

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

DENNY ROBERTSON

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Initial interview date: July 9, 2018
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This oral history transcription was made possible through support provided by U.S. Agency for International Development, under terms of Cooperative Agreement No. AID-OAA-F-16-00101. The opinions expressed herein are those of the interviewee and do not necessarily reflect the views of the U.S. Agency for International Development or the Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training.

Q: Today is July 9th, and we are beginning our interview with Dennis.... Is Dennis your legal first name?

ROBERTSON: Denny.

Q: Denny. Okay, Denny Robertson. So, Denny, where were you born and raised?

ROBERTSON: I was born in the suburbs of Detroit, Michigan, and spent most of my first 18 years in Michigan, so I consider myself a native of Michigan.

Q: Okay. And what year were you born in?

ROBERTSON: 1955.

Q: Now, the suburbs of Detroit at that time, when you were growing up, could you describe a little of what they were like?

ROBERTSON: Well, the area that I was raised in was really home to the big three auto manufacturers. I would say the largest part of my neighbors, friends, colleagues, and all their parents were factory workers during the heyday of the UAW (United Automobile Workers) and the strength of the unions and had, I would say, extraordinarily comfortable circumstances and a very predictable life path. You grew up. Your parents were in the factories. You were hoping to get a job in the factory. Then, you would buy your cottage on a lake, you would get your RV (recreational vehicle), your skidoos (snowmobiles), and off you would go. That was very unlike my early years, but that was the environment.

Q: Was it in any way diverse ethnically or linguistically, etc.?

ROBERTSON: Not in the least! I would say the most extreme case of diversity had to do with people of Italian descent. That was about it.

Q: Now, you said you had lived in Michigan your first 18 years. Did your family move around?

ROBERTSON: No, but I guess the reason our situation was a little bit different, first of all, my parents were educators. We kind of lived in a different bubble, if you will, in the community. Nothing extraordinary, but my parents believed strongly in education, and not only education, but education for transforming society to sort of move people from an industrial-based economy to more of a knowledge-based economy. But I guess the most significant thing that happened as a child was my father took a job as a consultant to the Department of Defense when I was in elementary school and moved the whole family to Madrid for two years, which, again, was very much out of sync with the neighborhood and the community, and I think a significant event in charting my future.

Q: Let's go back one second. Your parents, and how many children in your family?

ROBERTSON: Three children. An older brother, younger sister—I'm a classic middle child.

Q: Before we continue following you, a lot of people these days have done some ancestry investigation. Have you done any? Do you know where your grandparents and so on came from?

ROBERTSON: No, I haven't done that formally, but when the subject of ancestry comes up, it's one of my "gotcha" questions when you get to know people, when they say, "Tell us something about you that nobody else probably would know." I'm always happy to say, "I am a descendant of Abraham Lincoln." It somewhat defies belief but it's true. We have the charted ancestry to show the indirect, but still, "Oh yeah!" That's as far as we've ever taken it. I think that's enough.

Q: Okay, that's fine. Your parents met also in Michigan? They were both Michiganders?

ROBERTSON: Yeah. My mother's family moved up in the beginning of the 20th century from southern Indiana. My mother was raised in southern Indiana. My father's family was from the Detroit area, agricultural stock.

Q: So you are about seven years old when the family goes to Spain?

ROBERTSON: Six.

Q: Six years old. What was that like for you?

ROBERTSON: Well, you know, we were definitely “hicks” from Michigan, but my parents felt very strongly.... It was the Department of Defense, and there was huge network of military bases in Spain at that time. Those were, of course, the heavy Francisco Franco years. My parents chose not to live on air bases, and so we rented an apartment in downtown Madrid, with no one having any Spanish-speaking abilities at all. We lived in this extraordinary 17-room apartment next door to the most elegant and aristocratic Spanish family who wondered who these creatures were that had moved in next door. It was fabulous!

Q: [Laughs] Did you go to a Spanish school, or was there an international school? How did you work that?

ROBERTSON: It was a military school in downtown Madrid. I went with—I don’t know for sure anymore, but I would say mostly kids of military-serving parents. Maybe there were diplomatic kids in there, but I wouldn’t have known the difference at that age.

Q: Sure. What then would you recall about the experience there that was kind of remarkable for you that stuck with you as you went along in life?

ROBERTSON: I have strong memories of the experience sort of generally, less so specifically. I certainly remember my neighborhood. I remember my neighbors very well. I remember the experience of living. It was a very different life, you know, just everything from going to the grocery store, going to the barber, living in a heavily urbanized area after having lived in the suburbs. That was the first time I was exposed I think to racism, to be honest, because in the neighborhood there were Roma families; the Roma families were despised by the Spaniards. Some very strange experiences as a six-year-old from Michigan, but an incredibly positive sensation overall. I really do think it sort of touched me deeply in how I wanted to be part of a bigger community. It began some of my foray into foreign languages, which I love. I have gone back many times, and I have maintained contact with our next-door neighbor family up until this point. Yeah, after all these years, and I’m the one in the family that does it. My brother and my sister didn’t really have that much interest, but on behalf of my parents, I still stay in touch with them.

Q: Wonderful! Now, you go from there back to Michigan?

ROBERTSON: Yes, to Flint, where my father was finishing his Ph.D.

Q: What field was he finishing his Ph.D. in?

ROBERTSON: Educational administration.

Q: Did your mother work as well?

ROBERTSON: Yes. She was a high school teacher the entire time. She taught speech, drama, and English literature.

Q: As you are growing up, back now in the U.S. in Flint, were you involved in any of the school extracurricular activities? Cub Scouts, Boy Scouts, band—any of those typical things?

ROBERTSON: In elementary school, there wasn't a whole lot to get involved in, I guess, but at that time, Cub Scouts, yeah. And then band. Band became a very big part of my life starting at about fifth grade.

Q: What instrument did you play?

ROBERTSON: Trumpet.

Q: Now, what about reading? Often, we find with Foreign Service officers that their parents were very strong in reinforcing habits of reading. Did you find that as well?

ROBERTSON: Sure. Of course, both of my parents being educators, they were big readers, and we were big readers as well. I wouldn't call us very sophisticated readers, but reading was a very important part of recreation for the family.

Q: During this period of growing up, elementary school, perhaps into high school, other than Spain, did your family take regular trips?

ROBERTSON: Yeah, we took regular vacations, but always then within the United States. The family, I would say, we went to California—my mother's brother lived in Southern California—and southern Indiana, where my mother's family came from, but otherwise pretty traditional family vacations for my youth.

Q: Now, your high school, how would you describe it? Large? Small? City?

ROBERTSON: After my father completed his Ph.D. in Flint, we moved back to southeastern Michigan where I grew up. I went to high school. My high school graduating class was something over 600, so the school was probably about 1,500-1,800 kids.

Q: Large school?

ROBERTSON: For the suburbs, yes.

Q: You stayed in the band?

ROBERTSON: Yes. And that was a very big part of my social life. I did a lot of performance, solo and ensemble work.

Q: Other than that, were there other activities? Perhaps Boy Scouts, drama, debate?

ROBERTSON: Other extracurricular activities? I did track and field for several years. I was never really interested too much in team sports. Band sort of took you out of the running for different kinds of sports anyway, because you were in marching band at football games and things like that.

Q: That was the same for me. I was in the marching band five years, and you basically had only the choice of spring or summer sports. There was no way you could do anything in fall or winter. In high school, are there any other recollections of things that began to motivate you toward international service?

ROBERTSON: Yeah. In high school, I joined a wind ensemble—I was competitive, and I guess I was good enough to get into it—that went to South America for a summer.

Q: Mmmm!

ROBERTSON: In 1972, in 11th grade, we went to Chile for the summer. It was a traveling wind ensemble. I guess there were probably about 35 or 40 of us. We traveled from Santiago all the way to the northernmost point of Chile, in Arica, and then down to Puerto Montt, staying with host families and performing concerts in various schools, arenas and theatres. It was fantastic and a tremendous help with my Spanish..

Q: Oh my god, absolutely! Was it organized by the U.S. government, or was it church-run, or what?

ROBERTSON: Youth for Understanding, YFU. It's a good exchange program. It was 1972. That was the time of Salvador Allende, so there was some concern that if there was political unrest, the tour might be cancelled or redirected. They said that if, for whatever reason, there is political unrest, we will divert to Brazil. I remember thinking, "Oh, god, that would be awful. Who wants to go to Brazil?"

Q: [Laughs]

ROBERTSON: Now, it's one of my favorite countries in the world!

Q: Was religion or your religious community an important part of your growing up?

ROBERTSON: No. We were pretty unreligious. My parents took us to church, I think out of guilt, because their parents kind of guilt them into taking us. My parents were never strongly devout. They are wonderful people, but just that was not their thing. We pretty much grew up independent of a strong religious force.

Q: Okay. Now, as you are proceeding through high school, did you also end up doing part-time work? Part-time remunerated work?

ROBERTSON: Most of my high school, I was a part-time employee of the country library.

Q: Oh, wow! That's quite nice!

ROBERTSON: I was a page, cataloging and shelving books; working at circulation and, again, a life filled with books. It was a great experience.

Q: As you are going through high school, are your parents talking to you about college, or are you talking to them about where you see yourself going to college?

