

The Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training
Foreign Affairs Oral History Program
Foreign Service Spouse Series

FAITH HANDLEY

*Interviewed by: Jewell Fenzi
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Q: This is Jewell Fenzi on July 17, 1990. I am interviewing Faith Handley at my home, 1824 Sixteenth St., NW, in Washington. Faith is on her way to Bangladesh, as spouse of Ambassador William Milam, and we met recently at the Foreign Service Institute where she was attending the spouse training section of the Ambassadorial Seminar.

You were telling me, and I was very much impressed with the fact, that you had managed your own divorce proceedings in a Virginia court without an attorney, and you had begun to tell me that this was possible because you had been first to a mediator. Would you take it from there?

HANDLEY: That's right. When my husband and I had decided on a separation neither of us had a lot of money, we didn't want to run off and get our own lawyers and spend money we really didn't have. A friend of my husband's had told us something about going to a mediator, that you could arrange a separation, have it legal on paper, but that it wasn't necessary to go to separate lawyers -- you could go to one lawyer who could effect what you had both decided.

So we made an appointment with a mediator, a delightful man, who made his point that he was not really there to get us back together but could help us find people who could help us, if that was what we wanted, and if other problems or consideration he could give us names. He was there to help us, he said, to put down on paper the fact that we would like to separate, what we were going to do with our things, with insurance, with retirement, and vis-a-vis the children.

When I heard about mediation I thought it was probably the best bet for someone like me who'd already decided that she wanted out of the marriage, literally had gone through the whole process of denial, being sad, being angry, finally grieving for a lost marriage and a lost life --

Q: While you were still married.

HANDLEY: Yes. So to me it wasn't a matter of "getting what I should get." To me it was a matter of being able to slip out of this relationship, break this relationship with the least worry and bother on all sides. That's why mediation works. It also worked for us because my husband was very cooperative. I myself wanted the separation and divorce, he wasn't as keen but he was cooperative. I think that that made a big difference. Each of

us was very honest with the other: we didn't say we would go to mediation and then run off and get our own lawyer and see if we could get a better deal. We stuck with mediation. We arranged for the separation agreement, we signed it, and then we separated. I guess it was all rather civilized and fairly unemotional and fairly practical. But it worked well for us.

The separation agreement in hand, I felt that when the time came, a year later, to apply for a divorce, I could probably go ahead and do that myself.

Q: To interrupt for a moment, when you separated did he move out? You said you didn't have a house -- did he move out of the apartment where you were living?

HANDLEY: He moved out of the townhouse where we were living. We stayed, the children and I. I wrote to the landlord and said that I was going to be teaching, that I could afford the rent (without telling him how much money I was earning), and that we would like to stay because I wanted to keep the children in the same school. If I had moved and tried to get an apartment on the money that I was earning, no one would have taken me. I was earning \$14,000 a year, my husband was giving me child support, our rent was \$700 a month. So it was tight. It was more like half than the quarter that one usually spends for rent, so that was useful that I had written to ask for a new lease. Even though my husband was leaving I was upfront and honest with the management and they allowed me to stay; didn't ask how much money I was earning, just felt that it was a good deal. So it was to my advantage to stay put even though it was more money than I could afford it was at least for us to be able to stay and my husband moved out.

Q: Does he have extra rooms for the children?

HANDLEY: Yes. Later on he moved to his own apartment. Before he moved overseas he bought his own townhouse, with certainly plenty of room for the children. Now, in his new post he also has plenty of room.

So I decided I would go ahead and try taking my divorce through court myself. My first step was to call the mediator again and say, "I've heard that I can take my divorce through court, I've seen advertisements in newspapers that other people can do it for you, so I'd like to try it myself." I was told that for a fee of \$50 I could come in and they would tell me how to do it. This is more of a family law practice, and that's the kind of place you should go to if you're looking for a mediator. Either look up "Mediator" or "Family Law Practice" in the Yellow Pages or ask a friend do they have a mediator.

I didn't want to spend \$50 so I took as much information as they would give me over the telephone and then went immediately to the library at the Fairfax court of law and asked for a book on the papers that were needed for a "no-fault divorce." You're allowed to photocopy pages from a book so I copied the front page on what to do when, and then the appropriate pages through the book covering what I would need. I asked a friend who had a typing business to type up the pages exactly as printed. I filled in the blanks or changed what I thought was necessary. We began the process that way.

Everything worked well. We paid certain fees, sent away certain forms, notified my husband as we were supposed to do. Finally we had an appointment with the Commissioner who said that he couldn't help me, he knew what I was going to do but he could not help me. That being the case, he said, he would give me one small bit of advice: he felt that I was more or less on my own, that he didn't really approve, but if I were going to do it, fine, that I had to do it on my own.

Probably the most disheartening aspect of the whole situation was when we did go to court -- my husband, myself and my girlfriend -- the Commissioner was not helpful, in fact he was very unhelpful, rather mean, tried to make me feel as bad as possible that I hadn't brought a counsel with me; wanted to protect, I'm sure, the lawyers' interest in needing to have someone there; allowed me to blunder on through. Eventually it was over, I paid him the \$90 while he waited. In the parking lot the young reporter who'd been taking the notes said it was rather an awful session, she'd never attended anything like that before, that he'd taken an hour to go through what was usually a 15-minute procedure.

Q: Do you think this was because you didn't have counsel and he was trying to trip you up, maybe?

HANDLEY: Absolutely. I think he was making a point, frankly. I think if we had left and returned with a lawyer, that would have been just fine. I'm Australian and we're a little more pigheaded than that. I just wanted to stick it out and get it over and done with, and that's what we did. Eventually he had to address stock questions himself, do some of the things that were necessary himself. He gave us some good advice and whatever; so in the end it wasn't too bad, but it really wasn't a very good experience. So I don't think the faint at heart should try something like this. And you should take someone with you when you go, a friend.

But everything was fine. After it was all over I took the court order for the divorce to a friend, an attorney, and he said it was fine, so I did have someone check it out afterwards. He only cost \$400, the whole thing. So economically speaking it was much better, psychologically speaking it was fairly easy, although it did take a horrendous amount of time. I believe all I did that summer was get my divorce done.

