with the Africa Bureau -- I believe it was still Keith Brown at the time. I know it was Keith Brown when I went to Zimbabwe. I can't recall if he was still there in 2006.

Q: No, I think he may have left by then.

WEISENFELD: I'm not remembering who it was. I left in 2006, so the conversations would have started in 2005, probably. The Africa Bureau was very interested in me going to Kenya, and then I got a call from, I can't remember who it was in the Africa Bureau then if it wasn't Keith, saying, "You're not going to be able to go to Kenya, and you need to come back for consultations and speak with folks in the agency about your next assignment." And I was really worried. I was told to speak with Fred Schiek who was the deputy administrator at the time. This was 2006, which was still the first couple of years of the Iraq war. So, there was a giant musical chairs exercise to try and fill positions in Iraq. So, Bambi Arrellano was the Mission Director in Peru. And I guess it was Fred and Natsios at the time who decided she [Arrellano] needed to go to Iraq as Mission Director. And they were just doing a giant shift of musical chairs. So, Fred said, it was a very short meeting, and he said, "You're going to Peru." I said, "I don't speak Spanish."

Q: He said, "No problema" (No problem)."

USAID/Peru, Mission Director, 2006 - 2010

WEISENFELD: So actually, we did have a conversation about the fact that, I don't know that I used the word closed-shop, but I do recall talking about that. I think part of the reason that the LAC [Latin America and Caribbean] Bureau developed that way, and I came to appreciate this after several years in Peru, is people often say, "Well, Spanish is easier than Arabic, for instance." And having spent some time trying to learn Arabic in Egypt, I think, of course, that's true. But it's also completely irrelevant because no one

expects you in Egypt to conduct business completely in Arabic, you say your compliments and greetings, and then you move to English.

In Central America, you can find a good number of people who speak English. In South America, that's much less true. So yes, Spanish is easier, but your performance is expected to be at the highest level, and it's really hard to get there in a short amount of time. I think that feeds into spending your time and everything so that you can function, especially as a mission director. I honestly think my first couple of months, I was not effective at all.

Q: Did you have Spanish? Did you go to FSI [Foreign Service Institute] or somewhere else before you went to Peru?

WEISENFELD: I think the Agency made multiple mistakes around this. It probably was not the best idea to put me in Peru having personally benefited from it in many ways, intellectually, personally, professionally. I got tenure in Spanish when you needed a two. When I got tenured, you only needed a two. I studied Spanish on my own and with a private tutor at the time; I never went to FSI. When I was sent to South Africa, I was not a tenured Foreign Service Officer. And they said, "Well, it's urgent, you have to go to South Africa. You'll study Spanish while you're there and take the test." And that really was not the best thing for the Agency or me, so I took Spanish part-time. I took the test and I got a two, which, you know, there's a huge difference between a two and a three. That was a decade before I went to Peru.

So, ten years later I didn't speak Spanish, and I had to really learn it from almost scratch. You know, like many people I could say "*No hablo español*" (I don't speak Spanish). And the same thing happened, they said, "Well, you don't have time to go to FSI because we have to pull Bambi out right away, so go to Peru. You can take eight weeks without going into the office and go to an on-site immersion course." And after seven weeks, I said, "I need more time," so I pushed it to ten weeks. I don't know if you've ever done that [a language immersion course].

Q: No, I haven't done an immersion course.

WEISENFELD: From day one, I had three different teachers each day because it was eight hours a day and it was too much for the individual teachers to teach for eight hours a day--

Q: But not too much for the students to learn for eight hours a day.

WEISENFELD: I went through ten weeks of nonstop training and none of these teachers spoke a word of English, so the first couple of weeks was a struggle. And then I passed the test, I got my three.

The next week I went into a meeting with the Prime Minister. It was a donor meeting, so it wasn't just one-on-one. There was the UN and the EU person – ten or so. I can't

remember what the issue was they were talking about. And they got to the point where someone said something to the effect of, "Okay, what's the position of USAID?". I don't know what I said because I had no idea what we were talking about. Yeah, it took me easily two to three months before I became marginally effective. Now I speak fluent Spanish because I was there working for four years and also because I married a Peruvian and we often speak Spanish at home.

Q: After the training and being in the office and working.

WEISENFELD: Yeah. And you know, I did continue to struggle. I continued to work, I continued to take classes. I'd get in early every morning and struggled to read the paper in Spanish to make sure I was kind of understanding what the issues were and was up to date. You know, you get fairly quickly to the point where you can understand but to speak in a way that doesn't sound like you're a child takes a lot longer. I think if you go to any new post as a mission director, you're not as effective on day one as you are six months later or a year later, and this was just an added complication.

Q: Right. Just out of curiosity, particularly in those first six months when you were still working on your Spanish, did you take others with you to meetings with the government, so that either senior FSNs [Foreign Service Nationals] or other staff could sort of double-check to make sure that –

WEISENFELD: I did take others to meetings. I tended to rely a lot more on the local staff, because as the Agency moved away from the closed shop of the LAC Bureau, I had a bunch of other American staff whose Spanish was too weak as well. Several of them came in with stronger Spanish than I had. But within a year, my Spanish was better than those who didn't continue to work at it.

Q: Right. Kudos to you for being able to succeed in mastering Spanish.

WEISENFELD: Yeah, I mean, it provides you an opening. Having a facility with a language provides you with the ability to have a deeper understanding of the cultural context. I appreciated it, but I still question whether it was the right move for the Agency [USAID], because it took a while for me to be as effective as I felt I needed to be.

Q: Right, and they took a risk on you, which was a relatively safe risk, because you worked very hard to succeed with language, but that's probably not the case with everyone. I don't know that every new mission director would work as hard as you did. Their gamble worked out.

WEISENFELD: Embarrassment is a strong motivator.

Q: So, did you have home leave as well, or did you go directly to Peru in 2006?

WEISENFELD: I do not remember, I think I may not have had home leave. There was a sense of urgency, and I think I didn't take home leave. I took some leave later on.

Q: Could you maybe say a little bit about what the USAID program was in Peru at that point in time? What were you all focusing on? The program has ebbed and flowed over time because of the political issues in the country, and I'm not sure what it was like when you first got there.

WEISENFELD: Yeah. I think you told me you've been there at some point, right?

Q: Yes.

WEISENFELD: Peru is a fascinating place. It's one of the countries that received U.S. assistance earliest under the predecessor to USAID, and it's just remarkable to travel around the country and see all sorts of evidence of successes from pre-USAID and the earliest days of USAID in creating institutions that are important institutions in the country. And we don't do a good enough job, as lots of people say, at recognizing those successes in the agency. There have been periods where we did a lot of strong governance support and health support following Fujimori [Alberto Fujimori, former president of Peru].

When I got there in 2006, the health and education portfolios had really shrunk to be much smaller. We combined them into one office under, I forget what we called them, social assistance or something, under one office director. I think the agency does that a lot now, and I think combining them really doesn't make a lot of sense because they are very different areas and if USAID is going to add value, as development experts, I think you have to have a deep technical understanding. Mushing them together because somehow health and education are soft is an operational solution not a development one. We were still involved in governance from a civil society perspective, and there's a really interesting point I'll get back to about that.

The bulk of the program when I got there was really driven by Alternative Development. This means finding licit livelihoods for people who are somehow engaged in some part of the value chain of cocaine production. That was the big thing, and there was some small environmental stuff, too. I haven't kept track so much, but I suspect environmental work has increased because of concerns over climate change, and Peru occupies a crucial geographical location from that perspective. But the big gorilla in the program was Alternative Development, and it was an agricultural development program implemented from the perspective of dealing with the illegal drug value chain.

Q: Was there a large DEA [Drug Enforcement Agency] presence as well in the embassy? Were they going in and burning fields as well as interdiction like in Columbia?

WEISENFELD: There was a DEA presence that might have been as large as Colombia's. The DEA did more of the police side of investigating drug cartels. What we had, and this was a huge presence, was INL [Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs], the State Department INL. They handled the assistance to the Peruvian counter drug agency.

I became friends with the head of the Peruvian counter drug agency because we provided assistance to them and so did INL. I spent a lot of time in their offices and I spent time on their helicopters going out to the field, which was always frightening. They used these old Russian helicopters, and they looked in terrible, terrible shape. The Peruvians outlawed spraying. This was a big issue because in Colombia the INL sprayed. In Peru that was illegal, and the U.S., was always trying to convince them that spraying was safe. They never budged while I was there, so it was manual ripping out of crops. They would go in with large teams with U.S. equipment and rip this stuff out of the ground, and they'd have a police guard. And the police in Peru, like a lot of countries in Latin America, are a national police. It's hard to visibly distinguish them from the military because they're armed police. So, I attended a number of those kinds of field trips on a regular basis.

They [Peru's counter drug agency] would sometimes get attacked by the community, other times they would get attacked by people who were within the drug cartels. The whole plan was we would then go in and offer people, "Your crops have been ripped up, here's a better way to live." I remember very, very early on one of these joint INL-USAID field trips, we went to one community where we had our contractor (CHEMONICS) working with the community on early crop assistance. Their coca had been ripped out of the ground sometime recently, weeks, a short number of months. We really thought that they were going to string us up and kill us. There was just such hatred that we would ruin their lives.

Later on in the same field trip we went to another community that had been within our Alternative Development program for several years. These are isolated communities, typically, so we had to take a boat for a couple of hours. It's always amazing how the drug cartels can get this stuff out. We have trouble getting licit crops out. And we got out of this boat and people were on their knees crying and thanking us for saving them and pulling them out of the life connected to the drug cartels. This was within a few months of me being there, and it really defined a lot of my experience for the four years because that was so much of what we did.

There were big arguments that I can spend a lot of time discussing, "Should the drugs be legal, should they not be legal? Is our approach the right approach, shouldn't you spend more money on drug demand reduction in the U.S. versus trying to address the supply?" I think there's a lot of validity to those arguments. Obviously, the response is, "Well, it's because the drugs are illegal and it creates an illegal cartel around managing it." But in the communities where they were dependent on coca, what you basically saw is, the public health workers, the teachers, they didn't want to be there and would leave, resulting in no public services for the population. There were no jobs, all the legal businesses lost their people who fled. The communities initially thought, "Oh, we'll get some extra money growing some coke on the side." Within a short period of time, the entire economy changed to being solely –

Q: It became just coca production then, wow.

WEISENFELD: Everyone you talk to in those communities, without exception, knows someone who was killed by someone in the drug cartels. Someone was objecting to this and then they'd get killed. Maybe the answer was, "If you legalize it, this would go away." It was hard to see that because it's not like marijuana, where we're going to allow a legal business for cocaine. There's also a lot of research that INL would regularly share with everyone on how damaging cocaine is to the brain. It's highly addictive and it's damaging, so do we really want to allow it? That's a long-term debate that we were always immersed in. Every minute, you'd get dragged into the debate about legalization if you're in a program that's working on alternative development.

Q: Did you see successes in the program where alternative crops actually did succeed, and a community was able to move on and away from its dependence on the drug cartels?

WEISENFELD: Absolutely. Is it success at the macro level? I think it's questionable. There was a ten-year period that included the four years I was there where the mantra was "focus." It probably still is today. So instead of having Alternative Development programs dispersed throughout wide areas, we focused on one of the key regions. It was one of the key regions that was a top region for cocaine production, where we thought there was at least some level of political will among the regional government to work with us. We focused on the city of Tarapoto, in the region of San Martín.