ROBERTSON: Well, I was pretty much a high achiever in that environment, and they didn't have to do much convincing. There was no convincing needed to get me to go to college. That certainly was the expectation. The bigger conversation really took place over where I might go. I had grand expectations, so I was more interested in, I think, prestige than really going to a place where I was going to get an education suitable for my objectives, so I really wanted to go to Stanford. I remember my parents saying, "Well, you know, Stanford's kind of out of the question." Ultimately, I ended up going to Ann Arbor, University of Michigan, which I think was probably the best school in Michigan. I had originally thought to pursue performance art in trumpet.

Q: Ahhh!

ROBERTSON: I tried out for the music school. The University of Michigan had an excellent music school. I had gone to, I don't know if you have ever heard of Interlaken, which is a music camp in northern Michigan. I was actually a pretty high flyer in the music world as trumpet player. Again, living that life of big fish in a small pond, then going to the big pond, and the big pond being the University of Michigan, they said, "You're really a very good trumpet player. We think you would be a good addition to the music school, but we would like you to study privately for one more year, then we will see about that." Well, I got a little bit—it hurt my ego, so I said, "Well, to hell with University of Michigan," as a music student, and I went into the College of Natural Resources to study fish biology as my Plan B.

Q: Well, fish biology? Had anything in your life before been predictive of fish biology?

ROBERTSON: A love of fish and fishing!

Q: Oh, okay.

ROBERSON: Yeah. I guess that doesn't come out anywhere in the earlier narrative. Ever since probably I was five years old, I was fascinated with and loved fishing. My parents could just sit me on a dock and leave me there for hours and hours and hours, and I would just fish all day long. I loved the outdoors. I loved boating. It may not have been the most strategic career choice, but it felt good and I believed I was pursuing my passion.

Q: Mmm hmm. So you begin as a freshman at, it's University of Michigan?

ROBERTSON: Yeah, University of Michigan.

Q: Obviously, a very large university. How does that feel in terms of your initial year? Did you accommodate yourself to that? It's like a small city.

ROBERTSON: Yes. You know, you look back on it. These were mass classes for the most part, all the kind of introductory things. But Ann Arbor was a beautiful setting. I'm pretty much of an extrovert, so I never had trouble getting to know people, making friends. It was a fantastic year. I don't think academically it was a great year. *[Laughs]* But that's part of learning to set priorities when there is nobody looking over your shoulder, asking you, "Did you get your homework done?" Not a great scholastic experience. I dabbled with being in the marching band in my freshman year, but it was not conducive to my personal priorities at the time, so I didn't do that.

Q: And in college that kind of commitment is really big.

ROBERTSON: Huge commitment.

Q: I had the same choice to make, and I just thought, no. I liked it, but I didn't like it that much. In your first year, do you actually begin doing classes related to fish biology?

ROBERTSON: No. The first year was just basically prerequisite courses, basic math and science. The path was almost a pre-medicine curriculum, which was fine, and which was very challenging and with a lot of other hyper-competitive people by the way. The other part of the curriculum I pursued was foreign languages. I had studied Spanish. Started studying Spanish in junior high school, continued it through high school, and, again, I guess if I thought there might be a big career in it, I would have majored in it. , But languages seemed like something to do in addition, not to do primarily. Once I had completed most of the Spanish curriculum, I took Portuguese classes for my last year.

Q: Did the fish biology stick? By the time you were ready to take the coursework in it, did you stick with it?

ROBERTSON: Oh, gosh, absolutely! I studied under Karl Lagler, one of the nation's leading experts in ichthyology and a very wise and kind man.

Q: Ah! Okay.

ROBERTSON: I think my kind of figuring out how things started to connect, the foreign language issue was still very, very powerful. As a junior, I did a semester abroad in Costa Rica.

Q: For heaven's sake!

ROBERTSON: Working in fish biology, doing research in fish biology and having an immersion experience in a foreign country. My research focused on the impact of a

proposed hydroelectric plant in the Southwest of the country on fish populations and accompanying social impact. That sounds a lot more sophisticated than it turned out to be but I thought big. My academic advisor in Ann Arbor was not terribly concerned with what I would accomplish academically and believed that the experience alone was worth the semester's credit - also a very wise man. It was in Costa Rica that I met Alvaro Ugalde, also a University of Michigan graduate of the School of Natural Resources and then Director of the National Park System in Costa Rica. He went on to become a global leader in environmental protection establishing a foundation to buy up rain forests for the sole purpose of environmental preservation.

So the deepening of my Spanish skills, the content of environmental protection, and then my thoughts crystalized quite early in undergraduate school that I wanted to go into the Peace Corps. That became my post-graduation goal quite early on, which was helpful.

Q: So, throughout college, you were doing the fish biology and, I guess, aquatic environment issues related to that, and you're thinking about going into the Peace Corps. Were there other aspects of your college experience that also served as motivation for where you would end up later?

ROBERTSON: Where I would end up geographically? I guess one thing I could say is I knew I was going to get out of Michigan! But where I would go? I was guided by my previous experience. I had been an exchange student in Chile, I was a student in a university in Costa Rica, so I think I assumed that my destiny lay somewhere in South America.

Q: As you are graduating, are you thinking of going immediately into Peace Corps or getting a graduate degree and going in?

ROBERTSON: No, I was absolutely sure I was going to immediately go in. In fact, I had originally applied to the Peace Corps when I was in high school. The public service announcement of the Peace Corps in the 60s made a big impression on me even in high school. "The Toughest Job You'll Ever Love."

Q: Oh, wow!

ROBERTSON: I remember getting a very nice letter back from them that said, "Why don't you try going to college so that you can learn to do something, and then when you do, we'll talk."

Q: Aha!

ROBERTSON: I was part of the Kennedy era, and the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor is where the idea of the Peace Corps was announced by President John Kennedy, so there was a big part of my psyche that felt strongly about the mission of the Peace Corps. I knew throughout the time I was an undergraduate that I would ultimately go into the Peace Corps and had, in fact, kind of garnered a couple of my friends to also do the

same thing, including one who would turn out to be one of my longest and dearest girlfriends although we did not serve in the same country..

Q: That's great. So let's then follow you into graduation. How do you get into the Peace Corps? In other words, how much time passes between graduation and your entry into the Peace Corps?

ROBERTSON: Very little. During my senior year, I had applied, and I was accepted. I was accepted into the Peace Corps, and I was told I was going to be assigned to Zaire.

Q: Of course!

ROBERTSON: This was a kind of “come to Jesus” moment where I had no idea why or how that would be my destiny—first of all, because it was a French-speaking country. I didn't speak French. All my experience was in Latin America. I was just kind of befuddled by the government's incompetence with Zaire. And I was scared because it was pretty rough times in Zaire back in the late 1970s. I politely declined, and then was able to get a different assignment. I was assigned to the Philippines, which was not Spanish speaking, although at one time under Spanish domination. I guess I could visualize that more easily than I could visualize going to Southern Africa.

I graduated, I believe, in May of 1977, and I was due to leave in July for the Philippines, so a very short period of time. During that period of time, I took my grandmother, drove her across country from Michigan to Southern California and back to visit her other grandkids. That was my one big adventure before joining the Peace Corps and one of my fondest memories of my grandmother..

Q: Ah, that's sweet. Now, where do you go for your Peace Corps training?

ROBERTSON: We just get in a plane and meet in Los Angeles for what they called “staging” where I think the idea was, if there was anybody who was going to freak out, better they freak out in Los Angeles. After a couple of days there getting shots and being briefed, we boarded a plane from Los Angeles, with a stop in Guam, and ended up in Manila.

Q: Interesting because earlier in the Peace Corps, they would give you a few months of cross-cultural training, different things, but it sounds like they now had taken the view that, just drop them in, and let them sink or swim.

ROBERTSON: Well, there are many things I can say about Peace Corps and its approach to training Volunteers. I love it. But one size does not fit all. Even then, there were different programs that conducted technical training in the United States, particularly for fisheries programs. Those who went to Zaire spent three months at Auburn University in Georgia doing in-country technical training. But for the Philippines, and I think it was partly because of the infrastructure and skills in the country, they did all the technical training in country, and technical language and cross-cultural training in country.

Q: Ah, I see. So you arrive there, and still it's summer or fall of 1977.

ROBERTSON: Yep.

Q: Where do you go once you arrive? Where were you assigned?

ROBERTSON: We were given two-and-a-half months of training, about two hours north of Manila at one of the campuses of the International Institute for Rice Reproduction (IIRR). After training, I was sent to the island of Mindanao, which is the largest, southernmost island in the Philippines. I was in the middle of nowhere in the province of Agusan del Sur and the provincial capital of San Francisco. I said I wanted to be remote. I think I kind of overstated my resilience. It was pretty rough. It was a freshwater fishing program working with the Bureau of Fisheries and Aquatic Resources, helping communities develop alternative sources of protein through farming tilapia, which at that time was almost an experimental fish, catfish, and carp.

Q: Was it a town, a village? How would you describe where you were?

ROBERTSON: It was a bus stop, literally! San Francisco was an interim stop on the national highway running from Butuan City in the north to Davao in the South.

Q: Wonderful! Ethnically, were these Filipinos Roman Catholic? Were they Muslim? Was it a mix?

ROBERTSON: It was virtually all Roman Catholic. The western side of Mindanao was principally Muslim. However, one of my colleagues was a Muslim from the island of Jolo, which is the far, far, far, west. A lot of my colleagues in San Francisco were transplants, as the government was populating the province and building up government infrastructure. In particular, as a provincial capital with a wide range of government office, many of the people weren't really from that province.