Q: And a lot of legwork, isn't it.

HANDLEY: A lot of legwork. A lot of floating around, but that's what you're paying lawyers for. Except that you don't have to do that. I'm sure they'd be more efficient than I was. (she laughs)

Q: This won't work for everyone.

HANDLEY: It won't work for everyone. You have to have mutual consent. It needs to be a "no-fault" divorce, and to have a separation agreement signed and sealed by a lawyer,

that you've both signed. It's absolutely an asset and I would say absolutely a must for any people who are separating. It just helps you beforehand to put everything together. However, if one party just storms out of house and obviously a separation agreement is not viable, then this whole process is probably not viable. Or if you need to leave and can't stay to work it out amicably, that's fine too, because sometimes you have to do that. Then you have to go a different way and you must get your own lawyer.

Q: Let's talk again about how you delayed your divorce for years and years and years because with each move with the Foreign Service you hoped that it would be a solution and would be better.

HANDLEY: I think my one regret about my divorce is that I didn't get around to it sooner. I think that living a Foreign Service life exacerbated the process of not getting a divorce, because it seemed that every new move we made gave me new hope, new thoughts that "now at his next place things perhaps will be different." I don't think it was the place, I think it was the move. With a move you need to talk to each other a little more, you need to communicate a little more -- you must even if it's only about packing, or whatever. Just a little bit more contact there. Then I would raise my hopes that perhaps we were beginning to be more what I imagined a normal relationship might be for two people who are married. I think if I'd been living in one place all those years, the realization would have come along sooner, because there would not have been the distraction of moving nor the elevated hopes that were perhaps unfounded.

Q: You were very young when you were married too, and perhaps you had to grow into an awareness.

HANDLEY: Yes. I was 20 when I got married. My father was an alcoholic, is still an alcoholic, I had come from an alcoholic family, I married a man who was an alcoholic --

Q: You didn't know he was when you married him?

HANDLEY: No, I didn't. He was when we were married. We've found out since then that he was an alcoholic from age 12, 18, from a young age; he was 26 when I married him, so he wasn't "young and foolish." In many ways, I must admit, I didn't know what a normal life was, nor did I know what a normal relationship was. One of the reasons I entered this survey was because I really felt that I grew up in the Foreign Service in my married life, which is a little bit different than growing up when you're a child. Nonetheless, it did open many doors for me and it did broaden my outlook and educate me to what "a normal life" really was.

So as I grew and became wiser and a little bit more understanding of how things could be, I became more dissatisfied with the lack of communication that I had in my marriage. I came to realize that there was another way in dealing with the world, that I could talk to friends, that I could share my hurt, my fears, my worries. I think I was married 13 years, I think I was about 33 before I finally had someone that I could trust but finally broke down and told this woman everything that had happened, told her my worries and hopes

and fears. Then that opened the door to being able to think about being able to get out of the marriage. I think I'd come to rock bottom, I'd gone as far as I could go as far as taking the hurt on my own, and had probably decided that I was on the way out... But I broke down and decided to talk to someone. I think that was the answer.

Q: Opened the floodgates.

HANDLEY: Opened the floodgates as it were, and I can only say that if in the Foreign Service there are women or men who feel that their marriage isn't what they would like it to be, communication is the first step obviously: communication with your spouse. If it goes beyond that, then you must communicate with other people. Sometimes in the Foreign Service it can be difficult to find "safe" people to communicate with, but if you look around, those people are there. They may not be with you for an extended period of time if you work through the process of the difficult periods. But don't let that stop you from talking to the people who are with you at the moment. That must be done, that should be done, as you go along. Even if you don't have many problems, even if you don't want to get out of the marriage but you just want to say, "I wish I could get on with my eldest son a little bit better." We should share those things.

Q: Do you think the CLO coordinator is the person to go to?

HANDLEY: No.

Q: Or does it have to be a friendship?

HANDLEY: I think it probably should be a friendship. I do think that as a last resort I think of course a CLO coordinator could be the person, but I personally feel that you could out with a lot more gut-wrenching stuff if you can speak with a friend, a safe friend. I think always speaking with someone who's a lit-tle [shading the word] attached to the Embassy might put you on edge, you may not feel like you want to come out with the whole story. Although I know some people do and it's perfectly fine. For me a friendship was the thing that made the difference.

Q: But your husband's alcoholism didn't affect his job performance.

HANDLEY: Of course not, not at all. It doesn't have to. As a matter of fact, in the Foreign Service, I think you'll find that a lot of really nice, wonderful, hardworking, overworking people suffer from alcoholism. They give a lot at work and they don't give anything at home. They take at home.

Q: They have nothing left, perhaps, some of them.

HANDLEY: That's right. They take at home. It isn't that they're inactive at home, they take at home and they give at work. That's not the way it should be. You should give and take at work, you should give and take at home. They get what they need. They get kudos from work, they get their kudos from home, but they only -- in my case it only seemed

that my husband was giving at work and wasn't available at all to us at home. If he walked in the door and took a beer, he wasn't with us for the rest of the night. He was with us, he was right there next to us, as you are to me. But he wasn't with us in any real, connecting, communicating sense.

Q: But you said that he did go to treatment for alcoholism --

HANDLEY: After we'd separated. After I'd decided that I was out never to return, he realized himself that he needed to do something about his drinking. He went to the alcoholic rehabilitation center that the State Department recommends, went through their program, immediately began to go AA meetings, has gone to AA ever since, has developed into a remarkably kind, generous, understanding man, who can communicate. The children have a brand-new relationship with him, one that they couldn't have before, one that would not have been possible because of the disease. So I feel in this way, even though we broke up we've moved from a situation where no one was winning to a situation where everyone won. Sad as it may be to break up a family, I believe that in the end we all won and we're all better for this change in our lives.

Q: How marvelous it would be if everyone who goes through that could come away with that feeling.

HANDLEY: I don't think everyone does. As I said, it's really very difficult. You could speak to my children and they would say that it's been up and down. They both would come at it from an entirely different angle. We could talk about that later, perhaps.