We focused on this region, and there was an intense focused effort over a ten-year period. Even in the four years I was there, I saw dramatic change. I saw large communities within this region move into licit production, explosions of production of cacao instead of coca. We made a big deal because the cacao from this region that we were supporting ended up getting a high profile by being noticed in the press as the favorite chocolate of Nicolas Sarkozy, who was French president at the time. The chef of Nicolas Sarkozy, insisted on using cacao from this specific region of Peru. So, you're trying to implement agriculture programs, trying to market produce, and you can get into nice, fun things to do. But that entire region changed.

In 2006, Tarapoto went from a run-down, drug-infested town with really no services to, and this is going to sound trite, but I can remember the year I left I went into an ice cream parlor in Tarapoto that had a big flat-screen TV and everyone was just sitting there enjoying their ice cream and going about regular business. Four years before it would have been inconceivable that you'd have a shop like that. So, big changes that dramatically affected people's lives in specific communities, but, at the macro level, total cocaine production didn't decrease –

Q: It just moved around.

WEISENFELD: Yeah, so we used to talk about the bubble effect: you squeeze here and then the bubble expands someplace else. The theory, and I haven't followed it since I left Peru in 2010, is that you're going to squeeze it out of communities and move the

production into more and more remote areas without populations, and then you can have more of a police solution. I don't know if the data since then has borne that out, but my time in Peru was the early-to-mid years of executing on that strategy of squeezing into more remote areas.

Q: That's interesting. Were there any other donors working in other regions and doing some similar programs or approaches?

WEISENFELD: I met my Peruvian wife in Peru, and she was working on a European Union project for a while. And the European Union did not rip the coca out, they just went into communities and tried to convince people to switch from coca to something else. Our view was that the farmers, of course, would take the help, but it was supplemental, it wasn't instead of, because you could still grow cocaine between your banana trees or something.

The hard thing about this is that coca is basically a weed. It grows without a lot of need for help. You don't need a lot of pesticides, you don't need a lot of care and feeding, and you don't need to be out there doing something. Then the drug cartels are going to come and give you the inputs, and they're going to come and pick it up to take it to market for you. If you tell people instead to grow cacao, it's going to take a couple of years before it comes in, it needs a lot of work, you've got to be out there in the sun, you've got to go buy your inputs, and then you've got to figure out how to market it. It's not, "I have a great deal for you."

Yeah, the argument to convince people is, "If you're growing coca, you can't really do it out in the open. It's got to be hidden." The amount of area that you can grow, even though it's a high value crop, is pretty small, and you're not going to make a lot of money. If you switch, there was no land constraint in these parts of Peru. You could just expand your one acre to five acres, no problem, there's plenty of land. Moving into the licit economy, you're going to make more money because you can keep expanding if you're successful and live a life without having to be undercover. That was a lot more of the argument that we were making. And you give people cash, right? You'd say, "Okay, we're going to rip up your coca, and the new stuff is not going to come in for x period of time," so, by family, we were giving out cash to people –

Q: To cover them until the new crop would provide income. Because they were doing similar programs in Colombia, and perhaps also in Bolivia and Ecuador, perhaps throughout the Andes, was there much collaboration among the missions or discussion about what you're doing? Sharing of lessons learned?

WEISENFELD: Not enough, but the ambassador – I think it was when McKinley was there. Do you know Mike McKinley?

Q: I know the name, yes.

WEISENFELD: He resigned during the Trump administration. He's a brilliant guy. I became very friendly with him and have kept in touch with him. He left and became ambassador to Colombia, and he was an ambassador in Afghanistan and then became one of the highest-level positions in the State Department [Senior Advisor to the Secretary of State]. So, he and I had the idea that we were doing a better job than the folks in Colombia, but they were getting all the attention.

Q: I'm going to tell Susan Reichle [former Mission Director in Colombia] this.

WEISENFELD: This was before Susan was in charge. Susan was there, she was the Deputy Director. I frankly have no idea from a hindsight perspective if that was true, but that was the idea that we had in mind. We talked to INL and the Latin America Bureau about hosting a best practices lesson-sharing conference. We hosted it in Peru and had folks from INL, USAID, and Bolivia; they weren't doing these programs in Ecuador. Bolivia and Colombia came to Peru, and we all spent three, four days or something sharing lessons on it.

I'm not going to remember the details, but I'm confident that we picked up things they were doing in Colombia and vice versa. It was a one-time event. Well, I shouldn't say that. We didn't do another event, but it did help establish relationships that people kept up with. But I think there's a need to do that kind of stuff more.

Q: I agree. I gather that within the embassy itself there was very strong interagency collaboration within the embassy, and with USAID, and then with Washington as well.

WEISENFELD: For both Curt Struble [former Ambassador to Peru] and then when it switched to McKinley, there was constant interaction between us and the embassy political/econ [economics] section, but more INL, because INL was running big programs. And there was some competition. We were viewed as the softer folks.

INL also did part of the general police assistance. And then they did this police assistance specific to, "We're the anti-drug agency," assistance specific to ripping out coca, so they were a big operation. They were providing helicopters, giant trucks and things. It's massive. I don't remember the dollar amounts of their budget, but it was big if you're buying helicopters for people and maintaining them.

Q: Yeah. Did you have ongoing meetings, interagency meetings on a regular basis that the ambassador or DCM [deputy chief of mission] made sure happened?

WEISENFELD: Yes, and they may have been weekly or at least every two weeks.

Q: Yeah, that's often the case, to make sure everyone's communicating with one another.

WEISENFELD: Well, because we were both talking to the same government counterpart, the same ministry of DEVIDA [Peruvian Anti-Narcotics Agency]. They did the hard and we the soft side.

Q: That's very, very interesting and good that early on in your tenure, you went out on a field trip and saw people who felt positive about the opportunities that this provided for them. That obviously made it much easier for you for the next four years to be positive about it.

I believe there was also an election in Peru in 2006, and I think Alan Garcia came back into office. Were you there during that period? Were you all involved with any of the electoral support work? And what was it like having him come back after his checkered history?

WEISENFELD: Part of the wonder of these careers is I've met many presidents, and I never could have imagined that. I met Alan Garcia many times. It was shocking to me when he committed suicide. Before answering your specific question, the broader dynamic of dialogue with us, USAID, and the embassy under Ambassador Struble, was that we didn't see eye to eye about support for civil society from a governance perspective. Peru had gone through an authoritarian period under Fujimori that many Peruvians in the upper classes had seen in a very positive way. And then many others saw him in a negative light.

But in fact, I have close friends here in Durham who are Peruvian and they disagree about Fujimori's legacy. My wife's family, for instance, thinks "Yes, there was too much corruption, he was authoritarian," but she grew up in the Amazon where they had to hide under the house because they lived two blocks from a naval base. And the *Sendero Luminoso* ["Shining Path," the Communist Party of Peru] would come and attack the naval base and bullets would go flying through their neighborhood. From their perspective, Fujimori stopped it. Peru had one of the only homegrown terrorist Maoist movements ever in the world outside of Asia. There were bombings regularly all over the country, and Fujimori put a stop to it, so he's held in high esteem by a lot of people. He got excessive inflation under control and got them into APEC [Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation] and got them on a path of economic growth while he lined his own pockets and killed a bunch of people without judicial due process.

So, what did good governance in Peru mean? We had a different perspective than the embassy. Ambassador Struble said, and he had a point, that, you know the old adage, the scariest nine words, "I'm from the government, I'm here to help," the Ronald Reagan quote? We'd say in Peru, the scariest thing is, there is no government. You go to large parts of the country, and there is no government, there's no reach of government services. That's why people rely on drug traffickers and Maoist movements. So why did Peru respond with the Maoist movement? I don't know.

The ambassador's view was, it's all about helping government provide services and expanding the reach of government. He viewed the civil society groups as unreasonable, giving the government a hard time. He saw them as getting in the way of the government building the capacity to respond to real needs of communities. He really opposed our portfolio of support for civil society and our explanation that they served an

accountability function of good government, you help government stay good and stay responsive by creating this relationship where civil society provides input.

For instance, even in simple things like budgeting at the local and the regional level, you need to have budgeting processes and the creation of new policies that provide avenues for structured input from communities. The ambassador would say, "Forget about civil society, just let them go straight to the people." We had a dialogue about this which was contentious at several points.

It was another example where I had a lot of trouble getting anyone from USAID in Washington to weigh in strongly in my favor, not because they didn't agree with me, but because there's so many other priorities. For me sitting in Peru, this was like, this was almost issue number one, while for someone who is the AA [Assistant Administrator] or the DAA [Deputy Assistant to the Administrator], they're dealing with Mexico, Colombia, or the White House, and it's just never risen to the level of getting someone to engage on this issue.

I just kept getting beaten up by the ambassador in meetings. We just kept doing what we were doing, and I'd share with him documentation from USAID's DG [Democracy and Governance] strategy that supported the approach we were taking, but it was not pleasant for that year, it could have been a little over a year. Then when he left, the new ambassador was more understanding of our approach.

Q: Did you have to do a strategy paper, or was there an existing country strategy paper? I am just curious whether you had an approved strategy that had civil society development as an important part of the program.

WEISENFELD: Certainly, the answer is yes, we had an approved strategy. I think it was during that hiatus where the agency was trying to figure out what the next approach was. Yeah, and I'm pretty sure we didn't do a new one when I was there.

That didn't answer your question. That was the point I wanted to make. But you had a specific question about governance or –

Q: Well, it was on the election, whether AID was working on the election and what it was like when Alan Garcia won re-election.

WEISENFELD: I believe we did provide support for election monitoring, but I can't honestly recall that in detail. Alan Garcia presided over a lot of inflation and corruption in his first term, and there was concern about that when he ran again. During the time I was there in his second term, the general view was that he managed the economy pretty well and kept things on an even keel. As we know, years later he was investigated for corruption and committed suicide when the police went to his house to arrest him.

He was a very charismatic figure. He was a really big man, six-foot-three or -four or something. He had big, broad shoulders and a booming voice and was just a

tremendously eloquent speaker. He just exuded charisma when you were in a meeting with him. I think a lot of people who get to that level of being head of state must have charisma, whether they use it for good or bad. You know, Mugabe had charisma.

From my perspective, they [President Garcia's administration] were a strong partner in a lot of things. I got to know the prime minister fairly well, he invited me over to his house for karaoke a couple of times. So I dealt more at the prime minister level, but I was in meetings with the ambassador and Garcia five or six times.

Like a lot of politicians, he was interested in his profile and what was happening in the press, and they did some programs that we thought, "That's not the best expenditure of money," like they did this thing called *vaso de leche*, glass of milk. They were going to address childhood malnutrition by giving everyone milk. We and other donors would talk about more nuanced, effective approaches to address malnutrition, but it was a big public relations thing that he could get mileage out of. I think the failings that I was aware of (I certainly wasn't aware of the large-scale corruption) were normal political failings you'd see in any country. They're driven by short-term political gain and profile seeking.

Q: Given the high profile of the corruption allegations against Fujimori and later Garcia himself, was the AID mission doing any anti-corruption work? I'm just curious whether you all were doing anything on that front, whether there were any actors within either civil society or the government itself that you were supporting.

WEISENFELD: Remind me to go back and tell you a funny story about Garcia. There was an anti-corruption entity [High-Level Anticorruption Commission] that we supported, Beatrice was the head of it. I can't remember her last name, very nice woman, very effective. We provided support directly to that unit to help them understand how to do investigations. In my last two years, I think, they became eligible for an MCC [Millennium Challenge Corporation] threshold program. We worked with the government to focus the threshold program on corruption. That took quite a long time to negotiate. They brought in an external corporate figure to lead the design of the program with us, which was very interesting. We were working with people outside of government to design a government anti-corruption program. It took a while to design and probably started six months before I was leaving, and I feel guilty that I haven't kept track of whether it was effective or not.