Q: Were you able to get buy-in for your programs? Were the farmers, or the villagers, ready for what you had to offer?

ROBERTSON: I was assigned as a part of the national government program for fisheries. There was a set protocol of programs to implement and targets to achieve. Really, I would say my job was more than anything just implementing and reporting on the Philippine government's program of promoting fisheries. I would say my professional impact limited. As is often the case, I think, for people in Peace Corps, the technical contribution that you make is far outweighed by the cultural contribution that you make, as well as what you receive. Being the only American for hundreds of miles, I was a star. I had to perform. I was a potted plant everywhere.

Q: [Laughs] Did you have your trumpet with you?

ROBERTSON: I did not have my trumpet, but I did learn to play guitar. Of course, singing in the Philippines is a national sport. This was before the days of karaoke, but it certainly was still the time when performing in any group by singing a song alone was vital to establishing your community connections.

Q: I remember media reports of Mrs. Imelda Marcos standing up and singing at national events, or maybe a state visit, and I was astonished because it just didn't sound like the kind of thing you did in polite company, but apparently this is very much a part of Filipino culture?

ROBERTSON: Absolutely. One of the best things you can do to get into Filipino society is sing. But you're right. Can you ever imagine, I don't know, Nancy Reagan standing up at a state dinner and singing to people? Not really.

Q: Yes. While you were there, what did you learn? I realize you tried to do the fish farming, and it had whatever impact it would have, but what skills or understanding did you get from the job that would serve you later in USAID (U.S. Agency for International Development)?

ROBERTSON: Well, again, as I tried to apply the experience, first of all I knew I was not going to be a fish farmer. What I did think made sense was that my skills could be applied by perhaps going to law school and becoming a force for negotiating on behalf of third-world countries to defend their fishing rights. That was kind of the theme, more or less, if you had asked me, "What do you want to do after Peace Corps?" That was my initial idea. I loved the fact that I was able to learn a very, very exotic language and master it. I loved fitting into a new community.

Q: And this is Tagalog?

ROBERTSON: What?

Q: The language?

ROBERTSON: No. This was Cebuano (of the island of Cebu) also known as Visayan for the region in which it is spoken. .

Q: How many native languages are there in the Philippines, more or less?

ROBERTSON: I think they say 87, but many of them are related. There are many, many, many, many distinct languages, but they often bleed into one another in terms of vocabulary and grammar.

Q: That is pretty remarkable. Take a second just to describe. Cebuano, would it be, gee, what kind of language family would it belong to?

ROBERTSON: It is of Malay origin. I would say Bahasa is kind of the foundation for many Philippine languages. Visayan is heavily influenced by Spanish vocabulary but with a Malay base foundation of grammar..

Q: All right. Now, were there any particular successes, particular moments or particular anecdotes in the Peace Corps time you were there that kind of encapsulate your experience?

ROBERTSON: I have always been candid about my Peace Corps service and said I wouldn't really hold myself up as a stellar example of a Peace Corps Volunteer. It was important in identifying and developing an interest in programming and training. I loved the kind of training event, training skills, facilitation skills that Peace Corps promoted, so toward the end of my Peace Corps service, I became a part-time employee of Peace Corps, responsible for implementing a training program for newly arriving Peace Corps Volunteers. Again, there was content, but by that point I had kind of determined that fisheries was not going to be a huge part of my future, but the training side of it and environmental side of it seemed like it made a lot more sense. I left Peace Corps somewhat unwillingly. I had become so comfortable in the Philippines linguistically. I had so many friends. Yet I knew I that I needed to go to grad school in order to take it to the next step.

As with many Peace Corps Volunteers, I made lifelong friends both Americans and Filipinos. These are important relationships to this date and are my mainstay of support outside my direct family. Peace Corps has that type of impact on many people.

Q: Now, in terms of graduate school, what kind of program are you looking for?

ROBERTSON: I want to 'not deal' with fish, I want to deal with people was how I used to describe it. I identified a program in international resource development and community development that concentrated on the social and analytical sciences rather than biological. I think I realized that policy decisions are frequently more driven by a public administration perspective and I felt my skills were stronger in that field. Working with communities was fundamental to the work I did as a Peace Corps Volunteer, but I didn't want to be limited to fisheries. What I identified was a program at Michigan State University that combined environment with community development and international relations.

Q: So you go back to Michigan, and Michigan State—another large school?

ROBERTSON: Yes.

Q: What's that experience like?

ROBERTSON: It was a far more rewarding than undergraduate studies. I made good friends as an undergraduate, but I think one of the things about graduate school is you really are with people who share a passion for a subject matter that maybe you can't feel

in a large program. It was not only a very international program, but it was also.... I would say I had a much closer relationship with faculty, I shared experiences with others who had been in the Peace Corps, and I was exposed to a really wide international range of people from Latin America, Africa, Asia, the Middle East. From that point of view, it was a great experience.

Q: Now, you get into graduate school just around 1980?

ROBERTSON: 1981. Right 1980.

Q: Is it a one-year or two-year program?

ROBERTSON: Two years. I decided I didn't need to do a long program. I had been advised that a graduate degree was akin to a union card for work in international development with perhaps less emphasis on the depth of the program. Thus, I wanted to get the master's and enter the workforce. I didn't want a program with a heavy thesis requirement. I needed to do a paper, but it didn't need to be a dissertation.

Q: By the end of your two years in graduate school, what would you say you had prepared yourself for? Where did you see yourself after the master's?

ROBERTSON: International development. Let me go back to a moment, an event, in my service in the Peace Corps. I was living, again, in a very remote area. There was a USAID demonstration fisheries project being implemented nearby. I remember all of my friends in the community laughing about it because they said USAID had spent a huge amount of money to develop this fishpond that had no basis in the community. The community didn't know what to do with it. Nobody wanted to take care of it. The fish that were in it weren't the kind of fish that this community ate anyway. What a big waste of money it was. I remember very clearly saying, "Boy, I sure hope I never end up working for USAID!"

Q: [Laughs]

ROBERTSON: Karma. Karma's a bitch, right?

Q: Right! At least you had the exposure, but I guess your mind was beginning to change in graduate school?

ROBERTSON: Well, I wanted to go into international development, without necessarily knowing what the options were. I began to read through different kinds of lists of consulting companies. Also, I had friends who had been in Peace Corps with me and were now living and working in Washington, DC. They said, "Just come to Washington, DC, and you will find your future." So I completed grad school, packed up my car, and drove to Washington, DC, I remember so well, in January of 1982. They said, "Come to Washington because the winters are so mild." The day that I arrived an Air Florida plane

crashed in the Potomac; the subway system had a massive crash; and we were locked in traffic for 10-12 hours. You may remember that.

Q: Oh, yes. Absolutely! I was in graduate school at Georgetown. It was one of the big snows, yeah. You had friends there or whatever, and you find yourself a place to stay?

ROBERTSON: They invited me to stay with them. I just started looking for work. These were not great times for hiring. This was the beginning of the Reagan administration. There were hiring freezes and it was the post-Iran hostage world in Washington. The economy was not doing well. It was kind of a tough time, but one of the skills I had developed—don't ask me why—was typing. I could type about 70 words per minute on an electric typewriter. So I would do these temporary gigs with Kelly Services, Inc and pay my rent while I looked for work.

Q: It's amazing that even in the early 1980s, right before the Internet, you could still get work using the skill of typing.

ROBERTSON: That's right. It isn't so profitable anymore, right?

Q: No, I'm afraid not.

ROBERTSON: My parents told me to take typing when I was in junior high. I thought it was kind of silly, but I'll never regret that class!

Q: Oh, yes. Absolutely. I think anybody looking back now is grateful for having learned touch-typing. So where do you end up in terms of full-time work?

ROBERTSON: Through just kind of random sending of resumes to consulting companies also known as the 'beltway bandits,' there is a small company (Action Programs International) that expressed interest in me because of my fisheries background, and the fact that I spoke some Portuguese. They had been awarded a fisheries project in Guinea Bissau, a former Portuguese colony, and lost their Chief of Party. They presented me to USAID for a position on this project to the USAID staff in Washington who represented the Africa Bureau. Ultimately, they decided they wanted somebody else, but the company liked me, so hired me to work with them on the Washington side of the business of responding to RFPs (requests for proposal) and developing proposals for USAID projects.

Q: But principally still in the fishery-aquatic life and so on, or beyond that?

ROBERTSON: Beyond that. This is when I was exposed to a broader sense of number one, how USAID worked from the perspective of consulting companies and realizing basically the work is done by consulting companies, not by USAID. And also learning the process of responding to RFPs, developing proposals, recruiting staff, putting together implementation plans, and just the nuts and bolts of how work gets done overseas. It was a great experience with a small company not unlike many who are the providers of

services in international development. I gained skills appreciating the business side of development and made the contacts that ultimately led to me being hired by USAID.

Q: Let's look at that. How did that occur?

ROBERTSON: When I was presented to USAID as a candidate for this position, they said, "No, thank you." But one of the people in that office then reached out to me several months later and said they were hiring an inside personal services contractor (PSC) and would like me to apply for it. I ended up, again just kind of the luck of networking, hired as a U.S. Department of Agriculture contractor, one of the many, many bizarre permutations of contractors that the U.S. government works. I was hired full-time to work in the State Department with the Africa Bureau Project Development Office.

Q: This is State Department now, not USAID?

ROBERTSON: USAID, but this was during the times when USAID and State both lived together in the Department.