Q: The other thing that I would like to get on tape that we talked about before is that you now can send your children to him without reservations, because he's still in the Foreign Service. You'll be in Bangladesh and sending two children off to your former husband's post for Christmas -- it's rather exciting for them!

HANDLEY: That's right. This Christmas the children will stay with us and we'll all go to Australia, but then next summer they'll go to be with their father for a number of weeks. In the beginning, when we first separated, I was a little hesitant about leaving the children with him. Number one: I was an over-protective mother anyway. Number two: I just had always felt that he wasn't as responsible as he could have been with the children, but I think that fair play and the opportunity to be a parent is important. So they went, and I did trust him with them when they went for the weekend.

Luckily as things worked out -- I was able to say this to him personally -- that after he'd gone through the program, after he'd been with AA for a number of months, I was able to say to him, "I want to tell you that I trust you implicitly with these children, I trust that you can take care of them and I didn't, before, trust you as much; but I do now. I can see that you're able to take responsibility for them and I trust you with them." They'll be returning in a few weeks from a six-week visit with their father and I certainly have not worried about them for one minute. I know that he's a kind and loving person and that

they're with their father, and that's very important, and I feel comfortable with the fact that they can go back and forth like this.

Q: Also, as we said earlier, if you would be kind enough to give us any papers, anything that you have that would enable the FLO office, to which I'll turn them over, to help someone go through this without the huge expense and with the lack of acrimony and the level-headedness and the sensibility that you did, it may be helpful to others.

HANDLEY: Yes, I will, Jewell, I'll be glad to.

Q: May I ask you one thing: Being from Australia, did you ever feel like a foreign-born spouse?

HANDLEY: Oh, absolutely!

Q: "Absolutely" -- in what ways?

HANDLEY: I only thought that it was to my advantage --

Q: How nice.

HANDLEY: -- that I had something that was a little different, that I was a little different but that that was fine; that I was the one that "talked funny," the one who used different words. Especially, joining the Foreign Service at 20, I needed something to give me a little boost so that I didn't feel alone or too odd. But yes, I did feel like a foreign-born spouse, but I've never felt "out" because I was a foreign-born spouse. Not once. I didn't look for it, but I didn't see it, either.

Q: So being Australian has not been an issue with you in the Foreign Service.

HANDLEY: Absolutely not.

Q: You really made it work for you. ':-

HANDLEY: I think it's been to my advantage. People are interested to hear about another country, especially in Australia -- in the years that I've been in the Foreign Service, there's been a wonderful amount of interest in Australia. People are interested to listen to me speak because it's a little different, and that's to my advantage. Also I think being Australian I come to the Foreign Service with a little bit different kind of attitude from some of my peers when I first joined the Service. As a communicator's wife, I heard that sometimes Officers' wives didn't want to speak to us, and in my Australian way I thought that that was their loss, really; that even if it was true, and I hadn't particularly noticed it, that basically it was their loss, really. If they didn't want to speak to me, then probably I didn't want to speak to them. But it came through as a very matter-of-fact practical approach on that kind of problem that other wives told me they had had.

Q: But you don't remember having an exact problem like that yourself. I think it's partly your attitude.

HANDLEY: I don't look for it. And if it happened, I think that I probably thought "OK, it's just that person, there are plenty of other people, that's fine, I can move on; I have a choice too."

Q: Now that you're going out as an Ambassador's wife, doesn't that give you a totally different perspective on all of the wives of the Officers who'll be your husband's subordinates?

HANDLEY: Absolutely.

Q: But you haven't experienced it yet, so you don't know how you'll handle it.

HANDLEY: I think it's to my advantage that I've already spent 14 years in the Foreign Service --

Q: Oh definitely, definitely.

HANDLEY: -- as a communicator's wife, certainly from a different angle. It will be a little different, but frankly I don't think I'm going to handle it much differently than I did before. I think I'm going to be pleased with the opportunities that I'll have as the Ambassador's wife. I think I'll do as I did before -- make friends, encourage people, certainly invite everyone I can to the Residence at regular intervals to meet me and to meet my husband and to be a part of the community there.

Q: How big a Mission will you have in Bangladesh?

HANDLEY: I think it's called kind of medium-sized, not a big medium, just a little medium-size. Mainly the AID mission, so I'm looking forward to meeting everyone. So the position will allow me to meet everyone. I like that, that will be wonderful. Also, my husband and I have been married for only a year and a half, so I'm coming as a relatively new spouse with him, though I think I'm coming with a lot of Foreign Service experience. To fit in the role of an Ambassador's wife, I think I feel a little nervous about it but I feel very comfortable about it, actually, I think that it will work out fine.

Q: You're obviously communicating with him on this, (she laughs) -- absolutely, I can tell.

HANDLEY: Absolutely! And I think that our expectations of ourselves are reasonable. I mean, we hope to be able to spend enough time with the Bangladeshi people, enough time with American international people, and enough time with our own family. I think we'd like to be very well-rounded as far as how we divide up our time and how we manage to keep time for everything and everyone.

Q: I hope it works out that way.

HANDLEY: I don't know. We'll see, won't we.

Q: Well, there will be hectic times and then times that are a little calmer.

HANDLEY: I would think so. But my husband and I find that it's very important that we have plenty of time for ourselves, and then plenty of time with the children.

Q: Does he have children?

HANDLEY: No. I think because it is important, we'll find the time. Because it is important to have people come to the Residence, we'll do that. Because it is important for us to meet Bangladeshi people, have them come and go, we'll also do that. I think we'll be able to do everything. I think as long as we don't have high expectations of how well we're going to do everything, I think we'll be able to manage, and I think we'll get better at it as we go along.

Q: Well, I think also that if you are natural and yourself, I think the host country nationals sense that. I think they sense artificiality whether they be in Bangladesh or Brazil or Burma or wherever, and I think that your attitude is absolutely right.

Now, tell me about your teaching profession. First of all, because you married so young you only finished university last year?

HANDLEY: That's right.

Q: Summa cum laude and valedictorian (she laughs) all in one year! (both laugh) This was just after, or before or during your divorce?