Q: Okay, well, that sounds like an important initiative and bringing in important local private sector representatives to help design it.

WEISENFELD: I think the thing I recall from it and that has stuck with me in other work I've done in the corruption spaces is the research we were doing and the discussions with the government and the private person, I forget his name.

There's the more visible petty corruption that people complain about, "How come when I go to a government office, if I want quick assistance, I have to pay a bribe," or "When I get stopped by the cops and I haven't done anything and I have to pay a bribe." There's all

that petty stuff that is at the level of societal irritant. But in terms of what has a big negative effect on the economy moving forward, it's the big stuff, for instance, people stealing or asking for bribes from Odebrecht [a Brazilian engineering and contracting company], or else they don't get a bridge. That stuff tends to be hidden.

Yet, the way you address the petty stuff is different than the way you address the big stuff. But there's a big societal push to deal with the irritants because it's what people see and they don't know about the hidden stuff. You can't not deal with the irritants because that's what's visible. But I remember we kept pushing back on the government, "You have to address the big stuff," but that's more delicate and sensitive.

Q: That's where the bosses are. That's interesting.

WEISENFELD: So, my funny Garcia story. It was when McKinley was there, so I was already in the country for more than a year. Paul Ryan and Charlie Rangel came out on a congressional visit. I was running around with the ambassador and the two of them, and we had a meeting with Garcia. And the deal with the meeting with Garcia was it was only going to be Ryan, Rangel, and Ambassador McKinley, I was going to stay outside. We got to the very elaborate presidential palace, and it looked like Spanish royalty. Someone escorted them into the room, and I was sitting outside just reading on my cell phone, waiting for this meeting to be over. And the door opened up and McKinley said, "Get in here!"

I walked in, and he said, "The room was so vast. They had one translator and everyone was sitting far apart." It was not quite as bad as the images of Putin in his giant conference room, but it was a big palatial room, and there was no microphone and Rangel was the ranking person. So the translator was translating for Rangel, and Paul Ryan couldn't hear the translation. So, McKinley said, "Sit next to Paul Ryan and translate." Exactly, this moment of fear. I was at the point where I was feeling pretty good about Spanish, but translating the president? Even now, and I have very high-level Spanish, translating is really, really hard, it's a skill.

Q: Absolutely. You're trained for years to do it.

WEISENFELD: So I'm bumbling through something, and Garcia, who's very eloquent, said some long, flowering thing. And I'm translating just a bit, and Paul Ryan would say, "Is that it? He talked a lot longer." I responded with "Those were all the critical points."

Q: That's good. Well, Spanish is always a little bit longer than English, when you see them side-by-side.

Given the narcotics situation, given the fact that there certainly had been a country with significant violence in the past, was there a difficult security situation when you were there? Or were you, in the mission, able to travel where you wanted and do as you wanted on a personal basis as well? Or were there constraints on you?

WEISENFELD: Absolutely, there were no-go regions. There were other regions where you had to contact the RSO [Regional Security Officer] and give them advance notice, and they would check if it was okay to go. Most of them were in the mountainous regions. There were some places where we would go and have armed guards, and other places you could just go. I hadn't experienced that in my prior three posts. Zimbabwe had safety issues, but not at the level of Peru.

Q: Obviously that required another area of very close collaboration with the embassy.

WEISENFELD: Yeah, when I came, I still had an armored Suburban [Chevrolet vehicle], which was the same as the kind they were using in Iraq. It was left over from the years before when the situation was even worse. By the time I left, we got approval to get rid of the Suburban and just buy a Toyota sedan; it wasn't armored. Things absolutely improved in the time I was there.

Q: One other question. When I think of Peru, I think of Hernando de Soto, and assume that he was there during that period. Were you all doing any work with him? Any thoughts about the long-term relationship that USAID had with him in the Institute [for Liberty and Democracy]? Any thoughts you might have on de Soto?

WEISENFELD: I had lunch with him maybe four times a year when I was there and would see him in meetings periodically. He's an operator. He would be in meetings at the time at DAVOS with Bill Clinton when we were there, and he had high-level attention. There was a feeling amongst some of my staff that we had to support him because it was political.

Given that he was an operator, I had no doubt that when I left Peru, and I was no longer in a position of influence on funding, I would probably never hear from them [the Institute for Liberty and Democracy] again. And that was true. He's interested in talking to people because he can get something from them, but he's a tremendously charming man in the Old-World kind of sense.

And my personal view on him was, I'd say to my staff, "For goodness' sake, how many people have had not just one but two ideas that fundamentally changed how we think about our field?". His idea about tracking days and effort required to start a business gave rise to the World Bank's hugely important doing business differently initiative. Then his idea that came out of Hernando's work that regulations can hamper entrepreneurship and ingenuity. His first idea was about hidden capital, people not having titles to land. I studied that in law school; I thought it was brilliant. USAID supported his work. I thought there was huge value in continuing to associate with him and propagating these ideas.

Where I had trouble was, it was pretty clear to me because we had multiple grants with him, was that he was an idea person and not an operational person. And every time he had money to execute on something, it didn't play out as planned. I actually first met him in Zimbabwe, because he came to Zimbabwe to do work on land title. And I had the same

experience interacting with him with respect to Haiti years later in his land titling work. It took the World Bank to concretize his theories and come up with a structure and a way to operationalize it. He was just not the person to think through the operational details. I just thought the agency should not have tried to get him to put his ideas into action, but worked with him on propagating his work and developing new ideas.

Q: Yes, so recognize where his talents were. Didn't he get involved politically in Peru also? I'm just curious whether that involved any discussion with the embassy at all.

WEISENFELD: He ran for president this last round.

Q: Oh okay, I guess he did get involved politically.

WEISENFELD: I don't recall if there's a primary but he obviously didn't become president. He was not politically involved when I was there. Peru is a complex place with its own racial and ethnic dynamics. He's, like I said, Old World. He's clearly descended from Spaniards and colonists, and the last couple of Peruvian presidents have been people who are descended from indigenous communities.

Q: Right; there has been real transformation politically in all the Andean countries. Are there other things you experienced in Peru that you would like to talk about?

WEISENFELD: When I got to Peru, there was a woman who, one of the horrible Latin American traditions, I can't recall her name because they just called her *China* because she had Asian characteristics. She was the longest-serving employee in the entire agency. Within a month or so of me arriving, we had a retirement ceremony for her. And when she retired, Peru still had the longest serving person in the entire agency. That operation has been there for a long time, and just has a tremendous wealth of talent, experience, and historical knowledge among the local staff.

Q: Right. Do you think that USAID has made maximum use of that talented local staff?

WEISENFELD: I don't think so at all. There's a lot that can be done with the history. I remember we set up a training program at a local university [ESAN University] for government officials at the regional level who were working in coca zones to help them manage cities. I remember going to the ceremony to launch the training, and the president of the university said, "Oh, well, you know, we were founded in the 1950s with a grant from the U.S. government that connected us with Stanford, and we're still connected. We still have this ongoing relationship with Stanford University." He showed me a plaque. It didn't say USAID, but it had the hand clasp because back then it was under Alliance for Progress or whatever it was called. In a lot of those countries there's a rich history of success of what the agency has done.

Q: Right, and the first president of Peru who came from an indigenous background. I believe he had also been an AID participant and had gone to Stanford and has a PhD

from Stanford as well. There is a long history of AID in the country. So, you were in Peru for four years; you went in 2006. And then –

WEISENFELD: Can I just say one more thing about Peru?

Q: Yes, please.

WEISENFELD: I think a lot of the issues that we face in development are about how countries deal with their different populations. There are fissures in Peru for people of Spanish descent and indigenous communities. Within the indigenous communities, there's a big difference between the people who are from the Andes and the people from the Amazon basin. I'll hear among my wife's family, "Oh, those Andean people," and you hear the opposite, too. I had a local staff person who was our senior local person in the health office. And told me his mother would say, "Lima used to be a really nice place until all those brown people descended from the Andes." There are a lot of deep fissures and it's entrenched in a lot of countries where we live. You know, it really brought into stark relief that if you feed into those fissures and divisions, you don't move forward as a country. It just continues to divide people, and we're experiencing some of that in the United States.

Q: Yes, right. That actually reminds me, you had mentioned the long-standing Foreign Service National staff. How representative was that FSN [Foreign Service National] staff of the different ethnic groups within the country?

WEISENFELD: It was predominantly the Lima-based elite, most of whom would have been Spanish or Creole, mixed-race descent. Most people that you run into on the street in Lima are going to be mixed race between indigenous and Spanish. I think that's true in Zimbabwe. We were based in Harare where most people are Shona, not Ndebele, and we weren't really representative of the whole country. Same thing in every country that I've been to. There are people who reflect the elite in the specific region that you're in.

We started an intern program, and it was actually Andy Hersowitz who was instrumental in getting it off the ground. I think we were in a meeting at the senior level whining and complaining about not having a representative staff and Andy just created an internship program to pull in people from indigenous backgrounds in different parts of the country. So having interns that maybe we can then move into permanent employment, it's opened up –

Q: Were these interns from university?

WEISENFELD: Yup.

Q: That was a great idea. Even the fact that you recognized the lack of representation in your staff was important, and having a discussion about it.

It gets to be 2010, you've been there for a while. Were you beginning to talk to people about what your next onward assignment would be?

WEISENFELD: So, I was hoping to stay another year in Peru and squeeze out a fifth year, partly because, at the personal level, I had been dating the woman who's now my wife and we just decided to move in together, and I felt like I needed another year. That was my plan, and the Latin America Bureau at the time was fine with that. So, I thought I had the proverbial handshake to stay in Peru (informal agreement with the Bureau).

And then I was in a staff meeting, our senior staff meeting, and my secretary walked in and said, the phone is for you. I said, "I'm in a staff meeting. Is it the ambassador?" She said, "No, it's Raj Shah [at the time, the administrator of USAID]." I have Alonzo Fulgham [former acting administrator of USAID] to thank for this, it was maybe a week after the earthquake in Haiti, so we all knew about it. In fact, we sent several staff down. There was a call for missions to send people to support the mission in Haiti. So I got on the phone with Raj, and he said, "We're having trouble organizing the assistance effort for Haiti. We want you to come to Washington for two weeks and help stand up a team and then you can go back to Peru." Famous last words, so I never went back to Peru and I had to leave, like, the next day.

Coordinator, Haiti Post-Earthquake Task Team, 2010

Q: This was shortly after the earthquake, then. So, you were involved with the emergency response, as well as ultimately on the reconstruction?

WEISENFELD: Yeah, I think I was sloppy in my phrasing. So, the answer to your question, yes, I was involved in emergency, but that's not what Raj said. Let me backup because I'm paraphrasing here. He was clear that there was this huge effort going on to do the emergency response, and they didn't have anyone focused on organizing for the longer-term reconstruction. The whole point of was we needed to set up a team to do reconstruction planning, at the same time another team was doing the emergency response, and that would feed into a supplemental budget request. So that was my assigned task.

I got to Washington within a day, and Raj said –

Q: So, this, then, was early 2010. Yeah, the earthquake was right after Raj came in.