Q: Ah! Okay. Was this now a full-time, tenure-track job, or was this limited-appointment?

ROBERTSON: It was a full-time personal services contract effectively working as a US Direct Hire but time limited.

Q: Oh, okay.

ROBERTSON: Yes. But the title of the position was Project Development Officer (PDO). That ultimately led, after a year, to entering the Foreign Service as a Project Development Officer in the International Development Intern (IDI) Program, which was basically the junior officer program for USAID staff.

Q: In this first year, while you are at the State Department and you are doing project development, did you actually get to see from beginning to at least the opening of its work in a foreign country? Did you see all the steps that went through and actually began a project?

ROBERTSON: This is what I think was such a great opportunity, to have worked in the consulting business. Now I got to look at it from the other perspective, inside the U.S. government. I was backstopping, or supporting, USAID missions in West Africa.

Q: I see.

ROBERTSON: So the projects that were being developed by USAID missions and contracted out, I was on the support side in Washington, DC, for those USAID missions advocating for their programs, obtaining approval, troubleshooting contract issues, contractor issues, legal issues, political issues with the individual projects.

Q: Interesting, and all in West Africa for the moment?

ROBERTSON: That was West Africa in the famous “SWAP Shop” or Sahel West Africa Projects.. That resulted in my first TDY to Africa. I went to Mali and Niger. Amazing!

Q: To get into the International Development Program for USAID, didn't you have to take a test of some kind?

ROBERTSON: No, and this is one of the myths and one of the sensitivities between State and USAID, that you have to take Foreign Service Officer Test (FSOT) to get into the State Department, and we say that in USAID it's more merit based because you must have a master's degree and international experience to qualify for USAID. It's more of a technical assessment. But it's the same Foreign Service.

Q: You interviewed, or you made your application, for the IDI Program, and you were accepted in what year?

ROBERTSON: 1983.

Q: The IDI program was still going on. I think by now, it's been abolished. Back when you joined, what was the program for a new IDI officer? How did they introduce you to USAID and the kind of work they wanted you to do?

ROBERTSON: We went through a training period of approximately three or four months to understand how USAID works, followed by rotations in different offices, followed by language training, followed by an overseas assignment. I think, in general, the expectation was that you would spend up to a year in Washington before you went out to the field, combining all of those different components.

Q: Also at this time, USAID tended to hire people in a particular stream of expertise, so project officers or economists or international health experts or so on. Did you have one of these areas of expertise when you were hired?

ROBERTSON: I was considered a generalist, and that was what PDOs were. If there is a technical theme to project development officers, it was either agricultural economics, or public administration, or business, but there was really no specific technical area of emphasis just that you had to have a discipline that lent itself to working in international development. So my degree in international resource development worked fine.

Q: Okay. What was the IDI like for you in Washington? Did you appreciate it? Did it give you a good grounding for where you would be going next?

ROBERTSON: Yes. I thought it was a great training program. Again, USAID was big and complicated. I was lucky enough to have already worked for USAID for a year, so it wasn't quite so mysterious. We bonded with a group, like your junior officer program. I

think you bond with those people because you go through a lot together. Yes, it was a very rewarding part of my early professional life.

Q: How many were in your IDI group or class?

ROBERTSON: Probably about 30 although the attrition through the years was high. I think only one or two remain.

Q: Okay. That's about the same as the A-100 classes, more or less. So, where did they send you for your first assignment?

ROBERTSON: The original thinking for IDIs was that they would send you to a bilateral mission, and that was how you were going to get the best grounding in how USAID worked. However, for me, because I had already been out to West Africa once, I had met some people who worked in the regional office in Abidjan, Côte d'Ivoire. Something called a REDSO, Regional Economic Development Services Office. There was one in Abidjan, and then there was one in Nairobi, Kenya. The office in Abidjan wanted somebody who had Portuguese-speaking ability. I don't know why they wanted me, but they wanted me. We had to break a number of rules to get me assigned there. The reason I think they didn't want to send me there was because it was a kind of support office. There was no bilateral program in Côte d'Ivoire, so I would spend most of my time on the road, working with other USAID missions in West and Central Africa, which I thought was going to be great.

Q: I would imagine so because just the opportunity to be able to see different countries, different programs and compare them would be a really great opportunity. Did it turn out that way?

ROBERTSON: Absolutely. I thought it was fantastic. You know, I think about different State Department traveling positions, like the couriers or whatever these people are who just travel, travel, travel, travel, and travel. I was in my mid-20s, traveling through wild and wacky West Africa. It was pretty rugged. I traveled 60-70 percent of the time. Loved it! I mostly covered the Portuguese-speaking countries, so I was in Cape Verde, Guinea Bissau, São Tomé and Príncipe—places that frankly were of lower priority in terms of development assistance. They were tough to get to, they were tough to live in, but I just had a fantastic, fantastic first few years of work.

Q: What were we doing in terms of USAID work in those small West African countries?

ROBERTSON: Part of it was, this was still during, of course, the Cold War, so the Soviet Union had a fairly strong presence in all of them. They were former Portuguese colonies, so I met my first Cuban in a grocery store in Cape Verde. The economies were pretty much a shambles in all these countries, so it was basic food production, basic health projects in those countries. Rice production. Pest control. My job as a project development officer was to lead teams of other consultants who would do the technical, economic, social analyses, financial, legal, and then I would put everything together in

one package, develop the overall budget, implementation plan, contracting plan, and then present it for Washington approval.

Q: Okay. In general, were you successful? Were you realistic about these things?

ROBERTSON: Yeah, I think so. I think we did good work. USAID missions in those countries were small. They certainly were not considered garden spots. Yeah, I think we did. We were an important voice in the “West vs East” competition at that time. This is what the West is offering. This is what the East is offering. Where do you see your future?” There was naturally a heavy political angle to our engagement. .

Q: Right, right. Now, you say, or you list, on your resume that you spent about 10 years total in West Africa. Is it mostly this kind of work, or do you eventually get assigned to a bilateral mission?

ROBERTSON: Well, West Africa, I stayed until, I think, 1987. Then I went on to a very, very different experience. I was transferred to Pretoria, to South Africa. Again, this was a very unusual USAID program at a very unusual time in global history where apartheid was still living loud. USAID was operating a very unusual program without our Administration’s support. We were working on behest of the Congressional Black Caucus (CBC), that had earmarked funding to fight apartheid. Constructive engagement was the administration policy, and we were on a different train.

Q: Fascinating. So you are in Pretoria. You are in the embassy. What sort of programs do you either develop or manage? You are in South Africa, and you can’t work with the government, which is atypical for USAID. Normally, USAID works through the government. What were the ways in which you could plan and carry out assistance or engagement in a situation like that?

ROBERTSON: It was even more complicated than that. Number one, we were not housed in the embassy. That was a policy decision by USAID that was I think a good example of why sometimes, when we discussed the potential merger of USAID into the State Department, sometimes that is not always the right solution. We refused the embassy’s request that we be co-located with them. Part of it was just the political message that we were trying to send that, “We are not representing the U.S. Administration in our presence in South Africa,” which was important for the constituents that we hoped to work with, which was the Black South African political community that of course thought that constructive engagement was just assuaging the apartheid government.

A big part of our role there was trying to figure out a way to have credibility with black South Africans, and not being co-located in the embassy was an important part of it. We accepted the fact that we would be tracked and recorded by the South African police. They were very uncomfortable with us being there. They didn’t know what we were up to. But we knew we had to be as independent as possible under these unusual operational circumstances.

We hired local black South Africans. Again, not knowing who would be willing to work with us because the U.S. government did not have strong credibility with black South Africans. We had a small office and we called ourselves the Office of Development Assistance (ODA) rather than AID to minimize the political image. It was probably one of the smallest USAID offices that I had ever been a part of given the amount of money we were spending \$20-25 million a year. Our goal really was to help black South Africans prepare for a post-apartheid South Africa. It was to be done entirely through grants to non-governmental (NGOs) and community organizations. No funding could go to the South African government in any way. It was tricky stuff. This was back in the days when you literally could carry suitcases of money to give to people in order to avoid having to run things through the South African government.

Q: This is a very interesting moment because the South African government could easily have said, "You are interfering with our country. We're a sovereign country, and you are acting outside of the Chief of Mission authority. We could theoretically just declare you persona non grata."

ROBERTSON: That's absolutely true, and I think the South African government in its hubris thought that we were going to be ineffectual, that we were at best going to be somewhat annoying, and that they could at any time pull the plug. You know they wanted a relationship with the U.S. government, so I think it was their calculation that we were harmless in the long run.

Q: An interesting position for the South Africans to take when you see other places like Egypt and Russia that have basically thrown out all or nearly all of our work with nongovernmental organizations there.

ROBERTSON: That's a good point and it's worth pointing out that South African community organizations were often very sophisticated and staffed by some of the most brilliant South Africans. I think one of the questions that no one will ever really be able to answer is, how instrumental were we? What was the impact of our program? It gave hope to black South Africans that the United States was ultimately interested in a nonracial democracy. I think we built public opinion in the United States. We certainly were on the side of history in public opinion in the United States because this was a time when there were constant demonstrations in front of the South African embassy in Washington and consulates. We gave money. I was the Education Officer - something of a detour from my career track. My beat was education, so I was personally writing small grants of \$5,000 to \$500,000 for small, nonracial educational organizations—primary, high school, technical training—anything that was giving black South Africans access to education that they wouldn't get through the South African educational system, and funding a large number of scholarships in American universities and South African universities as well. Anything that would create the largest possible population of educated South Africans, so that during this dreamed of post-apartheid South Africa, there would be skilled people to be able to assume positions.