HANDLEY: Just after, I guess. I graduated from high school in Australia at 18, was married two years later and with my husband joined the Foreign Service. Two years later I had my first child, two years after that my second child. I always believed that I had put off continuing my education until later. I'm a nurturer who deferred her education, and I have to admit that now that I'm at this stage of my life, I'm pleased that that's the way that I did it. I feel very privileged to be able to have spent all those years with my children.

Having lived in America, now, for five years very recently, I understand how economics can drive parents into the workforce for long hours and to have to find alternate arrangements for their children. I felt privileged not to have had to think about making that choice. I chose to stay at home and it was possible for me to do that, I was pleased to do that. Right from the beginning, though, I felt I would get my education later on, it's been a dream of mine. I've had a few dreams long ago and a few long-term goals that I have never forgotten, and to finish my university education has certainly been one of the -

- so it was important for me to keep that all the way through. Once I came back to America and had the opportunity to go to school, that's what I did.

Q: Did you take Education?

HANDLEY: In liberal studies, English and Education.

Q: I noticed your bio says "teaching and education" -- I wasn't quite sure what "6th and 7th grades" meant, on the form?

HANDLEY: I taught kindergarten to 9th grade. Actually, I took a correspondence course while overseas in London when my children were quite young, in Montessori training, and I worked in Cameroon as director of a nursery school and also as a substitute teacher at the international school in kindergarten through 9th grade. I'm a wonderful teacher, I don't need to get a university education to be able to teach, I'm just a natural teacher. Some people can do that.

Q: But you have to have that little piece of paper under certain circumstances.

HANDLEY: Absolutely. So the first thing I did when I came back to America was to go to a Montessori school downtown to do graduate work in Montessori. They took me even though I didn't have my degree because they take one or two students each year and they understand that life experience means a lot. So I received my graduate work in Montessori and went to school. Then I went back to get my Bachelor's degree and did it the quickest way I could -- went to Marymount University because they gave me credits for life experience. One year I did 15 credits, the next year I did 43 [Fenzi gasps] and I did really well.

Q: Fantastic!

HANDLEY: It was a very good experience, so I enjoyed that and it certainly whet my appetite to do graduate work later on. I guess I could point out that it's good that one not let go one's dream just because one happens to be in the Foreign Service, that sometimes the opportunity will arise later on, sooner than you think, to be able to continue with part of your life, so if you grab the opportunity as soon as it arrives --

Q: Right: you can't count on instant gratification but the opportunity may turn up in two posts or

HANDLEY: Absolutely. If I hadn't taken that position as directress of the nursery school in Cameroon, I wouldn't have had the experience. You have to try things, sometimes. Right from the start, even, I've always done some kind of volunteer work in the Foreign Service, even from my first post, where I taught English and helped with the Girl Scouts.

At my second post I did something a little different: I also worked with the Scouts there but I started a women's group. We were all pregnant at the time and it was a pregnant

mothers' group but we loved it so much. We only met every two weeks. Most of the time we had a little subject that we talked about, but after our children were born we continued with that, and I saw the absolute need for women who were at home looking out for children to get together and share stories. That led me to my involvement with a group called La Leche League, which is a breast-feeding mothers' organization started in America about 27 years ago. I trained as a leader -- it's an entirely volunteer organization -- I trained as a leader, held meetings in Indonesia, and later was a very active leader in Ottawa. As a matter of fact, in Ottawa I chose to make friends with the Canadian women and chose not to be involved in any way with the Embassy group. When I was asked, I was very polite and thanked them and gave my support to the programs but said that I was doing something different; and I was. I was with the Canadians.

Q: That was after 1972 and the directive. Actually, you came into the Service just with the directive. So you had no pre-directive experience to compare that with. Was there any resentment in the Embassy?

HANDLEY: Not at all. People did what they wanted there, really, and they were very nice. I did go to a farewell coffee and that was interesting, that was good. I spoke with the women sometimes and I was really polite about it -- it wasn't that I didn't like them, it was that I had chosen to do something else, and what else I had chosen to do was volunteer work many hours a day working for the Leche League, doing my correspondence course for Montessori school -- that was enough already -- and looking after my children. I had chosen a different route, I explained that, and I think there was no resentment that I wouldn't join in, because they knew I was happy doing what I was doing so it wasn't as if they had to get me in to keep me happy. It was also Canada, which is a place where people do tend to go their own way a little bit more.

Q: Oh yes, because language --

HANDLEY: Exactly, no barriers.

Q: You probably have a work permit with Canada?

HANDLEY: Probably! (both laugh) But I took three years off from the Foreign Service, so it was wonderful, I had a great time there. And I continued with that kind of work. Cameroon was the first time I really worked for money, as director of the nursery school and as a teacher.

Q: What is "Ashoka"?

HANDLEY: That's a group I worked with here in Washington straight after I finished my degree. It's an international development firm, grassroots. They give money to the people who are doing something for their own people in developing countries. Then, about the time that I was thinking I needed to move on from that job that I'd been in for a few months, we heard about the possibility of going to Bangladesh and I think it probably hit us all like a thunderbolt when the news came and then it was only a possibility: we

had to go through all the months of waiting to see if it would really happen. I resigned from my job, and my husband and I had a very good chat over Christmas and the New Year.

I also had another dream that I hadn't thought was timely to bring into fruition yet, and that was to work in the theater. I had thought I would wait until the children were out of school to do this, but it just seemed like it wasn't worth looking for a part-time job for six months when I knew I would be leaving. I'm rather honest, I did interview, I told people I was leaving. They were interested but not interested! I just couldn't get over the hump of not letting them know that I was leaving.

So I decided to go to Catholic University and take some graduate courses in theater. I applied as a special student and took three classes -- graduate courses in teaching drama and in structural drama, which were wonderful, and in an undergraduate class in beginning directing, which is really what I want to do. So I decided to use this to my advantage in Bangladesh, and one of the reasons I'm so calm about going there is that Bangladeshi people have a rich culture of theater and I think I can probably go to the theater every night to a Bangladeshi performance if I want to. One of the reasons I'm in the thick of language training at the moment is because I want to be able to understand what is being said, and I'll continue my language training when I get to post.