WEISENFELD: Right. He had only been in the job a couple of weeks as administrator, and this was maybe two weeks after the earthquake. It was pretty soon after. And Raj said, "Don't worry about the response, just focus on the reconstruction." Within a day, he'd say, "Well, why aren't you in this meeting? And you need to go to these 7:30 meetings with SOUTHCOM [United States Southern Command] and the folks in the field." I got pulled into a huge part of that emergency response as Susan Reichle, who was acting in the Bureau of Humanitarian Assistance –

Q: It was DCHA [Bureau for Democracy, Conflict, and Humanitarian Assistance], I think.

WEISENFELD: DCHA, right. Necessarily there are other issues she was going to get pulled into. I got pulled into both issues [earthquake response and reconstruction of Haiti after the earthquake]. I've really tried hard not to talk about the failings of this because, I don't know, it just doesn't seem like good form having been so involved in it at the time. But there was a lot of 10,000-mile screwdriver [disruptive or meddling involvement, especially by those who are not experts on the situation], and so there was great pressure from the White House and the Secretary of State for immediate answers on all sorts of questions: "Oh, well, how many people haven't eaten breakfast today?", things that are just impossible to get a quick answer to from folks on the ground who are trying to dig out of rubble. There was just never-ending dissatisfaction with how the response was going, partially because the press was beating up on us, "Why aren't you working faster? Why are there still people living in tarps?". The solution was always that we must be able to find someone who's even better than the staff working here and send someone else.

Q: Yeah, I've talked to several people who were involved as part of the oral history interviews. I have interviewed Susan Reichle, I didn't interview but I have read Lew Lucke's oral history. I interviewed Phil Gary [Philip-Michael Gary, part of the USAID/OFDA-Earthquake Recovery Team], and he was involved.

WEISENFELD: Phil was working for me at the time.

Q: Then I interviewed Chris Milligan [another U.S. Response Coordinator for the earthquake], and he was also involved.

WEISENFELD: Exactly.

Q: Can you explain how this was organized? And who did what to whom? Or reported to whom?

WEISENFELD: It was not organized, that's exactly what I was getting to, that, "Oh, well, we need Chris Milligan down there. Oh, it's not enough. We're still not getting the answers. Let's throw a Lew Lucke at it. Let's add this other person. Let's add Paul. What is Carleene [Carleene Dei, USAID Mission Director in Haiti from 2010 to 2012] doing? It was a lot of confusion about who was in charge of what. There were a lot of chiefs telling people what to do, and a lot of the OFDA [Office of U.S. Foreign Disaster Assistance] and Food for Peace on the ground folks just thought, "Please stay out of our way, we're going to keep doing what we're doing." It was really unclear.

This is my recollection, and we're now twelve years later, alright, so I can't swear that my recollection is right. My recollection is the benefit that Lew Lucke played was he had the ability to act as a go-between with the military given his prior relationships and stature that other people didn't have. Lew was not the person who was going to actually roll up his sleeves and do any real work. He was a schmoozer. Chris Milligan, having worked for

Lew Lucke, was someone who could help translate Lew into reality for the rest of the team and with Carleene. But the leadership of the agency would send overlapping requests to all of these different people. I spent a lot of time just on the phone with all of them, trying to get clarity around "Hey, who's doing what?", and making sure the information was consolidated and coming back. For over a month, I was having daily meetings with Raj on these issues. The other challenge was that I was being given a hard time by the Latin America Bureau.

Q: Right. I know that the Latin America Bureau was very unhappy that they were left out of this.

WEISENFELD: I'm not going to name people by name, but the way that the Latin America Bureau and senior-level officials reacted was shocking to me. Raj was very impatient. Raj is obviously brilliant, I don't know if you've met Raj. But a lot of our people didn't have the ability to easily modify how they present information for the particular audience.

So, Raj would ask us a very precise question, and people would say, "Well, that depends on..." and they'd launch into a long history around development, and he just wanted to know, "It's 30 percent," and the answer is usually "I don't know, let me see if I can get you that figure." I'd have multiple occasions where I was on the phone with him and folks in the field. This was before Zoom calls, and so it was all audio. Someone would start going into this long discussion and he'd put it on mute and say, "You need to figure this out and get this under control." Or in meetings with him in the very, very early days I was there, he said, "Well, Alonzo said you're a person who can cut through difficulties and get stuff done."

I was at an early meeting with the senior leadership of the Latin America Bureau, and at the end of the meeting, he asked me to stay and asked them to leave. That was a dramatic change in how the Latin America Bureau immediately treated me and the entire staff of the Haiti Task Force. They left, and he said, "Okay, they're not responding. They're not doing what I need to do. I can't get clear answers. You're in charge of this. We're taking it away from them."

I said, "Well, we need to obtain new resources then." The LAC Bureau was not helpful at all, including to the point of making it difficult for me to find office space, even though there was plenty of office space in the Latin America Bureau. They refused to let the Haiti Task Force populate in their office space. They made it challenging to get phones, everything was a fight with the Bureau to stand up this team because they saw it as a threat to them. This was a classic example of bureaucratic, unnecessary infighting and a lack of focus on the real outcome. It was shocking and deeply saddening that they let this bureaucratic fighting get in the way of helping people who suffered the worst natural disaster in history in our hemisphere.

Q: Yeah, I had heard some of this, and I know some of the personalities are independent thinkers –

WEISENFELD: Having been in the Bureau for only four years wasn't enough for me to be considered one of the "in" people. Then at the end of this I went into being the DAA in the Bureau.

And there were leadership changes, so it all kind of changed in a positive way for me. I have not really told other people what I just told you about the fights with the Bureau at the time because it seems like some of the people have passed away and it doesn't seem right to complain about them. I didn't let Raj know any of this at the time because I thought it would paint the Agency in a negative light unnecessarily. I figured it was just my job to deal with it and find space and get staff. They also told me I couldn't rely on their staff to do this work, which I thought makes zero sense. Don't they want to be involved in reconstructing Haiti?

Q: I think it is important to record this. Given the rather chaotic organizational structure, and the inclination to keep bringing in people who have reputations as strong managers and hoping it will all come together in some way, it's important to look back at the issues that arose. Were there some after-action discussions? What did we learn? Did people lay out some ideas for how we could do this more effectively the next time around?

WEISENFELD: Not while I was there. After ten months, maybe, I was then moved to the DAA role with oversight of the Haiti Task Force. Then after maybe just four months of that I was moved into the Feed the Future program, so I'm not aware. I think aside from the irritation and the unnecessary work of trying to collaborate with the Bureau, when their antibodies were trying to eject us as an external virus, I think the work we'd done needed to be enriched by the expertise in the Bureau and we lacked it.

I ended up pulling in a lot of people from different parts of the Agency, some of whom had done tremendously well since they were people that I knew or had heard were talented people. I had spent a lot of time interviewing people to pull in those who were interested. There was a woman who was on the complement. If you're on the complement, people often tend to think you're there because you couldn't find an assignment or you're not very smart. She's one of the DAAs in LPA [Bureau for Legislative and Public Affairs] now. She was on the complement because she had to leave her post in Nepal early because her mother was ill and she was off-cycle. She couldn't get any post, but she was just spectacular.

There were other frustrations too. I was supposed to lead the assessment effort to figure out the big elements of the reconstruction plan. But because I kept getting pulled into responding to the challenges of the immediate response, dealing with Lew Lucke and Carleene and Chris Milligan, and after a while of not making progress, I decided I needed to pull together another team that can spend three or four weeks in country and figure this out. I called on senior people I knew who were smart, including Dave Eckerson and Todd Amani, who was the Mission Director in Mozambique. At the time, he [Amani] walked on crutches. There were three or four mission director-level people, very senior, that I pressed, with Raj's support, to pull a team together.

They went out there for three weeks, which is a lot to ask a team like that to leave their countries. They did a spectacular job pulling together a PowerPoint with the outlines of what a reconstruction plan would look like. Then two other people and I sat in the office for like three all-nighters writing it up in a supplemental budget request and presented it to the Hill. It was very well-received, even by Raj, but, and this gets into very sensitive territory, because the State Department stepped in at some very, very, very senior levels, and had some different ideas about areas of focus. I was seized with the idea that, even before the team went out, you have to balance between responding to the most visible signs of the tragedy at this level with, “How are you laying the foundation for future growth?”

You can’t ignore the most visible issues, and the most visible thing, that we were also getting beaten up on in the press, and that affected a large number of people’s lives, was the displaced. You had, I don’t remember the number, just extraordinarily high numbers of people who were made homeless and were living in the streets. That had to be the immediate focus, and you could rely on reconstruction of housing. Maybe I’m biased because at the start of my career I was supporting the housing program, but you could use that as a way to stimulate economic growth because of the spillover effects of that on the economy. That was a cornerstone of what we presented. The final plan had money for emergency shelter, but it did not really emphasize big housing reconstruction. I’m not going to remember the precise amounts, but a lot of money went into work up north in Export Processing Zones, as a way to do larger economic growth in the country. I don’t think that was a bad idea, but it was not where the earthquake was, or where –

Q: Right, and that was not part of the original plan that was prepared, that came in later.

WEISENFELD: Yeah. It was not in the plan my team put together and I was trying to make the case for focusing more on housing construction in the earthquake zones. But, of course, once decisions were made I had to go to the Hill and defend it. That’s part of the job.

Q: It is. In fact, I think that’s an important point to retain, that you argue within the confines of the executive branch, but then ultimately you have to go up to the Hill and defend the executive branch’s position. That’s just a fact of life.

WEISENFELD: We also spent a lot of time on metrics. In the Agency, I think there’s a big story there around indicators, because the Agency over my career has moved from not really paying attention to indicators to saying, “We’re going to have indicators, but they really don’t measure anything,” to “This is an enormous area of focus of how we do development now.” There was a huge amount of time spent on thinking about metrics. The Haiti work was more advanced in terms of more time and attention spent on measurable indicators so we could report back to the Hill. This is now standard fare in development programs. We did it in Peru, we did it in Zimbabwe, but it was not at the level of precision or attention. As I saw in Haiti, it was my first time seeing what I now see all the time.

Q: Do you think this increased focus is a positive? Is it a constructive, expanded focus? Or is it pretending for precision that really is not appropriate?

WEISENFELD: I suspect the latter part of your question is what you would think, and I would align myself with that. I think we try for a level of precision, but the juice isn't worth the squeeze. We try to define attribution in a way that is almost impossible. You would need randomized control studies all the time to get what we really think we're trying to get at, and that would be too expensive and I don't know that it's worth it. But that's kind of where we've moved in development. There's such a demand, and that whole MERLA [monitoring, evaluation, research, learning, adaptation] concept has become its own degree of specialization in a way that it wasn't before. We have a whole MERLA staff at RTI [Research Triangle Institute, where Weisenfeld is now Executive Vice President of International Development], and they hire people whose expertise is not health or education, it's MERLA. –

Q: Well, we can talk separately about this.

WEISENFELD: I think the head of our MERLA group is fantastic. I think he agrees that excessive desire for precision is not useful. The key part is, "Are you learning and adapting?", not –

Q: Yeah, I think there's certainly been some discussion now about this emphasis on MERLA, and how it relates to AID's desire to do more with local institutions.

That reminds me, after the earthquake in Haiti, there was a strong recognition of the weakness of Haitian institutions, particularly the Haitian government, to deal with this dilemma. I know there was a lot of discussion within parts of the development community that so much of USAID's work over the previous twenty years was with the international NGO [non-governmental organization] community and others. Because of corruption issues and other concerns, it had not been doing a lot to strengthen the capacity of Haitian governmental institutions.