Q: For the scholarships that went out of South Africa to the U.S., were the non-white South Africans allowed to leave and go to the U.S.?

ROBERTSON: Yes. There were some people who we probably would like to have sent, who maybe the South African government wouldn't send because of their political activity, but those people had other options besides going to the United States anyway.

Q: As you look back on it, did the training that these South Africans got—was it something in the end worthwhile for the post-apartheid time?

ROBERTSON: Absolutely. I know that many ambassadors look at the kinds of programs that fund exposure to the United States as the most important things the United States government does. For better or for worse, we gave several thousand black South Africans academic experiences in the United States, most of whom went back to South Africa and applied it. It was an absolutely worthwhile investment.

Q: Within South Africa, the grants that you gave to support education or training within the country—was that equally successful?

ROBERTSON: I don't know if you could say equally successful, but certainly for people who economically did not have access to higher education, you couldn't go wrong, merit-based, by giving people access to higher education. We sent them to white universities. It wasn't that we sent them all to homeland universities. Some we did. But we sent them to the University of Witwatersrand, the University of Cape Town, Rhodes, the University of Durban. I mean we sent them to excellent schools.

Q: And even these white schools would accept them as long as they were full paying?

ROBERTSON: Right, and met academic requirements.

Q: Interesting. Okay. As you look back then on this period when you are essentially working programs without the formal review, assistance, permission of the government, what lessons or what insights did you draw?

ROBERTSON: Well, for starters, that sound development doesn't take hundreds and hundreds and hundreds of millions of dollars, that we were able to do on a relatively small budget much more than traditional USAID programs did with much larger budgets, and why the concept of throwing money at a problem is not necessarily the best way to fix the problem. When I look at programs in, whether it's Afghanistan or Israel where the U.S. government decides that the amount money is more important than the programs, you don't need big money to make an impact if you are working at the community level and if you are really responding to the needs of the people you are trying to work with. That's certainly one lesson. There is a political element to development that I was still lacking in my insights but the principle is important.

Another lesson is that if you do choose to work with a government, there is no point in working with a government if the government doesn't share your objective or express the political will to accomplish those objectives. In this case, we would never have been able to do the things that we wanted to do if we were channeling it through the government and when programs don't work, that are bilateral government-to-government, it's usually because the government is not committed to it. Then I guess, more than anything, being on the right side of history with the U.S. government is a nice feeling!

Q: [Laughs] Okay. The other question about these kinds of programs is, again, in the absence of any government attention, how did you determine which programs were the valuable ones to do?

ROBERTSON: That was the process of community consultation that was so important. That we would meet with people who were known to be political leaders in black South African movements, very often not secret, but certainly very much below the radar, and we would ask them, "Who are the organizations that have community credibility that you would like us to fund?" We would base it on that kind of consultation. Again, very under the radar, and then we really had to prove we were not "stooges" of the Reagan administration when we would meet with those groups. They needed funding, they could use funding, but they weren't desperate for it, and they had to be very careful not to betray their community by accepting the wrong kind of money. It was sensitive and, again, one of the reasons why we could not use shovels full of money. You could only do that with relatively modest amounts of funding. And it was not without its political pitfalls. During these days, Winnie Mandela possessed great authority despite having a somewhat provocative presence. I would say that we were sometimes blinded by the light of her aura and funded some activities that were not necessarily in our mutual interest.

Q: How long were you in Pretoria?

ROBERTSON: For four years. I left just shortly before Nelson Mandela was released.

Q: Did it feel like change was coming by the time you left?

ROBERTSON: No. In fact, I would say that the screws of apartheid tightened and, no matter what you might have thought, I don't think anybody believed it would happen as it happened as quickly as it happened during the time I was there. Apartheid and the isolation of South Africa internationally had become untenable but it was still a surprise how quickly the situation unfolded - a joyous time in the world and great hopes that would eventually be largely dashed by the reality of politics and the slow march of change.

Q: Well, that's remarkable. All right.

Q: Today is July 13th. We're resuming our interview with Denny Robertson as he has completed his South Africa tour, moving on. It's all yours.

ROBERTSON: Okay. So ending the tour in South Africa, I came back to Washington. This was my first tour in Washington since joining the Foreign Service. This was 1991... When did Saddam Hussein invade Kuwait?

Q: The invasion took place in 1990, and Desert Storm took place in 1991.

ROBERTSON: I arrived back in the United States pretty much just as Desert Storm started. Again, this was my first tour in Washington. I was assigned to the Asia Bureau, for no particular reason, as a project development officer. It turned out again I think to be one of the turning points in my career. Not because so much of what I did during that tour, but the people that I met that set me up for my subsequent tours. It turned out then not to be a terribly long tour because I then went back overseas in 1992.

But a couple of significant things I can say about it. One of them is, that was more or less when the breakup of the Soviet Union began. Mongolia was the first of the satellite countries to break away. There was no such thing as a bureau for Europe and Eurasia at that time. No one really quite knew where to put Mongolia, so it went into the Asia Bureau. We were among the first people in USAID to go to Mongolia and begin to see what deconstructing a Soviet economy and reconstructing a capitalist economy would include in a country as remote and totally unusual as Mongolia.

Q: Interesting. How were you selected for Mongolia? Was it just luck of the draw, or were there some negotiations that went on?

ROBERTSON: No. Not particularly. I was responsible for other portfolios, but I would say the other portfolios were pretty much more traditional. I worked a little bit on backstopping the India program. Because of, I guess, my growing expertise in project design, I was also part of an innovative exercise trying to come up with new ways to design projects that would shorten the length of time in design and implementation to speed the process up. Again, I would say for my own career that wasn't what I went into it with, but it helped me to develop my operational skills that would serve me well later on. It opened my eyes into the former Soviet Union, which would play a big role in my subsequent career.

Finally, I would say this is probably where it is useful to mention the founding of GLIFAA, the Gays and Lesbians in Foreign Affairs Agencies. I was not in a leadership role, but I was in the very, very beginnings of the creation of GLIFAA in the early 1990s. It was a group, I think, of mostly State Department employees, but a few of us from USAID, mostly men but a few women. And, really, what brought GLIFAA into being was the very poor relationship with DS (Diplomatic Security), and the fact that the department of security was holding, rescinding, denying security clearances to people based upon sexual orientation. It ruined many people's careers. This was the first I think. I don't really what the circumstances were that led us to believe we were going to be able to make a difference, but we came together and were able to create an advocacy voice that was heard beyond DS that was helpful. GLIFAA turned out to be a really important organization for all Foreign Affairs agencies.

Q: It was interesting. Just a side note about GLIFAA—the founding meetings took place in the summer of 1992, which was the ramp up for the 1992 fall national elections. No one at that time knew that a new president, Bill Clinton, was going to be relatively more sympathetic to gay and lesbian employment in the federal government. No one knew that at the time. It was still George H.W. Bush. As one of the members at the very beginning as well, I wondered myself, what was it that caused these people to come together at this moment in American history? I wasn't seeing anything in particular that I thought was indicative that we might be able to expect any better treatment, but I went along anyway because I figured "safety in numbers," and at least we're beginning to coalesce a common voice. And, yeah, it was created that summer with David Buss as the first president.

ROBERTSON: Brave people. Some brave people. But also just egregious overreaches by DS on valuable and competent professionals. I remember when we would discuss the questions that would be asked of allegedly gay men regarding their sexual behavior. You know, just crazy, intrusive, bizarre things that would never be asked of somebody that was heterosexual. There was such bias in the highest ranks of DS that attention needed to be focused on it.

Q: Yes. Okay, to return to your story.

ROBERTSON: Basically, as I think most Foreign Service Officers know, tours in Washington are good for visibility as you position yourself for your next assignment. It's always valuable when you are overseas to know people in important places in Washington and a valid reason for requiring FSOs to do rotations in Washington. Living in Washington, yes, it's a hardship, but I think it is far outweighed by the advantages to one's professional development.

In 1992, I was approached to go out to Peshawar. This was we were running this secret program in Afghanistan supporting what would then become the Taliban. I was approached by somebody that I respected and I thought, "Wow! I never dreamed I would be involved in something like that." So I sort of tentatively said, "Yeah, that sounds like a good idea." No sooner had I said that than I was approached and told, "No, no, no. You're not going to go to Afghanistan or Pakistan. We are starting up a new regional platform for USAID in Bangkok, and you must be the one to go help set that up." That was partly due to my previous experience in a regional platform in West Africa. I kind of knew the drill. How do live in one country and support lightly staff small AID missions in another. So I went. Again, through the kindness of the contacts that I made, it was an incredible opportunity to be part of setting up a new platform for development in Southeast Asia. So, in late 1992, I went out to Bangkok.

Q: Did you get any training in Thai before you went?

ROBERTSON: Well, it was always one of my pet peeves in USAID that the State Department felt it was critical that if you were going to go Cambodia, you needed to

speak Khmer. AID didn't pay much heed to language training with the exception of French for francophone Africa and Spanish for Latin America. That left out a large number of countries and languages. If you wanted to pursue it independently, that was fine. In fact, in Thailand, I studied hard, and I became actually pretty proficient in Thai—written, spoken and writing. But that was just by sheer will of person and my love for foreign languages. USAID never really paid much attention to that or recognized it in performance evaluations.