The other special advantage I have is that they have an expatriate theater called "Dacca Stage," which is run by the Brits as far as I know, and I'm absolutely going to become involved with that. As far as my education is concerned, I do want to continue and eventually I want to get my Master of Fine Arts in theater directing. To help me on my way I've found some correspondence courses to take -- an undergraduate and graduate course in play-writing, another is an undergraduate course in film analysis. So I'm happy with those, that will be a good start.

Q: It sounds absolutely marvelous, so well thought out.

HANDLEY: Well, to be happy going, it was absolutely essential, Jewell, that I have something of my own to take with me. Because if you think about being married all that time, being dissatisfied, getting out of it, falling in love with a very special person, that (laughing) wasn't in the plan -- I'm not always planned! And deciding to take a risk and get married fairly soon after I got divorced, and also married to someone who may be sent out as a DCM or Ambassador, when it finally came through, I thought, "Well, this is fine, but I must take something of my own with me or else I know I'm not going to be happy." I'm much more independent now than I was before. I've always believed in the power of the individual but I've actually seen things happen because of the power of my self, of the individual. That leaves you with a certain amount of independence that you don't like to give up too easily.

So I think theater is far removed from Embassy, and that's what I want -- something that's different, something that will take me out into the community and into the

international community where people can know me as a person other than as the wife of the American Ambassador.

Q: Would you like to talk to someone who was the wife of an Ambassador who's very involved in theater?

HANDLEY: Absolutely.

Q: Sally Lewis. Before you leave I'll give you her address. When I called recently they were unsure whether she'll return before you leave next month, I don't know, but try to talk to her, because she has just exactly the interest that you have.

HANDLEY: Excellent! And it's good because I can take it with me. I'm already ahead of schedule as far as that goes, because I wasn't planning on doing this theater until the children left home. They'll be with us in Bangladesh, but it isn't like taking classes -- I already did it for one semester, I took classes and was involved in a play, and when a play is running you're gone from the house quite a number of days a week for six weeks, and that's a long time to be away on a continual basis. But I think it will be that continuous in Bangladesh, I'll just pick and choose --

Q: But you'll also have household help.

HANDLEY: Exactly; so I think I'll be able to do it. But it's very important to me to have something that I can do. I think, actually, it's important to my husband, I think he likes the thought that he has a thread out there in the world, a different thread out there in the world than the one that he has. I think it will be good to be able to support each other in our own work and our own interests, but I think it's important for us as two very independent people that those interests are different.

Q: Was there anything in the course of training at the Overseas Briefing Center that suggested that?

HANDLEY: No. There was nothing.

Q: I think that's more important to your generation than to mine, because we had different expectations.

HANDLEY: I think that part of the importance of me going to post with my own identity perhaps might be a little exacerbated in our case by the fact that I am going as a 38-year-old woman and my husband will be 54. I need to have something of my own to take with me that I can feel that I'm also independent and that I have my own life in the Foreign Service at post. My husband and I also believe it's important that we support each other in our own interests and in our own independent growth and maturing. We feel that it's not necessary to both be involved in exactly the same type of work.

Q: In other words, you're willing to help him with CODELs and VIPs and Fourth of July receptions, you don't resent that. Principally, I think, because of your relationship with him. I've always felt that women do this for their husbands more than they do for the Department of State, but I think the fact that you have your own plans for your own identity in the theater must be very important in your attitude towards your willingness to help him, I think.

HANDLEY: Absolutely. I think so too. I can help with these visits, perhaps I can take these people to the theater, maybe that will be a new thing for them, to go to local theater. And yes, our willingness to support each other; as he will support me by coming sometimes to listen to the theater or to watch a show that I'm involved in, or whatever the case may be. I think that's every important -- he takes my work very seriously, as I take his. I don't interfere in his work and he doesn't interfere in mine, we're fairly autonomous in the way we go about our work. And yet I am available and will be interested in supporting him. But that's not going to be my only job, I'm going to have other work I'll be doing and I think that that is important.

Q: I wonder if some of the older women in your course do see that as their only job?

HANDLEY: I think so --

Q: And is that sowing seeds for unhappiness?

HANDLEY: It may be. However, if you're a woman who looks on a more traditional view of going overseas as being a helpmate to your husband and on taking up the burden of life in the Foreign Service as a Foreign Service spouse, and specifically to be with your husband, and you're happy doing that and you feel fulfilled doing that and you both can still communicate well doing that, then that's wonderful and that's what you should be doing. If you are only helping your husband and feel that you are "just a helper" and don't have anything in your own right, then you have a choice: to do it and be unhappy, or to move along and find something that you can do that will balance that work and that will bring you some happiness and fulfillment for yourself.

Begin tape 1 side B

Q (mid-sentence): of the host country community. Do they discuss that in the course at FSI?

HANDLEY: They do, they say that in some countries you could be busy every night of the week going to host community functions and that one has to make choices. We believe that we have to make choices fairly soon so that the pattern is set -- that we'd like to spend certain nights at home with our children or going to the theater or whatever it is that we want to do. But we want to do as much as we can, it's not that we don't want to do that; we want a good balance. And I think it will take us a few months to achieve the balance we feel comfortable with. And I also believe that sometimes the balance will be out of kilter, where there will be special days when we'll be going many times out to

places. But they they'll be a lull, we'll make use of the natural lulls in the host country for our own time.

Q: It seems to me it's very well thought out.

HANDLEY (laughing): Well, we'll see. The other thing, perhaps, is also what the expectations are of the American community. I'm sure there are more foreign born spouses as Ambassadors' wives nowadays

Q: There have always been foreign born spouses.

HANDLEY: It will be interesting to see what the expectations are also of the American community and international community, and how to fit them in with the amount of time we'll have available to be able to share with other people.

Q: I was just thinking, I wonder if you would have to be careful in your relationship with the spouse of the Australian Ambassador? (she laughs heartily)

HANDLEY: I'm sure, I'm sure.

Q: About to be perceived to be spending too much time --

HANDLEY: Absolutely! I think that's true, but I think luckily being the Ambassador's wife certainly opens the doors so that as far as choosing friends is concerned, you have a wide variety of opportunities and varied people to be able to choose friends from. So it would not be good to be perceived as playing favorites, but I don't think that would be perceived as much if the friends are far removed from the normal circle that Americans will be traveling in.