I'm wondering, when you were doing this reconstruction plan, how were you thinking about the role of Haitian institutions in this longer-term plan, and whether you addressed that at all, or whether the urgency of getting things done and achieving metrics put that on the back burner?

WEISENFELD: In 2010, there wasn't, if I'm recalling correctly, as much focus on directly funding local organizations. I don't think the focus was on funding local organizations the way it is now, but it was on partnering with them. Well, actually, maybe I'm wrong. Maybe it was unfunded because I remember Gary Juste [Director of Acquisition and Assistance for USAID/Haiti after the earthquake] – do you know Gary?

Q: Yes.

WEISENFELD: He became mission director after this, but he was the Contracts/Acquisition Officer. Originally, we sent Gary down as a contracting officer. I give Gary a lot of credit because he was a senior person at the time, and he agreed to go down as the contracting officer in Haiti because things were getting stuck. We had him and his team do a series of roadshows around Haiti for local organizations to explain how to contract with USAID, and they did set aside some funding for local organizations. I don't remember, honestly, if there was talk in the strategy around this. There probably was, but I remember the focus was on training them.

Q: I ask in part because there was a lot of criticism around this time, from Paul Farmer and others, that the U.S. hadn't done enough to support Haitian institutions historically, and that the result was their inability to be able to respond effectively to an earthquake.

WEISENFELD: Yeah. I'll give you a little bit of a long answer. My job was technically to develop the reconstruction plan. That was part of it. I spent more time being the, this is an inappropriate term in modern diversity thinking, the whipping boy, I was the person who would go up to the Hill and get yelled at because things weren't moving quickly enough, and I'd get beaten up at the State Department, and in the interagency. That's kind of the job, though, if you're the senior career person, the face of this, because Raj is not going to go up every day too. I would get hit with this criticism, and I'd also have to go to meetings with NGOs and present to groups like Interaction on what we were doing. I just felt like I was getting whiplash and everyone was beating me up.

I think it's a fair criticism, though, but I don't think the criticism should solely be directed at USAID. My view is that we have an overall U.S. government system that has zero tolerance for not accounting for every penny. That's resulted in us creating an accountability infrastructure that focuses on compliance rather than the results. I remember Mike Kitay used to say to me, I've kept this phrase, "Yeah, if you learn the handbooks, it doesn't make you a better person." But the idea that we're going to train a local Haitian organization with a small number of staff and a high turnover to comply with the AIDAR (USAID acquisition regulation) and federal acquisition regulations, that's not going to make them a better organization or necessarily advance their own goals.

And, we do some work for the Canadians and Europeans at RTI, and it's a totally different perspective. It's much more focused on, "What did you accomplish? Can you demonstrate your accomplished result?" rather than, "Can you account for every penny?".

On bids that we've done at RTI for USAID, I can remember a \$40 million proposal where we got back a question about why we were budgeting \$20 per month for printer cartridges in a satellite office. It's that level of detail that makes it difficult for a local organization to bid. I think people like to blame USAID for it, but it's a larger issue, I think, about how the American government approaches accountability.

Q: Yes. Well, this sounds like an incredibly interesting and important job that you took on for the Agency. But, you did ultimately get it done, Paul.

How did you work with the mission as well? Obviously, they were going to be the ones that would have to implement any longer-term reconstruction strategy, and yet you were tasked with organizing this from Washington. You had recruited some people to go out. Presumably, they worked with the mission in preparing the initial plan that came back, and then that got modified because more people in Washington weighed in. Can you describe a little bit how the mission was interacting with all of this going on around it?

WEISENFELD: I think one of the reasons I was – I was going to say successful, but I don't know how you define success – successful was in terms of getting a plan developed and getting it approved by Congress and the supplemental enacted, and in the sense of preventing people from killing each other in the emergency response, is because the senior people in the mission were people I developed good working relationships of trust with: Carleene Dei (the Mission Director), Tony Chan (the Deputy MD), Mervyn Farroe [oversaw program operations in Haiti]. They were all originally from the Caribbean and Tony and Mervyn were both Trinidadian (part of my background).

Q: Okay, so it was the Caribbean mafia!

WEISENFELD: It was. Tony was in Egypt with me, and my family's from Trinidad. I don't know that that was the region, but I knew them all. I think they trusted me, and I actively saw my job as protecting them, letting them do the work they thought they needed to do, keeping the heat off of them, and giving them every opportunity to participate in providing input. But they were under a lot of heat from Raj and from the Chief of Staff for the Secretary. I think that's how it works, even though, to be honest, I don't think the Bureau was reaching out and supporting them enough. So, they were actively involved.

A couple of times I also went out to serve as acting MD against Raj's wishes. It was hard to convince him, but Carleene and Tony Chan needed a break. Tony ended up being Mission Director in Liberia, and he's an economist. Yeah, Tony Chan, Mervyn, and Carleene were at the senior levels there, and they needed a break. I went out a couple of times for a few weeks to serve as Acting Mission Director. I think that went a long way in helping me understand the situation on the ground, even for only a few weeks.

Q: Yes, that's probably a very positive thing to do in that kind of a situation. It helped bring the two together in a very organic way.

WEISENFELD: Yes, so my funny story about how I ended up staying. I was planning on going back to Peru after the first two weeks, and Raj said, "You need to stay another two weeks, things are not organized." So, okay, another two weeks. Then a third week into that, and I swear this story is true, I was in a meeting in the Eisenhower Executive Building with Raj, Cheryl Mills [Counselor and Chief of Staff for the Office of the Secretary in the Department of State at the time], and Gayle Smith [a Special Assistant to President Obama and Senior Director for Development and Democracy at the time], and Raj said, "Well, you're not going to go back to Peru, this is not making enough progress.

You need to stay here." I can't say I was shocked that that was the conclusion. I said, "Okay, but I need to go back for at least a few weeks because I have to pack out, I have to ship my dog, I have to fire my maid, and I think I'm going to get married!" So, I literally said at the end, "I think I'm going to get married!" I decided in that moment I was going to get married, and Gayle Smith said, "And that's the order of priority? Ship your dog, fire your maid, and get married?"

Q: "Get yourself sorted out, young man." So, were you able to go back and do all those things?

WEISENFELD: They said, "You have to find someone that we trust to cover for you." The agency helped people pull together at the highest levels to support each other. So, the person I called to come in and substitute for two weeks was Pam White, who then became an ambassador. I'm sure she would have done it for other people too, but I think that's the agency that we work in.

Q: What was she doing at that point? Was she mission director in West Africa then, or was she –

WEISENFELD: I think she was still in The Gambia. She came in for two weeks and took over.

Q: And she knew Haiti well, so that was good.

WEISENFELD: She knew Haiti, yeah.

Q: Yeah, that was good grounding for her when she then went out to be ambassador.

WEISENFELD: Yeah. I think that story says a lot about how people pull [together], or the earlier part about Dave Eckerson and Todd Amani going out to Haiti.

Q: Yes, that is important.

Now, finally, the team went out to the field and prepared a draft strategy, you prepared something, there was further discussion of it in Washington and further adjustments made, and then a final strategy was approved by the Executive branch. Is that what formed the supplemental request? Did the Hill itself then make its own adjustments as well?

WEISENFELD: For the supplemental request, Cheryl Mills and I went up for multiple meetings on the Hill. They were informal briefings to explain it and justify it, and my recollection, although it was twelve years ago, is that the final supplemental that came out was pretty close to what we proposed.

Q: Okay. And was the task force disbanded as soon as the supplemental was approved?

WEISENFELD: No. I'm not going to remember the timing exactly, but the task force stayed around for several years. It ended up being merged, so when I took over –

Q: Oh, when you went to the Latin America Bureau, you took it with you.

WEISENFELD: It didn't merge back into the Latin America Bureau, it got office space in the Latin America Bureau, which I made sure of. It was just crazy. They were at the furthest ends of the building from LAC and it morphed into supplemental support for the mission and monitoring of the supplemental package so they could do the reporting. It basically became like a supercharged country desk office.

Q: So, when you were winding down your time there, did Raj approach you then to become the Deputy Assistant Administrator for the LAC Bureau?

WEISENFELD: I believe he approached me about it, or else it was Mark Feierstein. Mark was the DAA who was politically appointed.

Q: And he had come in a bit later, so he wasn't part of those earlier difficulties with the Latin American Bureau?

Latin America and Caribbean Bureau, Deputy Assistant Administrator, 2010 - 2011

WEISENFELD: No, he came in easily six, eight months after the earthquake, probably eight, maybe even ten. I remember when he was going through the preparations for his hearing, he was interviewing various people in the Agency to get up to speed. I spent a lot of time with him because he was anticipating, rightfully, that he was going to get a lot of questions on Haiti. He and I hit it off. I mean, I still communicate with him to this day. Great guy. I don't know if it was Raj or him, but I think he [Feierstein] was scheming, and I don't mean scheming in a negative sense because I think it was absolutely right that the task team should have been pulled back into the Latin America Bureau. It might have been his idea that I became his DAA and oversaw that, and I think it worked out very well. Paloma Adams-Allen was one of the other two DAAs, Paloma Adams-Allen and Mark Lopez.

Q: Okay, so you had multiple DAAs, but part of your brief was overseeing the Haiti Task Force. But you had other responsibilities beyond Haiti as well.

WEISENFELD: I had the Caribbean, which included Haiti, and I had Mexico, which, as you know, gets a lot of attention, so that took a lot of time. I remember going to a briefing with Tim Rieser on Mexico. He had some questions about what we were doing, and I was still trying to get up to speed on Mexico, never having had any involvement. It's the craziness of our system that Tim Rieser had been involved in Mexico for twenty-some-odd years, knew everything about it, traveled there many times over decades, had lots of contacts, and then after a week of reading up on it I have to be the person briefing him and justifying what we're doing. That's the nature of our system.

Q: For a long period of time there was a very small program in Mexico and it was doing a few niche things and then, all of a sudden, it became much larger. How big was it at this point in time? What kinds of things were you doing?

WEISENFELD: At the time, I had that Washington DAA oversight of Mexico, the U.S. Ambassador to Mexico was Carlos Pascual. It's just so amazing how we're a small community and people come back. I remember meeting Carlos in 1991. In my first couple of months in the agency, we were still in the State Department at that point. Carlos was in the E & E Bureau [Bureau for Europe and Eurasia]. His office was on the same floor as mine and GC [Office of the General Counsel], so I thought he was a young rising star and a super, cool guy. It was great to get to see him as ambassador. His DCM was also a phenomenal guy who also became an ambassador and a senior person in State.

Q: So, was Carlos pushing for an expanded AID program?

WEISENFELD: Carlos was definitely pushing for an expanded AID program. The Hill was also pushing for an expanded AID program. You know, given the importance of the U.S.-Mexico relationship and the issues, it's just not a surprise given concerns over immigration and drug trafficking. Now, in many ways, there's an argument – I believe this argument and I don't know that I've read it anywhere – that our success with anti-narcotics efforts in Colombia and Peru have opened the door to empowering drug cartels in Mexico.

The TV series *Narcos* on Netflix depicts the Colombian drug lord Pablo Escobar. The efforts to cut off the leadership of the Colombian drug cartels that took years and years of tremendous police work and was hugely successful created a vacuum that opened up the door for Mexican drug cartels to take over. Sorry, this is kind of a tying together of Mexico and my time in Peru.