Q: Mmm hmm. Okay. When you say, “construct a regional platform in Bangkok,” what were the elements? What were you expected to do?

ROBERTSON: This was at the time that Vietnam was opening. It was the time Cambodia was opening. There was a huge UN (United Nations) program in Cambodia. USAID started a very small mission, and also in Laos. Those were the three main countries. We were winding down the bilateral program in Thailand because of the economic success of Thailand, which then of course in history went up and down, and went up and down. At that time, the economy was very strong.

My responsibility was to support the small presence missions in Cambodia, to design and implement the programs for Vietnam because there was no USAID presence permitted in Vietnam—in fact, there was no diplomatic presence at all—and also to design projects in Laos. We were working with a Congressional earmark from Senator Patrick Leahy for Victims of War and the Displaced Children and Orphans Fund that were the major fund sources for those activities, working with communities that had been severely affected by the war. You wouldn't really call it reparations, but it was at least an acknowledgement of some of the most tragic effects of the Vietnam War.

Going back to Mongolia, Mongolia was ramping up and had a very small mission, so Bangkok became the hub from which Mongolia would get all of its economic contracting, legal, administrative support. Through my assignment to Bangkok, I ended up spending many, many, many months in Mongolia as well. I traveled to Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia regularly, and Mongolia. We were still at that time supporting the cross-border program into Burma, and there were camps set up along the Burmese-Thai border. Money and goods were being shipped across the border to support Burmese refugees. It was a fascinating time to be there.

Q: Now, at the time you were there, the Burmese refugees were the Karen, not the Rohingya?

ROBERTSON: Correct. In fact, the Rohingya, there was no discussion of them at that time.

Q: Okay.

ROBERTSON: Four years. Fantastic tour. Loved Bangkok. The client missions had great experiences breaking open the doors into places like Vietnam, being among the first Americans to go to Vietnam. Yeah.

Q: Do you want to take a minute to describe what you saw as you entered Mongolia? How you would describe its level of development, and what was your impression about where it needed to go? Similarly, with Cambodia, because it had not only the experience of the Vietnam War, it then had the Khmer Rouge experience.

ROBERTSON: Each of those countries, I could write a chapter about each of them I think, yeah. In the very beginning, Mongolia, for example, desolate. Absolutely desolate! It was still very much a part of the Soviet Union in terms of language and culture. The programs we were designing were largely based on just creating the basic infrastructure of a working economy. Banking systems didn't work. Energy grids were obsolete. Obviously, there was no Internet. English was spoken not at all. They were just the very, very, most elemental building blocks for a functioning economy. The Mongolians were hungry for anything. They were so easy to work with. We had access at the very highest levels of the government, anything we needed. It was a rewarding period, but also it became pretty clear to those of us in Bangkok and the embassy that this was not a quick fix. You just didn't flip a switch from communism to capitalism, which is a lesson that I think we learned in spades further on down the line. But, boy, isolated, frigid, long winters. The smell of mutton—I don't think I will ever forget that. More sheep than people! I think that's one of the jokes we used to say about Mongolia.

Q: And Cambodia? I keep thinking you were going to be running into people who had PTSD (post-traumatic stress disorder) or were simply traumatized and perhaps were difficult to work with for that reason.

ROBERTSON: In Cambodia. Yes. This was a country suffering from PTSD. You could not find a person who didn't have a harrowing tale of horrific things that they and their family had experienced at the hands of the Khmer Rouge. As we know, the object of the Khmer Rouge was to destroy the intelligentsia, destroy anyone with any education, and what was left was people with wonderful hearts, but zero, just zero, basis to work in terms of literacy, in terms of numeracy. I mean it was absolutely starting from square one.

Q: In Bangkok also, beginning in the early 1990s, we had the refugee program for the Amerasians. Did USAID play in that at all?

ROBERTSON: We didn't. Of course, I knew a lot of the people that were running this program, but that was entirely a State Department-run program. When we would go to Vietnam, our optic was of course very different. We worked with international adoption agencies, so I guess you could say there was some confluence of interests. That was at the time when it was extremely easy to adopt a Vietnamese child. And it was incredibly corrupt, of course. So knowing what I knew about the Amerasian refugee program—that people would try to figure out ways to identify themselves as Amerasian, whether they

were or whether they weren't—to try to qualify for the program, anything to get out. That was the same with international adoptions.

Q: In that case, what would you say as you are looking back on the Bangkok experience, what were the principal successes, or what were the takeaways for you?

ROBERTSON: As I kind of look forward into my career and relate back to it, I would say one of the takeaways was that the money invested in developing people was much better spent than money invested in things.

Q: Ah, okay.

ROBERTSON: That not only applies to local employees of USAID, but again, looking back on the scholarship programs in South Africa, it takes time for those programs to pay off. They don't necessarily cost a lot of money, but you can't do an energy-restructuring project in a country where nobody has any technical expertise in energy restructuring. Putting the sequencing development in terms of human development before you can do sort of big infrastructure things was an important principle that then I think I took forward.

Q: Interesting. It was a principle that you could use perhaps in other post-conflict locations or maybe post-disaster locations?

ROBERTSON: Right.

Q: So you were there three years?

ROBERTSON: Four. That was a four. It was probably my longest tour.

Q: Not many people who do not get any language training before they go are able to really become fluent because they are spending so much time on their job, and then the enforced receptions and enforced representation afterwards, but you were able to carve out time to do this?

ROBERTSON: Well, yeah. I'm not fluent but conversationally very comfortable. I'm not sure—from an FSI point of view I might have been a 2/2, but I was completely at ease in most situations. I didn't work in Thai formally which is very difficult, but I was perfectly comfortable managing relationships, friendships, life. Again, it was my love of languages, and it was such an exotic language. It was fascinating.

Q: Yep. Okay, great. Before we pass on to the next location, is there any anecdote that is particularly exemplary or compelling from that time that you want to relate?

ROBERTSON: One of them is kind of operational. Then the other one, I guess, has sort of more broad implications. When I left Bangkok, it was because USAID had made a budgetary decision that we could not afford to support the office. So after having devoted

significant effort to setting it up, here we were four years later shutting it down. It seemed to be a very foolhardy decision, particularly because two years later they decided to restarted it. With the strength of the local economy Thailand didn't need it, Thailand did not benefit from our presence, but our Thai government counterparts had to do a lot to help us stay in terms of diplomatic approvals. We had been so careful in developing respectful, professional relationships with our Thai counterparts in the different ministries, and they were shocked and insulted when we suddenly made the decision to shut it down. The decision was made in the most American, abrupt way. It was an awful, awful example of, I think, American task orientation and cultural insensitivity at its worst. Not recognizing how important the relationships with the Thai are at a broader level. That was, I would say, and I don't want to belabor it, but it was so poorly done and unnecessarily done--very penny-wise and pound-foolish.

I guess the other is... Now I'll go to Vietnam and the programs we were implementing in Vietnam, many of them with NGOs that were founded and run by Vietnamese-Americans. The relationship between Vietnamese-Americans and the Vietnamese government was sensitive for the obvious reasons, but those were the people that probably had the best access to implement the Leahy earmarked programs. I guess the comment about that is, we saw early on what a very big challenge it would be to run development programs in Vietnam. Surprising to all of us was how little acrimony, or to my great surprise as a person who came very close to serving in Vietnam in the military but the draft ended, to see how little grudge the Vietnamese held against American people. You could write a chapter on it, but it was a very significant time in Vietnamese-American relations, and I think for all Americans that went to Vietnam in that time, it was a real eye-opening experience to see how the Vietnamese were ready to turn the page despite what had happened. Of course, it could be argued that they 'won' the war and it was easier for them to be gracious. However, our assistance programs were one element of a broader bridge building strategy that included military and political components.

Q: How was the decision made for you to go on to your next assignment? Did you lobby for it, or how did that work?

ROBERTSON: Well, a couple of different things. One of them was the bidding process takes place when the bidding process takes place. I think with any good Foreign Service officer you are supposed to lobby for jobs, right? At the time when the bidding process occurred, I was hospitalized for about a month, so I missed the moment to explore and negotiate an onward assignment. Again, as you will see, it turned out fate was being kind to me as it was throughout my career..

I had to fill out a bid list. As one of my last choices, I bid going back to Washington to work in this new thing called the Europe and Eurasia Bureau in the former Soviet Union. USAID was having a difficult time recruiting people for the opening of the region. This was 1995. The State Department was moving quickly as they staffed up existing embassies and established new embassies where there had been none. And every embassy wanted an USAID program. Number one, USAID staff had no language expertise, but also were weak on directing assignments. So I was drafted into the Europe

and Eurasia Bureau. I fought it, tooth and nail. It's the first time that I appealed an assignment. My naïve take was, I wanted to work in countries where we had serious development programs. I didn't want to work in what I viewed as political rather than 'true development' programs.

Q: Yes.

ROBERTSON: I'm not very proud of how I dealt with it, but that's how I ended up going to work in the this region

Q: Okay. In order to prepare for it, did you go back to Washington for any training or consultation?

ROBERTSON: This was a Washington tour.

Q: Oh, I'm sorry! Okay, yeah.