Q: Theater people.

HANDLEY: That's right. I think that will be the trick.

Q: I think we've pretty well covered -- is there anything else that you would like to talk about? I didn't go through a blow-by-blow description of what you did at each post --

HANDLEY: No; that's fine.

Q: -- because if you had come in before 1972, I would ask you if you noticed any perceptible difference between your posts before the '72 directive and those afterwards. Have you seen a copy of the '72 directive? (Handley says she has) I think it's very sensible.

HANDLEY: So do I.

Q: I think a lot of people misinterpreted it when it first came out.

HANDLEY: Absolutely. r 0/

Q: You have to be sensible about it, like everything else.

HANDLEY: Exactly.

Q: Is there anything that I haven't touched on?

HANDLEY: I would like to talk about having cancer, actually, because that was a really interesting episode in our life, in my life certainly. I think I believe in quite a holistic approach to physical problems, and I think a lot of the tension I was under in my marriage probably allowed cancer to grow. It was quite a shock when I discovered I had cancer. Luckily the type I had, colon cancer, showed itself by external bleeding and I went immediately to the doctor once it got bad enough to go. They immediately put me on alert and within a month of seeing the doctor I was in the hospital for surgery to remove the pieces of colon harboring the cancer.

During that month I found out some very important things about myself and about my attitudes to life. Number one was that I was a survivor -- you know when you're very sick like that or when you find out that you were very sick, you go through all your options from living to dying, from coping with it to committing suicide, just the whole deal. And I decided that living was for me, that no matter what I wanted to continue. The other thing I had to face was the children, that if something happened to me and that if when they went inside I was riddled with cancer, I wondered how it would be for the children without me.

I came to a very interesting kind of closure as far as the children were concerned. I didn't pull away from them or did not continue as usual, but I also felt in my heart that I had already done what was necessary for the children to take with them in their lives.

Q: They were quite young then, weren't they?

HANDLEY: They were 9 and 11. So that if something did happen to me, I would not be dying thinking that I wished I could have done more for my children. I felt very content and very peaceful with what I had already done with them and as a parent. I think that's very free -- that if you can decide that, for whatever reason, when they're 9 and 11, anything over and above that just seems to be like your gift to them. Likewise, in interaction that they give back to you is like their gift back to you. So it's interesting: it hasn't changed our relationship but it's made me feel a little bit more peaceful about the way they're growing up and how things are going with them. It has certainly taken a lot of that tension off being an over-protective mother, I've stopped doing that, gave them a lot more freedom, decided they were old enough to take on more responsibilities, to do certain things. And that even if it was frightening, I wasn't to be frightened for them; that they could be frightened and I could support them, and they could take it from there.

So I think there were some good things that happened out of the process of coming to accept the fact that I did have cancer.

Q: And you recovered completely?

HANDLEY: Recovered completely. Have had many tests since then and everything's fine. I try to live a less tense life. I've always been a very careful eater but I guess I'm even more careful now. I even started running, in Cameroon; I continue with my running. I try not to get too tired: that's the one thing that I still fight, since I tend to push myself a little bit too much and get a little bit too tired for my body. But other than that everything's fine. Certainly a lot of people have a lot sadder tale to tell as far as cancer is concerned. But I think it's only important in that I think it came out of my earlier life in an unhappy situation, and that good things came of it -- that I reappraised my life, reappraised my children's life. And when I did reappraise it I found good things.

Q: You've taken two situations that devastate other people and managed to bring something positive from them.

HANDLEY: Yes, I try to do that. I think that that's important. It may be a failing but I do need to see the positive in a situation.

Q: I think more people could "do" with that. Let's return to the topic sheet again... My one thought is that in going to Bangladesh you won't be able to take advantage of your degree that you've just gotten. And as far as teaching is concerned, is that the career you ultimately want? Or do you think it will be theater?

HANDLEY: I think it will be theater, but teaching in theater -- teaching and directing or whatever, in theater.

Q: I was thinking there would be a gap in your CV if you weren't involved in teaching somewhere.

HANDLEY: That's one of my questions. I would like to know how you can put the role of an Ambassador's wife on a CV and make it look really good, because it certainly keeps you busy.

Q: Well, it's management, it's administration. It's an administrative position, it's a management position.

HANDLEY: That's exactly what I would think too.

Q: And as an Ambassador's wife you have more responsibilities than you do in charge of a Consulate, but you have an opportunity to direct your own ORE, the Official Residence Expenses, keeping track of that. Go to your Budget and Fiscal officer and find out what all of your possibilities are with that ORE. Because there are all sorts of things that can be done with it that, you can work within the law. There was the time that the B&F

woman in Recife said to me, "No, there is no way we can buy your steward a bicycle." (laughter) How did I do it, legally? I didn't tell him we were giving a raise. I used that money to pay for the bicycle. Then I gave him the bicycle and the raise at the same time, telling him what I had done. And he was so pleased, for if I had given him the raise he would have counted on that money, because they live such a marginal existence. And I guess your Bangladeshi domestics will be the same way, unless they have a very good group that's been at the Embassy for years and years.

HANDLEY: I think I can continue with my teaching. I'll have to see when I get to post. I see no problem with substitute teaching at the international school. But I'll see what the process is. It's not unheard of for an Ambassador's wife to work for money.

Q: Well, I think the only problem is in the Mission where you would be directly responsible to your husband.

HANDLEY: I think so too. So if I feel that I need to continue my teaching, and I think I will, I think the possibility is there to do that, but I'm not going to plan on doing that till I get there and see how these plans with the theater work out. I'm also obviously a trained Montessori teacher, I'm a trained Lactation consultant, which is a step above volunteer working with breast feeding mothers --I have a certificate saying that I'm trained to do that. So I think there are many ways working with breast feeding that I could move into the community there.