So, this is a story that we would talk about in Peru all the time. Ambassador McKinley, who is a really, really great historian of Latin America, would talk about this. Peru used to be the biggest producer of the raw material, like during the Fujimori days. Colombia was controlling the trade in drugs that– if you think of IBM (although it's a global company), the headquarters is in New York. The headquarters for the global drug trade was Colombia. They sourced their supply from Peru, they made almost no coca in Colombia, and they would transit through Mexico and the Caribbean. Mexicans were a small subsidiary.

Then a couple of things happened. This is one aspect of the balloon effect. So the U.S., with the DEA and INL support under Fujimori, I guess this was the 1980s, had this program called Air Bridge Denial, where they used U.S. intelligence to identify airplanes that were transiting coca from Peru to Colombia. At that time, most of the transit was small aircraft, and they started shooting down these planes. I'm not going to remember how many we shot down, this was before my time. But we would always talk about these dynamics.

So, Air Bridge Denial was very effective. It cut off the supply of raw material to Colombia. A couple of things happened as a result of that. One, the Colombian headquarters for drug cartels thought, "Holy crap, our supply's at risk. We need to start growing in Colombia." So, Colombia went from an almost nothing producer to being the biggest producer of coca. Peru, which didn't have strong drug cartels but had a lot of supply, all of a sudden didn't have access to sell its product. Then Peru started to grow to the higher-level traders in the drug cartel movement so they could market their stuff as well. So the supply chain just shifted around and it actually got worse for both countries.

In my humble opinion, that is the way to think about this. And then the hugely successful police effort to take out Pablo Escobar, who is one person, but, you know, the leadership, not just Pablo Escobar, created this opening where the Mexicans jumped in. They now control a huge amount of trade, and many people would say are more violent than the Colombians were in their heyday. So that's my view of the drug trade history, whether other people would agree with that.

Q: Interesting.

WEISENFELD: It's a big picture view. I'm sure the devil's always in the details and I'm probably missing some things. So, in Mexico at the time we were involved in working on the drug trade and governance and corruption issues and immigration. We had an INL and a DEA presence in Mexico, and there was always an effort to have USAID provide the soft-side support to communities; it never got anywhere near as big as Colombia or Peru. There were programs dealing with corruption, civil society support, and supporting lawyer's types of institutions. It was not a large program when I was there, it was smaller than Zimbabwe's, for instance (not when I was there, when I was the DAA of the LAC Bureau), but it was absolutely a high-profile program. You had interest from the Hill and the White House, and the embassy was not happy with our leadership in the mission. It was not easy to get the highest-performing people to go to a country with a small program that was not a traditional program. We had some people like Larry Sacks, a superstar who was running the DG program there. And he's now mission director in Colombia, a hugely successful guy.

But the embassy was not happy with the leadership. Sitting in Washington, I was told by the State Department, "You gotta get out there and talk to the ambassador and the DCM because they want you to change mission directors." So I ended up making a couple of trips out there to deal with that issue, and we did end up pulling the mission director. I don't honestly remember who it was and I don't remember who we replaced him with.

Q: But hopefully it was better.

WEISENFELD: Yeah, that is a fascinating place.

Q: So, most of the program then was dealing with the soft side of the drug battle as well as the rule of law, judicial reform, and then things related to immigration?

WEISENFELD: I can't recall what we did on immigration. I'm not remembering that. But there was a focus on rule of law programs.

Q: Yeah, okay. And is that what Tim Rieser was also supporting? Because obviously he was pushing for these programs as well.

WEISENFELD: Yeah, Tim was very interested in that.

Q: I don't know Mexico's geography but recall reading that much of the violence and drug crisis is in Chiapas. Were we working there?

WEISENFELD: We were absolutely working in the areas that had the most violence, some in the south, some at the border, difficult places to travel locally.

Q: Okay, so you were overseeing that program and then the Haiti Task Force and the rest of the Caribbean. Was the Caribbean regional office in Barbados? Did we have a strong regional office at that point, or –

WEISENFELD: We had a very small office, but it wasn't a regional office at the time I was there. Actually, I made a trip to Barbados for something. I don't remember why. I think it was a regional conference. Because our program, it's so small there, I don't think I would have gone in normally. I remember Aaron Williams was the mission director there many, many years ago.

I remember when I was there, I think it was for a conference, the person who was driving me around had driven Aaron Williams years before. So you have these long-term relationships with people. Yeah, so it [Barbados] wasn't a regional office when I was there. I think that came after I left that position.

Q: Okay. Jamaica is also a program that I recall has had a checkered history of ups and downs and issues. During that period, you were the DAA overseeing the Caribbean. Was that a good time for Jamaica or a bad time?

WEISENFELD: It was definitely not a good time in terms of size of program and funding. I never got to make a trip to Jamaica, it wasn't high on the radar. I'm sure you know that in those kinds of jobs you end up mostly dealing with two categories of things. One is if there's some high-profile events, pulling in the Secretary of State or administrator, and the second is if there's a problem. So, I was only in that job for maybe four or five months, and I never really engaged in anything there.

Q: Okay, that's helpful. You provided oversight still for the Haiti Task Force, but was there a new Task Force leader then who replaced you as the Task Force leader?

WEISENFELD: There was.

Q: There was an Office of Caribbean Affairs and there was presumably a Haiti desk. Was there the Haiti desk and then the Task Force was something separate from that, or was it integrated at the Haiti desk?

WEISENFELD: They were folded in together. Belinda Barrington was on the Haiti desk.

Q: Okay, that was the former lawyer.

WEISENFELD: Yeah, I believe she was the desk officer.

Q: Okay, so it sounds like you rationalized all of this structurally?

WEISENFELD: That was the intention.

Q: Okay. And, as you said, you were there for a relatively short period of time, and then you ended up going off to do something that I don't think anyone in the world would have guessed would be the position that you would be asked to take on. You are full of surprises in your career. Can you explain how you became the Assistant Administrator for the new Bureau for Food Security? In the past, any equivalent of that kind of position was usually led by an agricultural person.

Assistant to the Administrator, Bureau for Food Security, 2011 - 2013

WEISENFELD: Raj Shah called me into his office; I've seen this story before. I don't remember word-for-word, but he said, "I want you to take over a new responsibility," and he told me what it was. I was kind of dumbfounded because I started my career in the housing office, which is much more of an urban than a rural focus. I have felt that, over the course of my career, I've learned a tremendous amount about rural issues in agriculture. I actually did my, in law school we would sometimes call it a dissertation, but that's a misnomer, it's not a PhD. But I did my law school dissertation on land reform in Zimbabwe.

Q: That's right, I remember that.

WEISENFELD: And land title issues used to be a big part of how USAID addressed agriculture development, thinking about title as a piece of the puzzle. We used to have a strong relationship with the Land Tenure Center at the University of Wisconsin, and de Soto's early work focuses on that. But that's gone by the wayside. From my humble opinion, people don't really think enough about land titling. At the time, me and a guy in the E3 Bureau [Bureau for Economic Growth, Education and Environment] proposed a component of the Haiti supplemental to deal with land title issues, because I think it would have helped both in the rural space and the urban space, but it didn't get any interest among the interagency leadership.

Q: That's interesting, because there's a lot of gender work that also highlights land tenure as being critical on gender equity as well.

WEISENFELD: Absolutely. Jumping ahead, one of the best things I thought we did in the Feed the Future program was some land titling work for women in Ethiopia. We saw huge results. So, I felt the Alternative Development programs were basically ag programs. I felt like over my career I'd gotten to understand a lot of the dynamics of ag development from an economic perspective, not an agronomic perspective. I was still surprised that Raj asked me to do it.

This is, again, one of these things that's hard to talk about because I don't want to be critical of other folks. But, essentially, Raj didn't think that the leadership of the Bureau was being responsive and driving things forward. He was worried. He had someone who had stature, but Raj didn't think he had the management skills to get stuff done. They had to put a new strategy in place, and they had to get metrics approved by everyone and anyone. There was a lot of external representation with NGOs and the Hill, and there was the huge task of getting money out the door because Feed the Future came with a lot of money.

Also, we moved towards a more centralized effort for Feed the Future, instead of just giving money out to the missions and saying, "Here's money, figure out what to do in the ag space," it was an approach that involved more a top-down guidance regarding best practices: "How are you going to approach it?" So, he tapped me because he was worried about management: "Who's going to manage this and get the money out the door and move forward?". My approach to everything, as with Spanish or every country I've ever served in where I made sure to read like ten books, equally literature and history, before I get to the country, so I feel I have some understanding.

We had Rob Bertram, the chief technology person in the Bureau for Food Security, a chief scientist, who's a longtime ag person in the Agency. I hadn't known Rob before, but I would have Rob and his assistant, Sahara Moon, come into my office every day at 4:00, 4:30 and talk to me for an hour about agronomy, or ag economics, or soil science, or ag research, and what did I need to read or understand better about this? Because I felt like I had to have some credibility to be able to talk about ag development. I at least wanted to know the key questions to ask when I'm reviewing proposals. It felt like I spent a couple of months with them working through and understanding the dynamics better from both the economic and the agronomic perspective.

Q: Yes, it's a very important lesson. I mean, you were selected for the job because of your leadership management skills, but then taking the time at the outset to become conversant enough in the technical issues that you were dealing with and, presumably, empowering the technical people to do what they needed to do.

WEISENFELD: Yeah, there's a lot of interference on the political level. So, like Haiti, I thought, "Well, my job in part is to protect the technical career staff, but also make sure that they hear what the demands of the political staff are. We've got to be responsive or else you can't move forward. Raj was personally knowledgeable, so it was tough because he's personally knowledgeable about the ag space. That was his job at Gates [The Bill

and Melinda Gates Foundation]. Even though he was a medical doctor, he became seized with that issue and was really an expert.

Part of the change that Feed the Future brought, I still talk about this in RTI now, from our business strategy approach, not even a development approach, is this whole move in business management literature that if you do too many things, you're not going to do anything well, right? That's that whole focus mantra that's been in and out of USAID for a long time. And I know that at any business management meeting or strategy meeting I attend at RTI with senior people, I can guarantee someone's going to make that point. It's almost trite at this point, and I think it can be taken to the extreme.

But the way we've done ag development for many years. USAID was working on agriculture writ large and trying to make sure that the entire system is working. What Feed the Future started off as, and it's changed a little bit since then, was a hypothesis that there are differences in the value chains for corn versus potatoes versus cacao for example. If you just try to make the entire system work, your efforts are going to be too dispersed, and you'll fail. So, figure out the key crops that have a meaningful impact on food security, and just focus on those and get the value chains right for them. It was very controversial because a lot of the technical people would say, "Well, part of food security is diversification of crops, because if you put all your money into cacao and it fails, then you don't have any money and you can't buy a food crop." I think it can be taken to the extreme. We were charged with enforcing this focused version of ag development on missions from a more central approach.

Q: How did it work with the missions? The missions didn't program the funding as part of their budget proposals, it was parceled out by you all. How did it work from the center to the missions?

WEISENFELD: Another background piece before answering that. You know the whole lore around how State F [the State Department's Office of Foreign Assistance] was created because supposedly Hillary Clinton or Colin Powell –

Q: I think it was Condi Rice.

WEISENFELD: Condi Rice asked a question that required aggregation of data across Missions, but USAID couldn't aggregate. That data aggregation question was a critical question that kept coming up as Feed the Future was being created by the Obama administration because every mission had its own tailored indicators. And they wanted to know, "Why can't you tell us how many farmers in the world you've helped with this particular kind of assistance?" I'm overstating, the whole Feed the Future thing was not around selecting a few value chains, but that was fine, that's an example. So part of our job was establishing guidance around this new thinking on focused ag development and a set of standard indicators that you must apply. If you don't, you're not getting the funding. We had control with the State Department over allocating, but we went through a process of selecting focus countries, a lot like PEPFAR [The United States President's Emergency

Plan for AIDS Relief], so that was also part of it. We were going to focus at the crop value chain level, but also focus at the country level.