ROBERTSON: I was recalled to Washington after four years in Thailand and was doing a similar function of backstopping, but in this case there were very few proper USAID missions. At this stage, USAID assigned one or two mid-level officers to the Eastern European country embassies. Strategic development and project design were largely done by Washington staff. The role of in-country staff was more monitoring and logistics. During the 90s, this was the platform chosen to get programs up and running as quickly as possible and to manage the very limited staffing available within the Direct Hire workforce. There was also great reliance on Personal Services Contractors to access technical skills needed for a different type of program. Building stock markets, launching venture capital funds, transforming soviet style energy grids were not common skill sets in USAID.

Q: Did your portfolio include the whole of the former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, or was it restricted regionally?

ROBERTSON: Well, you may remember the appropriation was divided with the former Soviet Union (Freedom Support Act) and then Eastern Europe (Support to Eastern European Democracies). The Bureau handled both of them, but they were under the direction of State Department Coordinators, which was a big organizational change. And it's one of the reasons why it was so difficult for USAID to staff positions, because USAID people really did not like the idea of reporting to State Department, or having the State Department make budgetary decisions on USAID projects. It was a sign of the times as USAID and State have come closer together in the ensuing years.

Q: Right. How was the lace up? How did the lace up work between what AID was doing and what State was doing?

ROBERTSON: Because it wasn't just State, the appropriations were not only divided funds between State and USAID, but also Forest Service, Treasury, EPA, USDA, DOJ

among others. This was when many of us say that USAID lost its position as the preeminent development agency, because the State Department was parsing funds out through interagency transfers from the State Coordinators to other agencies that did not necessarily have international expertise, but were glad to expand their operations. It was very contentious. And, again, one of the reasons why it was so important for USAID to staff up so that we could responsibly argue for resources—if we said we were going to do something, that we would be able to do it. It was a very difficult launch but was eventually accepted as an operating principle. .

This was also under the leadership of Brian Atwood, in late 1996, when USAID undertook a huge IT (information technology) infrastructure project to retool our operating system under the leadership of Larry Byrne, the New Management System (NMS). It was, I'm sorry to say, a disaster; we spent tens of millions of dollars and it was eventually trashcanned. Mobilizing NMS was a global task and Bureaus each appointed a leader for deployment of the system. I was sort of the last man at the meeting, and I was chosen for the role in our Bureau. With, you know, making lemonade out of lemons, I ended up getting good feedback for our Bureau's efforts despite the challenges. It provided a level of visibility that resulted in my own career progression and very rewarding onward assignments.

Q: The operating system was essentially to be able to follow the money and know where the projects were taking place, and also project evaluations? Was it everything?

ROBERTSON: It was supposed to be everything. It was supposed to link finance with procurement, with implementation, with strategy, with evaluation, yeah. So it was all the new management system.

Q: There was something else going in that era of the mid-1990s, which was the RIF (reduction-in-force). How did that affect things?

ROBERTSON: The RIF hit just as I was leaving Bangkok.

Q: Okay, so in 1995?

ROBERTSON: Like, late 1995, sometime in 1995. Going back to my appeal of the assignment to Washington, once the RIF took place, the job that I really wanted was as Program Officer in Manila (where I had served as a Volunteer). The person who was in that job got RIF'ed. The Europe Bureau was a higher priority than staffing a key position in the USAID Mission in the Philippines. Unfortunately, the RIF is an unforgettable memory in the legacy of Brian Atwood was brutal and untargeted. I won't write Brian Atwood's bio, but the new management system and the RIF were not great moments in that period for USAID people.

Q: There were certainly USAID people in the field—maybe not many in Eastern Europe. What were they focusing on, or what were they expected to focus on in terms of delivering some kind of development systems there?

ROBERTSON: The in-country staff at that time, in the very beginning, were really largely just monitoring and logistics. This was partly due to a lack of senior staff and partially the desire of the State Department. They didn't want mission directors. They did not really want senior people. They were predominantly FS-02 and FS-03 generalists. It wasn't easy to recruit, and then once you put an FS-02 officer in that position, the ambassador ironically treated them like mission directors. So their egos sometimes grew to fit the new role. Eventually over time, as we were able to staff up, and as we had a better sense of where we were going with individual countries, some countries more important than others, we were able to create more functioning USAID missions with real leadership positions and the range of skills to implement full programs.

Q: How much time do you spend there? What was the tour length?

ROBERTSON: I spent three years in Washington. One of the important things that happened was, even in that short a period of time—I was again operations, project design—we felt pressure both internally and externally to graduate programs. We had really just mobilized programs for a very, very limited number of these countries, and then we already began to think about, when is it time to leave? Slovenia, for example, came in early and left early. It was the first one where we said our job is done here. I've never been to Slovenia, but I think it's pretty obvious why. The Czech Republic was one of the early graduates. Slovakia was one of the early graduates. The Baltics were some of the early graduates. Then we began to realize that we could exit these countries in a way I don't think we had ever done. We're still in Ghana 50 years after we started. Just the idea that we really could go in, do the job, and leave was remarkable, and I think something we were all very proud of. So we began to think about ways to leave legacy institutions that might continue assistance in closer cooperation with the host governments. Closing the door, but not slamming it, so that when USAID staff and programs ended, there would still be endowments, foundations that would live on, so it wouldn't be a sort of a sudden escape. Again, being a part of the design of some of those legacy projects while I was in Washington was also part of helping build my career farther down the road, as we'll discuss.

Q: As one of the legacy projects, I have a vague recollection that USAID had something to do with the creation of the Central European University in Budapest? Is that accurate?

ROBERTSON: Absolutely although I believe CEU benefited mostly from George Soros' Open Society Institute. In fact, one of the aspects of particularly of Eastern Europe was every country wanted their own American University to offer western higher education degrees rather than studying in the US --the American University of Bulgaria, the American University of Armenia, the American University of everywhere! And those were black holes. Those were far bigger investments than we realized in the beginning particularly concerning their long term sustainability and eventually the universities were required to draw more heavily on local business and government to remain viable. However, the US contribution to higher education was significant..

Q: [Laughs] Yes, because I had plenty of experience with Eastern European American Universities everywhere I went. Sure. Okay.

ROBERTSON: Mostly what we were doing was trying to set up locally implemented foundations with a little bit of American government oversight that would continue mostly with grants that promoted democracy. It was really democracy where the post-USAID presence was focused.

After two-and-a-half years in Washington, I did a number of TDYs. I went to Azerbaijan. I went to Moscow. Then I was asked to go out to do a TDY in Romania because we had a mission director who was going to be away for a period of time. We had a very, very difficult relationship with the ambassador in that country. His name was Jim Rosapepe. I think almost anybody who was in the Eastern Europe at that time knew of the famous Jim Rosapepe.

Q: You were sent out initially on a TDY to Romania in 1996, or how late was it?

ROBERTSON: 1998.

Q: Wow. All right.

ROBERTSON: I was sent out on TDY. Ambassador Rosapepe had a reputation of being challenging to work with and instilled even fear. My reputation was of somebody who was competent and I could get along with difficult personalities.

Q: [Laughs] Right!

ROBERTSON: And what did I know? So I go to Romania, and, you know, we got along fine. We got along great! He was just exactly as everybody who knew him described him. Anyway, at the end of the month, he called me in, and he said, "So how would you like to be the mission director in Romania?" First of all, I wasn't sure it was his to give. Second of all, in my career progression, I had not reached the stage where I should be considered for mission director jobs. He said, "I really like working with you." I said, "Well, I enjoyed working with you, too, but it's really not my decision." I went back to Washington, and he just basically made it happen. He said, "I want him, and I want only him."

Q: [Laughs] Just as a quick aside, the U.S. State Department Inspector General did come through Romania towards the end of Rosapepe's tenure and gave him probably the worst report that the Inspector General can give for many years. In other words, he was at the bottom of those who had been inspected for many years, not just for the period of time of his tenure, which is pretty remarkable to consider. Anyway. But you have a separate story in USAID.

ROBERTSON: Well, and it really wasn't just my story. But you are right. When I went out to post, it was quite tense in the Embassy and USAID. Staff were curtailing left and

right. Ambassador Rosapepe was helping people curtail because he didn't find them effective. To me, again, it was fascinating watching somebody try to manage a bureaucracy the wrong way. If this is what you want, there are many ways you could get what you want. Anyway, I went out, and I went out really almost in tandem with Susan Johnson as DCM (deputy chief of mission). Again, I hold no grudge against Ambassador Rosapepe. He was very supportive of me and I appreciated his respect for the Romanian staff at the Embassy. He was empowering to staff who were competent but did not suffer fools. I really enjoyed much of my time working with him. But Susan's and my job was to try to go out and keep morale up. So we did! We had a great time. I think we helped him, and I think he appreciated that we helped him. We were not bullshit artists. I was not a turf-conscience person. I think that was one of his big problems with USAID, that people wanted to create firewalls, and he was just not going to have that.

Q: When you got out there, what was the nature of the program that you were directing?

ROBERTSON: The program was the basic Eastern European USAID program. We had local government, democracy, elections, and an IRI/NDI (International Republican Institute/National Democratic Institute) program. We had an economic development program that was working in capital markets, building a stock market, agriculture development, agriculture credit, agriculture extension. We were working in maternal and child health and child welfare. That was probably the most unique aspect to the Romania program, because child welfare is not an area where USAID really does a lot of work, but because of the AIDS babies in orphanages in Romania and, again, the corrupt nature of international adoptions—Romania was a huge source country for international adoptions—we were working with the Romanian government to try to get a handle on reducing the number of international adoptions. As an aspiring EU (European Union) country, it was considered antithetical that you're not able to take care of your own children, and you need to send them out on international adoptions. That was probably the most unique part of it. And then a large enterprise project which was part of the infrastructure of the former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, where this huge, independently run capital investment fund was set up. That was also in Romania.