Q: You've been in Cameroon, in Santo Domingo, Indonesia -- this will probably be, if I can put it that way, the "most Third World" country you'll have served in, surely, as far as poverty --

HANDLEY: It was rather different in Indonesia. I don't think the people there are quite as poor generally as they are in Bangladesh. I think it's one of the five countries that are the poorest in the world. I think there will be ways there to help in another way with the local community, given my expertise in education and in mother-child health care.

Q: You have all sorts of possibilities, of potentialities, don't you, for fulfillment of your own personal --

HANDLEY: I think so. And to do what one generally does in countries like that, I think it can dovetail. I think that's the trick -- to be able to dovetail what it is that you want to do with what else is "going."

Q: Are there travel possibilities? I envision Bangladesh as being rather isolated.

HANDLEY: It is, in a way. Travel in Bangladesh itself is very simple -- by ferry, by road. It's rather small. You can get to a place and stay overnight and get home again. When you really think about it, it's awfully close to Calcutta and New Delhi, to Nepal, to Tibet, to Bhutan.

Q: And the climate?

HANDLEY: My husband has always wanted to live in this area of the world, so we are going to go and see this place. I think we'll just make time. (she laughs) When we came back from Cameroon, I went to the Overseas Briefing Center and went through the re-entry program, and we wrote down what it was we wanted to do in the next few years, we made a list. And do you know, I've always done everything that I said I wanted to do.

Q: Fantastic!

HANDLEY: Not everything but almost everything.

Q: But even if you've done almost everything --

HANDLEY: That's right. I think that's really good. I once had a history teacher who said, "Make your list. If you can do half of what's on the list, you're a better person than me. But if you can do half you're doing well."

Q: Well, I think it shows that you have realistic expectations.

HANDLEY: Maybe that's true too. That's what we'll do. We'll make these mental lists, perhaps I'll write it down because it's always interesting to come back later and see what it is you've actually done. Make a list and then see how that works out with reality once you get there, because with your good plans and your thoughts and as much knowledge as you have about the place, reality sets in once you get there. Then you have to see how your plans will work with what you actually have. But I feel good about going to Bangladesh, I feel confident that my husband and I have a strong relationship, which to me is absolutely imperative in embarking on such an adventure as going to a country as Ambassador.

Q: How did you meet him?

HANDLEY: Well, I needed to get some advice, and I knew that he was good at Economics. So I telephoned him one day and talked to him about it and we just kind of went from there. I just knew of him, knew that Economics was his field. I thought, "Gee, I need some advice on money." I didn't have any but what little I had (both laughing) I needed some advice on. That was so funny! We got together that way.

Q: He hadn't been at posts where you were before? How did you know about him?

HANDLEY: Actually, he was in Cameroon but certainly not in any circles that I ran in.

Q: Had he been Ambassador before?

HANDLEY: No, he'd been DCM. And he's "career." This is all just moving along. Sometimes I think it's moving along too fast but we seem to be doing all right. (both

laugh) But to have a chance, actually, to come and chat and put it all together, I think that even helps me get it more in perspective. Actually I feel more organized leaving than I did coming in, because when you look at the broad picture, the long picture, one always has to keep in mind the ups and downs seem to level off a little bit better, and you can see how things have really worked well along the way if you've been willing to put some effort into it.

Didn't I say in my letter something about "a successful life is one where you tried something interesting?"

Q: (reading) "The life offers many opportunities for continued growth and enrichment. No matter what the age of the traveler, that's the way any successful life should be."

HANDLEY: "Growth and enrichment" -- that's good, that's what you want. If you feel that you can continue to grow where you're going, then you should go.

Q: I think it would be interesting to talk to you when you return from Bangladesh --

HANDLEY: (laughing) It would be!

Q: -- and to see how, since you did so many of the things on your list you set out to do, it would be interesting to have you come back and record what you actually had done in Bangladesh, what were the possibilities.

HANDLEY: This time I'm going to do what my mother said: I'm going to keep a journal. She thinks I'm impossible for not keeping a journal all these years, you know?

Q: Well, maybe you didn't want to keep a journal before --

HANDLEY: As I wrote in my paper, my mother and father did not graduate from high school. My mother went, I think, to seventh grade, my father to sixth. So my family background was not one where education was taken for granted. Education was something that came, if you could afford it and were bright enough to get a scholarship to continue it. It wasn't a given, it wasn't necessarily even a right. It was something that other people did if they had the opportunity. So I think from their perspective they're just amazed that one of their family could continue on with her education, that she had wanted to. Not only academically but as far as being in the world is concerned. I think that they're very pleased about that.

The other thing is, life is just so interesting. As a small girl I cut out a picture of the Taj Mahal. I even kept that with me in the Foreign Service for many years. Eventually it just disappeared or I threw it out but you know, I'm going to see the Taj Mahal, although I'll be 39 when I do. (Fenzi laughs) But you know there's something to be said for that. And there are still all these years ahead of me for other exciting things that can happen. So much has happened already; it just seems like a full lifetime, and an exciting one, an adventurous one.

Q: And the Foreign Service is exciting.

HANDLEY: It is, actually -- a lot of work but it's really exciting.

Q: A lot of work, but there are rewards.

HANDLEY: There are, there are. But it is a lot of work. I would not downplay that at all. I think you only get out of it what you put into it. The same with everything. And if you can make it work for you, make the opportunities work for you.

Q: I'm glad you're having an opportunity to go out in a happier situation than all of those years that weren't.

HANDLEY: Thank you, Jewell, thank you. I think it's going to be different this time.

Q: I think so.

HANDLEY: There'll be a certain given there.

Q: It'll be really different this time, not as you had hoped it would be before.

HANDLEY: Yes. And it might be a lot different, my expectations might need to be raised! (both laugh heartily)

Q: But don't get them soaring too soon.

HANDLEY: Right now they're very realistic! (hearty laughter)

Q: But everything you've told me is that way. I do wish you all kinds of success, and it will be fun to talk to you when you get back.

HANDLEY: I'll be sure to call you.

Q: I'd like to carry this on long distance.

HANDLEY: We'll take our time, there's obviously plenty of time to do it.

Q: That's one of the drawbacks about getting very interested and involved with someone in the courses that I meet at FSI because they are gone a couple of times, but then they always come back. Thank you.