So we went through this process and came up with focus countries and had to run them through the State Department, OMB, the Hill, and everyone. Everyone got their shot, like, "What was the focus country?" Then we issued guidance on programming and a set of standard metrics that people had to apply, including one of the things I think is groundbreaking in development. Our folks developed, and I got to launch, the Women's Empowerment in Agriculture Index with Secretary Clinton at the UN [United Nations]. I think you can take out agriculture and do it in other sectors. The woman who was key in developing this had this critical insight that, where people say women are empowered, the proxies they typically use are whether they are educated and/or have money. Her insight was, "Not really, you can be educated and not be empowered. You can have money and not have control over how to spend it." So, she spent time thinking about and doing research on what empowerment really means and created an index to measure it, which I just thought was absolutely gold. I don't take any credit for having any of the ideas there, but it's just great to have been associated with that.

Q: And that came through the Feed the Future program, it was done for the ag sector. Yeah, I remember seeing it when it came out. It was very, very impressive.

WEISENFELD: So, missions had to submit programs that we reviewed to ensure that they were consistent with all of the guidance, and then they'd get money allocated. I set up a system that people were not happy about where we would periodically, and I forget if it was quarterly or semi-annually, review mission progress and have missions come in and, mostly by video conference, go through the programs in the priority countries, and ask how they're doing and give advice.

I don't remember who said this, but someone said to me, "Yeah, you thought that power should be in the missions when you were in the mission, and now that you're in Washington, you think all the power should be there." You made the point earlier about sharing lessons in the Andean countries. I think the Agency has always pushed this notion that local context is what's critical and it delegates authority and programming to the people who are closest to the ground because they know, and I think that's true, but you have to mitigate for the fact that, the way I would explain it to people is, if you have one true ag expert in Senegal, you're lucky. But, you're not likely in any individual mission to have someone who's a soil scientist, and someone who's a plant biologist, and someone who's an agronomist, and someone who's an ag economist. So, your ability to even understand the full range of issues is necessarily limited. And, USAID never had a good knowledge management system. For one mission to know that "Hey, they did something great in Liberia, and maybe it applies here," is total happenstance.

WEISENFELD: I think in Washington, in my personal view, bureaucracies and organizations try to get more power. That's the way human organizations work. But, to me, the proper function of Washington is not to create its own programs, but to provide the best practices and the expertise that isn't passed easily from one individual mission to

another. That does require some level of central oversight, but it has to be done in a balanced way.

Q: In many ways, it's what has been done for the health sector for years in different ways.

WEISENFELD: Absolutely, I use that example all the time.

Q: It was done with less of a hammer, although at times there were hammers in the health sector as well, but less noticeably.

So, again, this was a complex interagency process. I assume that Gayle Smith at the NSC [National Security Council] was heavily involved. I believe that the Chief of Staff for the Secretary of State was also heavily involved with the Feed the Future program and I believe that Curt Reintsma from AID was seconded to work for the chief of staff at some point. I assume you had to spend lots of time managing the inter-agency aspects of this.

WEISENFELD: So, yes, the chief of staff was involved, but not as much as in Haiti, so there was kind of a divide and conquer thing. I don't know if it was official, but it appeared to me that Raj took the lead on Feed the Future and Cheryl took the lead on Haiti. They both got involved, but day-to-day it was definitely Raj On Feed the Future, Curt was not seconded. I was there for about two-and-a-half, almost three years. That didn't happen, I don't recall that [Curt Reinstma being seconded to work for the Chief of Staff for the Secretary of State], but certainly Gayle Smith was active.

So, I was in that role of the person who gets beaten up on at the senior level. I'd have to go to OMB [the Office of Management and Budget] and the White House and the Hill and the State Department and get beaten up on why things weren't moving faster. But we actually had a lot more control with the Bureau for Food Security than we did with Haiti, for instance, so things moved forward pretty quickly. So there was not an intense level of unhappiness. I need to talk about the Feed the Future coordinator for a second.

Q: Did you have your own appropriation? Was there an appropriation for food security that you were responsible for allocating?

WEISENFELD: We controlled the budget.

Q: So, it was a food security line item within the budget?

WEISENFELD: It is a separate line item. When I say we controlled it, obviously, with State F, lots of people had a role in it, but it was allocated to the Bureau. They created a Feed the Future coordinator, who had the role of interagency coordination. That is now combined with the head of the Bureau.

Q: But it was someone separate when you were there.

WEISENFELD: I was there with someone separate. For a while it was Tjada McKenna, and before Tjada, it was Julie Howard. And it was not very functional in my mind having these roles split.

Q: Where did the person sit?

WEISENFELD: They sat in USAID. So Tjada's a friend of mine. And we got along then and we get along well now and we continue to be friends. But splitting that role created a dynamic where you end up arguing over, "Okay, who's going to go to this event?" and who covers this meeting? There was no real, clear delineation of duties. And she didn't have, in her role, control over the allocation of resources and strategy, but she's supposed to coordinate interagency. It just didn't work. It didn't make any sense.

Q: This was just making another political appointee position, right?

WEISENFELD: She was a political appointee. She's very talented, she's –

Q: No, I know, but the instinct is for any new initiative to create a political appointment, as well as rejiggering the bureaucracy to deal with it.

WEISENFELD: Right. And if the two of us didn't get along, because I think leadership matters, I don't think this would have taken off in the first couple of years. Otherwise, we would have spent time fighting over things.

Q: Yeah, it's interesting that there is an important lesson learned here organizationally about how one approaches big strategic tasks. It's not always just naming a lot of people to high-level positions, because that was Haiti and that was a little bit with this as well.

WEISENFELD: I had this conversation with my staff at RTI recently, that when we say something's a high priority, people usually think that means throw more people at it because our main resource is people. That often confuses things, and if you don't have clarity of roles, that definitely confuses things.

Q: Right. Were there controversies about the selection of focus countries? Was that a difficult process? There's some that were very obvious such as Ethiopia, for example, that would be one of the focus countries, but was it a difficult process to come to agreement?

WEISENFELD: So, I recall the PEPFAR discussion when I was in Zimbabwe, I think we talked about that. In my recollection, there was more difficulty around that than around Feed the Future. But the difference in Feed the Future is that we moved away from a pure basic needs approach, and this happened before. The focus countries actually were selected before I took over, because the initiative started maybe three or four months before I took over. So, I came in at the tail end of that and don't have the personal experience of being in those discussions, I only know what I heard afterwards.

And Feed the Future moved away from a pure basic needs approach, determining which countries to focus on based on the level of greatest need, to thinking about which countries can actually make progress combined with who has need. One example was the DRC [the Democratic Republic of the Congo]. The DRC has a tremendous food security need, but there was a view that throwing a lot of money at the DRC and working with that government was not going to get us any progress on food security, so frankly, I never heard anyone complain about, "Well, why isn't the DRC on the list?", or "Why isn't Zimbabwe on the list?". I think in the early 1990s, when I started in the Agency, I think more people would have said, "Well, you're considering political factors." And I think by 2010, the Agency had moved to an assessment of the willingness and capacity of the country to move forward. I was not aware of it being controversial.

Q: One of the important parts of this was it was a multi-donor initiative as well and involved, in those days G8 or perhaps G7 countries. Presumably, you played a role in that whole process of defining priorities for a multi-donor initiative, as well as defining the priorities that we would be following within ourselves. Can you talk a little bit about that process and how it fit together or were there sometimes difficulties?

WEISENFELD: You're so good at doing your homework, because I'd forgotten about that completely. I don't remember where the G8 meeting was in the U.S. There was one year we were leading the G8, I believe, and we were setting the agenda. I did not get to go to that meeting. But you know the way this gets manifested when you're in USAID, it's really the State Department and the NSC running the traps. But we would get tasked with producing lots and lots of papers and having dialogue with the donors, so I would do a lot of phone calls with other donors at the donor level to make sure there was alignment on potential announcements and what the agenda would be.

Q: And the other donors were all on board with this as well and there weren't any particular issues.

WEISENFELD: Actually, I want to say it was in Italy.

Q: Yeah, there was a big one in Italy at one point relating to food security, I remember.

WEISENFELD: I think it was Italy, and I believe the next year was London, so I don't think it was in the U.S. But Obama went and our role was, like I said, the staff work, preparing papers and talking to the donors.

I had the same kind of experience I had in Zimbabwe, which was where I had the most intense rapport of my career up until then, where we just, and this sounds weird, but we just always clicked better with the Brits. As we were in these conversations it always seemed that, "Oh, we and the Brits see eye-to-eye, and it's painful to get everyone else on board and get them to understand where we want to go." So I spent more time talking to the DFID [Department for International Development] colleagues. DFID's now no longer called DFID. Back then, it was DFID. It also worked well because the next year, if I'm getting my years correctly, the G8 was in London, and we wanted the Brits to continue a

focus on food security. For me, it was an intense couple of months to do papers and donor phone calls, and then you move away from it totally.

Q: Yeah, one of the other parts of the initiative was participation with the private sector. Were you involved at all in the efforts to try to get private sector participation and commitments to work in partnership in at least some countries?

WEISENFELD: Personally, no. The Feed the Future coordinator, Tjada McKenna, was involved with this. And we had an office within the bureau, private sector engagement or something along those lines. The private sector office was trying to do that. I would get involved and they would develop deals with Caterpillar, for instance, and it would end up in a signing ceremony that the administrator would go to. I'd get involved with the outcome, but the day-to-day work on deals was done by staff.

Q: Right, okay. Did you get a chance to go out to any of the field missions and see the work that was being done?

WEISENFELD: Yep, absolutely. Actually, Margaret Enis Spears was the person who was heading our private sector office. She's, I believe, now the Deputy Director in Jordan.

Yeah, so I made a number of trips, to Tanzania, to Senegal, to Ethiopia, I'm not going to remember all the places. There was great work being done around the globe.

Q: Obviously, the Food Security Initiative was part of a broader, enhanced approach that the administration was taking on economic growth as well. And there was another initiative, I don't remember exactly what it was called, PPP – partnership for productivity. It was done in collaboration with the Treasury Department. Did you have any involvement with that? No. Okay. I was just going to ask you your views on it.

WEISENFELD: There was a water initiative that we tried to coordinate with, and there was a water "czar." That wasn't the appropriate title. Somebody came in, I believe it was a political appointee. You might know his daughter.

Q: Yes, right. Chris Holmes.

WEISENFELD: Yeah, Chris Holmes. So, we tried to coordinate with Chris Holmes, there was a new emphasis in the governance group. They didn't call it the third way, something like that, trying to think about how emphasizing governance creates better outcomes in other sectors, like a governance lens to health, and a governance lens in education and food security. There were always attempts to think about multisectoral programming.

Q: And with other parts of the agency. Was PPL [Bureau for Policy, Planning and Learning within USAID] very much involved with your work?

WEISENFELD: Actually, at the time I moved to this job, in effect, Susan Reichle moved to PPL.

Q: Yeah, they were just standing it up, I think, about the same time.

WEISENFELD: Yes, and they would review our guidance, but there was not a lot of regular interaction with them. The challenge with the multi-sectoral coordination, which I'm personally a huge believer in, is the indicators. So, we had very specific indicators around ag livelihoods and nutrition, and it's hard to program the money for governance work if I then have to report on increased incomes from ag.

Q: Yeah. I know that one of the complexities with nutrition was that the Office of Nutrition is in the Office of Health, but you didn't create another nutrition group within your bureau, did you? You relied upon the one from the health office.

WEISENFELD: Yeah, there's a personality aspect to this, too. You just have to get along and create relationships. We had people who were the heads of the Office of Nutrition come to whatever meetings they wanted to come to. There's this group called SUN [Scaling Up Nutrition], I actually just saw a plaque I got from them. It's a multi-donor effort with NGOs on nutrition, and the U.S. had a representative to this group.

I got appointed the USAID representative to the SUN group and would travel a couple of times a year. It was always in Europe for some reason, which was nice. It was, like, twenty years in the agency and it was my first time ever having a work trip to Europe. But I would just bring the folks from the Global Health/Nutrition office as support on that trip, and I think that worked very well.

Q: Absolutely. Related to this, and you started out by talking about how you, early on, put aside time for the agronomist to come talk to you, but any other thoughts about the generalist leader of an organization that is a technical organization? Any thoughts you have about how one can be most effective in doing that? Or was it really very similar to your experience as a mission director?

WEISENFELD: I used to say, I think the challenge of being a mission director is at 9:00 am you're expected to be an expert on HIV [human immunodeficiency virus], at 10:00 an expert on elections, at 11:00 an expert on education. And, obviously, you're not an expert on any of them, but you need to be conversant. I think that what's different about Washington if you're in a job like the Bureau of Food Security. It's just one thing, but for your level of expertise, the expectations are deeper. You're expected to understand not ag, but the differences between agronomy and plant biology and soil science and sometimes just naming those things helps. I think taking the time to understand the big picture issues that drive forward progress in these areas is important.

And the other thing I'd say is if you're managing a highly technical group, it only works if you have real curiosity about their field. So that helps bring people along and build trust and mutual respect that they see that you're authentically curious and desirous of learning more about what they do. But your job is not the substitute for their technical expertise, it's to help them channel it in ways that are effective within the management structure.

Often, those people who are very focused on technical aspects don't get why something moves forward and something doesn't.

Q: That's helpful. You were basically the Assistant Administrator, although they had different titles for purposes of meeting targets for positions requiring confirmation by the Senate, for about two-and-a-half years. I believe you retired from that position, is that correct? Had you been thinking about retirement, or did opportunities come up that seemed so interesting you decided to move on?

WEISENFELD: So I was approached by RTI, by our friend Aaron Williams, maybe a year or a year-and-a-half before I retired, and I told him, "I'm not planning on leaving USAID, what are you talking about?". He called me every three or four months, and he kept bugging me.

At the same time, I got approached by a couple of senior folks in the State Department asking me if I wanted my name on the list to be an ambassador. It was the guy who was the deputy DCM in Mexico under Carlos [Pascual], John Feeley, who became the PDAS [Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary] in Western Hemisphere Affairs at State, wonderful guy, and Roberta Jacobson, who I got to know when I was on the Haiti Task Force and as DAA at LAC. I don't know if you know Roberta Jacobson. Do you know who she is?

Q: No, I don't.

WEISENFELD: She was PDAS in WHA [Western Hemisphere Affairs] when I was on the Haiti portfolio and when I was in Peru. Then she became Ambassador to Mexico. I don't know if it was directly after Carlos. She overlapped into the Trump administration and, I believe, resigned in protest. She's just one of those absolute top-notch State Department people who was just totally one of the great representatives of the U.S. and the profession. So I got to know Roberta and John from when he was DCM. They asked if I was interested in being nominated and I said yes.

So I said yes, and they put my name forward for a position but ultimately a political appointee was nominated for the position I went for. I was in discussions with State about other potential positions, but this was after five different calls from Aaron Williams over perhaps a twelve-month period.

Q: Right, and you said Aaron's more reliable?

WEISENFELD: So, I started talking to some friends, and someone said to me, "Okay, well, if you get an ambassadorship, what are you going to do afterwards? Are you going to go to a place like RTI?". I thought, "Probably, I kind of like that." My friend said, "Well, what does the ambassadorship do for you, then, other than just the title?".

So, I thought it seemed uncertain. My name could go in. It seemed uncertain, maybe it'll go forward and maybe it won't. And for senior-level jobs, there's a view that a lot of these organizations that do work for USAID are filled with former USAID people, and that's

just not true at all. Very few people, and I have 1,600 people under me, worked for USAID; it's a different set than that. These organizations are pyramids, so there aren't many senior jobs and they don't open often. So if you pass up on one, it may not be easy to get it again.

And the thing about RTI that I found attractive is I didn't want to just be an organization that only works for USAID and only does development. RTI is a big implementer for USAID, but that's only a third of what we do. We do laboratory sciences and deep social science work in the United States, we do new drug development, there's new energy technologies, we do research on a broad range of public health, education and justice issues; there's all sorts of cool stuff. And it's a nonprofit with a deep mission orientation to improve the human condition but which manages itself rigorously. In the 1950s and 1960s, a large number of these research institutes, like Battelle and Southwest Research Institute, SRI, were created. At RTI, we publish more peer-reviewed publications than any of them, so it's just an interesting place to be. So I just decided it was an opportunity I didn't want to pass up for something that seemed uncertain.

Q: Now that was an important step, but one that, obviously, you used good reason in making your decision.

WEISENFELD: One other thing that I thought about, frankly, is age. I know who told me this, but I don't want to use the person's name. Someone who was a mentor, it wasn't Aaron. But another mentor said, "If you retire at sixty or sixty-five and want to go into another organization, you enter at a very different kind of status than if you retire at fifty. If you retire at fifty, you have opportunities to grow and move up in the new organization. You're long-term staff in that organization. At sixty-five, you're a short-term consultant. So if you want a second career, you need to do it at an earlier stage. Or if you want something where you're part-time or not permanent staff, then do it when you're older.

USAID Retirement (October 2013) and Wrap-Up Thoughts

Q. So, you retired in October of 2013, and then started work in November. If you have any observations on the development field from your work the last twelve years that you'd like to share, please do that. But before leaving the USAID, if you have any final thoughts on the career itself and any recommendations or thoughts you'd like to share.

WEISENFELD: That's such a big question. From a personal perspective, as I've said a couple of times, I could never have imagined the career that I had with the opportunities to be engaged on issues that are just so critically important globally and meet people at the highest levels and have a chance to at least maybe influence their thinking. That just would never have occurred to me growing up. So it's a remarkable agency and people don't know enough about it.

As for the advice from a perspective of the Agency itself, I think we're filled with development purists who operate in a system that's not about development, and we're not as capable as we need to be in communicating within the interagency. People in USAID

say, "Development is a discipline, and you need to pay attention to us." I think we need to find ways to be more effective in persuading colleagues in the interagency, and it's hard because the political process in the Washington ecosystem wants short-term returns and development is long-term. But that has ended up in a focus on metrics. And we report on deliverables and how much money is committed and how much money is spent rather than talking about long-term results, so I do think that's the fundamental challenge.

Part of the issue is how we promote people at the highest levels of the agency. "Am I smarter than other people who didn't get promoted to the level I did?" I don't think so. I think what I'm good at is communicating to senior people in a way that they can understand and that gives them confidence to make decisions. And if our senior people can effectively communicate at the Secretary of State level, then we're successful. When they can't, then you create PEPFAR or create something else that pulls the authority out of the agency.

Q: Are there things you think AID could do to train its senior staff to be better communicators, recognizing the needs of the political level and of our White House and the Congress? We tend to want to just keep saying the same thing. If we say it loud enough, maybe people will hear us as opposed to adjusting what we say?

WEISENFELD: Well, I think if we say the same thing, and we just keep saying it louder, we then get disinvited to meetings that we don't even know are happening, where critical decisions are made.

Yeah, I do think training can help. I did go through one of the early forms of leadership training at the FEI, Federal Executive Institute, that the Agency did. We spent, I want to say, four days solely on communications. That was a long time. Yeah, a lot of time on communications, including being filmed and critiqued. That was very helpful to me. I've actually done it since at RTI again, and our new CEO [chief executive officer] is going through it now. He was just appointed a few months ago. He's done it before, but he's going through it again. We have a team of critics reviewing his performance and giving him advice on how his message is received. I think it's the kind of thing that you have to do periodically. How your message is perceived is all that counts, not what you intended.

Q: Yeah. That's an important observation.

You've now sat on the other side of the table for almost a decade. I know AID is working hard on developing new localization policies. Do you have recommendations to them on that given your experience, because you've worked in some countries that have had strong local institutions? And do you have any thoughts on how AID can further develop its system to be more successful?

WEISENFELD: So, I have a strong view that at both the tactical level and strategic level the problem is what I was talking about before. We have a system that forces us to focus on compliance and accountability, not results. And we burden and overwhelm local organizations. If you think about what it takes to comply with USAID rules on a big

program, we have an enormous infrastructure at RTI that we built up, the back-office systems of contracts and finance, compliance, risk, et cetera. You have to have those as separate functions in order to have genuine accountability. Does it make us a stronger organization? Yeah, but a small NGO in Haiti is never going to have enough people to have all those functions as separate. They can build it up to implement a USAID program, but if the USAID program goes away, their other funders are not going to provide that level of resources for funding overhead costs. So I don't think it's the long-term answer.

I think a big part of the solution is to focus on results. For instance, fixed amount obligation agreements, which the Agency is talking about doing more of, is one type of tool that increases the focus on results. The standard USAID approach of cost reimbursement where someone's looking at all your invoices just gets you into the muck. Where there's a lot of uncertainty in the program outcomes, these cost-reimbursement approaches make more sense, but the issue is understanding the implications and picking the right tool.

We had a financial review for one of our projects recently that said we had \$1.9 million in unallowable costs, which is a stunning amount, even for an organization with large dollar value programs like us. So of course we dove into the issue in detail. What the audit said was really that we hadn't submitted enough documentation. But everyone will immediately think, and you can see news articles about this all the time that these are "unexplained costs," which implies fraud. But the reality was more mundane, things like someone forgot to submit a hotel receipt. So, of course, we worked at it, submitted revised documentation, and the number went from \$1.9 million to \$30,000. And this was on something in the range of a \$25 million program over 4 years, so \$30,000 was not really that much. And this example is not that uncommon.

The reality of implementing programs in low-resource settings around the world is there's an element of risk. The project-based nature of the work we and others do means that we hire large numbers of local staff for term employment (3-5 years) and we entrust them with a lot of resources. We have systems to ensure that money is used appropriately. In the modern world, it's easier to do that through pre-agreements with hotels and electronic invoices and all that. But there's always an element of risk.

And this is true in the United States for big programs that federal agencies fund: there's no such thing as zero risk or therefore zero waste. But we have very limited tolerance for that; our system strives for zero risk with a mentality of accounting for every penny. And I'm not saying we should tolerate stolen money. We must have systems of accountability, but the implication that, "Oh, my gosh, that organization's caught," I think we have to shift the focus on results. Have accountability. If money's identified and it's going wrong, organizations need to pay it back, but don't make that the dialogue. The dialogue is mostly about compliance, it needs to be more about results.

Q: Absolutely. Thank you very much, Paul. You've had a remarkable career. Your story provides a lot of important information that others can benefit from, as well as recording

the history, which itself is important, but I think that there are lots of lessons. If I were a young person in AID today, I'd want to learn from you.

WEISENFELD: That's very kind of you, Carol.

Q: So, we'll try to get as many people reading this as possible.

End of interview