[narrative breaks momentarily, then resumes]

Q: Let's talk a little bit about what alcoholism does to a Foreign Service marriage -- well, does to any marriage.

HANDLEY: Sometimes, looking at it from the outside, it's difficult to see how alcoholism can be destroying a marriage as you look on. It's always important to remember the old saying, "you can't see behind locked doors." And what goes on between an alcoholic and their spouse is something that you don't see in the outside world, because in the nature of the disease, alcoholic families are trained to keep whatever happens at home a secret.

The disease of alcoholism affects different families in different ways. Certainly in my family, my marriage, we did not have physical abuse at all, we did not have necessarily mental abuse or emotional abuse as such. What we had was a lack of involvement, an absolute lack of that person being there. So I felt like I was bringing up the children on my own, I felt like I was moving on my own, I felt like I was setting up house on my own. And yet I didn't have any of the independence or power that comes with doing those things on your own. Even though I was instrumental in keeping everything together, I was still someone's wife and didn't have any of the power that would go with that.

The other thing is that with the secret of not telling what is going on, I didn't share with anyone else what was going on, so how would they know what was happening in my house? How would they know how unhappy I was? How would they know this was squashing me as a person, how trapped I felt, how unable to do anything I felt, how frustrated I felt because I wasn't sharing with other people. Once I began to share with other people I began to feel it was normal, then things started to take perspective.

Q: How did he react when you had guests? You said he would come home, have a beer and just be gone?

HANDLEY: Yes, but see, with other people he was fine, he was always that way, everyone else thought he was great. And he is a delightful, charming, effervescent, effusive --

Q: Gregarious --

HANDLEY: Yes. He likes to be around people, he's that kind of a person. And part of the deal for me, as a good co-dependent, allowed him to do what he did. I took care of what he didn't take care of at home. I took care of the children, I moved by myself, I took care of my own self, supported myself emotionally, didn't tell him about my lack of warmth and closeness in my own house. So while I wasn't actively being abused, I certainly wasn't loved or helped. In my case it was more a lack of, and it was more abuse by inaction than by actually having something happen to me.

That's why I think it's difficult for people anywhere to see a person's spouse who is an alcoholic, they seem to be OK, they seem to lead a normal life, there doesn't seem to be anything wrong, which, if the interaction between the spouses is going as it should, outside people are not supposed to see. It's just that the interaction that's happening

between them is an un-healthy one. It's not healthy for either person, really. One person has the disease, the other person makes it possible for them to keep having the disease --

Q: And enables them.

HANDLEY: -- enables them. And certainly as an enabler I was good, and as a co-dependent I was very good. When I stopped doing that and wanted to get out of that, then that's when things started to go for me. When I started to talk about, started talking to my husband about it and he really didn't understand

Q: Was he aware that something was wrong?

HANDLEY: No, not until after I left. Then he found out, but really he'd been an alcoholic all those years. And part of his not feeling, part of his not expressing his own emotions, any of this came from the disease. That's how we've come to understand it.

It probably affected my daughter more than my son, he is very close to his father but my daughter feels much closer to her stepfather and likes her father as a friend and they have a warm relationship but she feels like her stepfather is more like a father to her. Which is interesting --

Q: But how nice.

HANDLEY: -- but how nice, exactly. My son was a lot closer to his birth father all the way along and I think now feels a little torn but has always had the opportunity to live with his father if he wanted to but has, either by volition or choice, opted to stay, to be with us. We've tried to be open about that, about the children going where they needed to go, and let them make other decisions as they get older, and that's fine. Whatever they decide is OK with all of us. We feel we have to be open about that. I just wanted to say: even though people aren't being physically abused, even though you can't see from the outside what's going on, people in any alcoholic relationship are still hurting.

Q: And emptiness can be very painful.

HANDLEY: Absolutely. Both the alcoholic and the other person, both are hurting. And the alcoholic is hurting too. So you've got two people who are hurting there who are probably putting on a good front --

Q: Which is adding to the strain and stress --

HANDLEY: Absolutely.

Q: -- especially in the microcosm of an Embassy community.

HANDLEY: I think so. You want to put on a good appearance, you don't want to let people think that you have something bad going with you or something that's different

going on in your family. You want to seem as though everything's normal, you work it so that things look that way. (with a halfway laugh) Interesting.

Q: Well, that takes its toll, too.

HANDLEY: It does. After my husband went to his clinic I also went away for a week at a place that the State Department recommends and pays for, and learned what it was that I had been doing all those years, how I could effect change in my own life. And I think, although change comes slowly, that's one reason why I feel adamant about having something for myself. Because I know that's very important for me personally, but it's also very important because it helps you to keep perspective on your own independence and your own power and your own energy. So that's another reason why to me it's very important that I take something of myself with me, because then it's really me that's growing too. That's all part of the deal, I think.

Q: Very well stated, very well thought out.

BIOGRAPHIC DATA

Spouse: William B. Milam (2nd marriage)

Spouse Entered Service: 27 years ago

You Entered Service: 1972 (as spouse of a communicator)

Posts:

1972-73 Ciudad Trujillo, Santo Domingo

1973-76 Bonn, Germany

1977-79 Djakarta, Indonesia

1979-82 Ottawa, Canada

1982-85 Yaoundé, Cameroon

1985-90 Washington, DC;

8/90 Dhaka, Bangladesh

Spouse's Position: AEP designate

Place and Date of birth: Australia, October 16, 1951

Maiden Name: Handley

Parents (Name, Profession): Beryl and Ken Handley

Schools (Prep, University):

Marymount University, BA, (1989) Arlington, VA

Date and Place of Marriage:

Australia, January 1972

Virginia, USA, December 1988

Profession: Educator

Children: Erika (age 16) and Fred (age 13)

Volunteer and Paid Positions held:

A. At Post: La Leche League; Girl Scouts; Teaching (many positions - 6th and 7th grades); Newcomers Committee; Church librarian; Accreditation Committee

B. In Washington, DC: Cedar Lane Montessori, Teacher; ASHOKA , Assistant to President; (International Development Group)

Honors (Scholastic, FS related): Summa cum Laude, Valedictorian, Marymount University, Arlington, Va.

End of interview