It was a big program. I would say we were not the biggest game in town because this was when Romania was trying to get into the European Union. Our job was to help Romania prepare itself for EU accession. They made the game rules. Where we could, we helped. We used to laugh and say that Romanians really wanted to become the 51st state, but that really wasn't our role, and we were trying to help them get into the European Union. I was there from 1999 until 2003. They were making steady progress, but compared to the pace of the Baltics, Czech Republic, Slovakia, Slovenia—compared to the pace of reform in those countries, it was very obvious that Romania was going to be a lot slower. Romania went to the back of the pack. Romania and Bulgaria. Because of the competition between Romania and Bulgaria, they were basically treated the same no matter what they did. They competed with each other, but if Bulgaria got it, Romania got it. If Romania didn't, then Bulgaria didn't.

Q: True. True. So you were there actually for quite a while, for a good four years, I guess?

ROBERTSON: Right. Let me also say that an important part of the Romania experience for me was, I went with my partner at that time. I think I am considered the first openly gay USAID mission director. That was part of the deal with Ambassador Rosapepe I negotiated before accepting the assignment. He was incredibly supportive, so that helped make it happen in a country that was not particularly gay friendly, and, in fact, very anti-gay as we learned subsequent to Ambassador Rosapepe. As an example, I asked him to represent the U.S. government at an International Lesbian Gay Association (ILGA) meeting, and he went! So he did things for the cause - things that were politically risky for him to do. Yes, that was an important piece of the experience.

Q: In looking back at that part of the experience, were there noteworthy anecdotes about what it was like to live there with a same-sex partner that you recall now?

ROBERTSON: I guess I would say it was noteworthy that it wasn't noteworthy. We were accepted—at least publicly—by everyone and everything. It didn't attract a lot of attention as far as I could tell.

Q: Yeah, that was my experience as well. I overlapped with you for a year and then served a little further on. Although periodically there would be little anti-gay demonstrations, and occasionally there would be remarks in the newspapers and so on, you never, or at least I never got the feeling that there was a kind of violent or militaristic homophobia in Romania. It was probably more of just a general distaste, but the Romanians themselves never seemed to be particularly nasty about it.

ROBERTSON: And I think as we find out in other countries, it was the Orthodox Church that was really behind most of it.

Q: Yes, I think you are right.

ROBERTSON: However, if you remember, when Ambassador Rosapepe left, Michael Guest came, and it became a bit more delicate - not only from the Romanian side but also the US far right - remembering this was the Bush Administration.. I think I worked with Ambassador Guest for about a year, maybe a little bit more than a year, but there were unpleasant times when he bore the brunt of his openness in ways that had to be incredibly stressful. At the level of ambassador, there was a lot more public display of unhappiness.

Q: Yes, fair enough. I would agree. As you prepare to depart, there is that old expression about Brazil—“Always the country of tomorrow.” I always had that sort of in mind about Romania as well. So much potential, not just the natural resource potential or the other things that are in the country, but the potential of the people was also there. The human capital potential was also there. But it never quite seemed, at least while I was there, to quite to be moving forward as fast as it might. How would you look back on it?

ROBERTSON: When you think about it, Romanians were their own worst enemy. If it was beautiful weather, then it was, “Well, tomorrow it’s going to rain.” There was such an inferiority complex in that country, paradoxically, because I also remember, the first airplane was built by a Romanian. You know, they lay claim to all kinds of incredible global feats, but they were pessimists. Maybe some of it comes from having lived through the Securitate. Certainly, that had to affect people deeply. It wasn’t the Cambodian PTSD-type thing, but the Securitate affected everybody’s lives, I am sure. They were just determined they were never going to get into the EU. They were never going to get into NATO (North Atlantic Treaty Organization). But they did!

Q: Yeah, in spite of their own negative catastrophizing, they did eventually get in. And things did get better. I don’t want to give the wrong impression, but it just seemed to take longer.

ROBERTSON: It took a long time. Again, I think Romania suffered perhaps more than a number of other countries in Eastern Europe from “brain drain.” People felt that due to the corruption, it was impossible to really get ahead in business or get ahead. Yes, I would say they suffered to a certain extent because of that. But, I’m telling you... You know, I just went back to Romania maybe six months ago—amazing, amazing progress, and an extraordinarily wonderful experience.

Q: How would you describe the progress? What impressed you?

ROBERTSON: Well, the infrastructure. There is an incredible road system. The telecommunications. The cities. Each little județe has a planned and developed capital city. The capitals are lovely. The tourism infrastructure is booming. Just wonderful! And still the old, tiny Romania is still there in the mountains and in the villages, but the cities are very, very sophisticated now.

Q: Mmm hmm. Okay. So from this sort of unique tour as one where you weren’t in the traditional kind of developing country, where are you thinking of going next? And also from the unusual position of having been able to be a mission director a little bit earlier than would typically be so, what were you thinking about in terms of your next assignment?

ROBERTSON: At this point, I guess I was more of a known commodity, and I think thought quite well of, so I’m kind of entering the part of my career where they have to be fairly big jobs. It’s no longer “where do you want to go?” It’s “where do we need you?” The Caucasus is where I was asked to go next. That was at a time when were still running a regional platform that was serving Azerbaijan, Georgia and Armenia. They needed a mission director. We had originally centered the platform in Armenia for completely political reasons, as you well know. It was very difficult to mount regional programs because of the relationship between Armenia and Azerbaijan, so largely the program was run out of Georgia.

Anyway, I was assigned to Georgia. That was fine. I didn't have great insights into the region although I had done one TDY. Those were the dark, dark, dark days of the Caucasus, with no electricity, no infrastructure. It was grim, grim, grim. But it was an important focus of U.S. assistance, U.S. foreign policy, to support the Caucasus. Eduard Shevardnadze was still the president of Georgia. So I was assigned, and okay, fine. Then there was an opportunity to go on long-term training. To take a year off to go to one of the war colleges—which I also really wanted to do. I wanted to take a year and take a break. It had been pretty intense working in Romania. Then Ambassador Dick Miles in Georgia said they needed me in Georgia immediately. He wanted new blood and off I went to Tbilisi in September of 2003. As you may now remember, the Rose Revolution happened two months later.

Q: Just to go back one second, you went out to Armenia briefly after Romania, and you were expecting then to have your year of long-term training, but instead then went to Georgia?

ROBERTSON: No, I had gone to Armenia on a TDY prior.

Q: Ah, okay.

ROBERTSON: I had seen the platform and done some work out there, but I did that prior to going to Romania.

Q: So you end up in Georgia in 2003?

ROBERTSON: 2003. Fall 2003. No electricity. Men in black leather coats smoking cigarettes, everywhere. Pretty grim.

Q: I can just tell you briefly, I was assigned to Armenia from 1999-2001, and although the border was more or less open between Armenia and Georgia, the warning was, "Oh, you don't drive up there" because in that period the carjackings and the criminality was not just against property, it was violent. Now, maybe by 2003, it had improved a bit, but the central government was not very good at extending its authority much beyond the center.

ROBERTSON: You could go overland. Of course, at the time you were there, I think the only way to do it was, they had these World Food Programme (WFP) planes that would run kind of a shuttle in Azerbaijan, Georgia and Yerevan. That's what we used to do, but it was very much catch as catch can. It was not easy to get between those countries, never mind the politics.

Q: Right, right. You could drive up from Yerevan to Georgia. It was just recommended that you did not.

ROBERTSON: {Laughs} Well, it was much easier to do when I was there later on, road quality notwithstanding.

Q: Right, yeah. So you get to Tbilisi in 2003. It's a pretty attractive city, even though it didn't work because it is on that river, and there are hills and so on. But you're there to help Georgia. Wow, what are you going to do to make things better in Georgia, given the multiple problems?

ROBERTSON: Of course, by that time, the Armenia mission had grown due to the politics. The Armenian diaspora drove that car where they wanted that car to go, so they had a sizable USAID Mission that was pretty independent by the time I got there. But I was responsible for the Azerbaijan program and the Georgia program. Frankly, there was more traction in Azerbaijan at that time. There were resources in Azerbaijan. We were probably doing more in Azerbaijan at that time than we were in Georgia, just due to the lack of political will. I was there literally at the very tail end of the Shevardnadze period. During that short couple of months, I went to one meeting with Shevardnadze and the ambassador, so I kind of got to see this global icon. One could sense that he was tired and frustrated. Then the Rose Revolution happened in November, and all hell broke loose. The beginning of the Mikheil Saakashvili and Zurab Zhvania period of government.

Q: Right. I'm very curious, what sort of areas did you work with Georgia on that you could accomplish things?

ROBERTSON: You're talking about post-Rose Revolution?

Q: Yeah.

ROBERTSON: Because prior to the Rose Revolution, most of our assistance was only modestly effective at best. Post-Rose Revolution, the Georgian government reconvened itself with 25-year-old ministers who had been to university in the United States, were fluent English speakers, and so this thin, thin, thin superface of the government was made of people everybody could talk to. They were exposed to many of the concepts of capitalism and democracy. It was a fascinating period. And Misha was a force of nature.

Before I get to that, I think it's important to say that one of the things that happened in those few months that I was there before the Rose Revolution was, I was an election monitor at the last failed election, which led to the Rose Revolution. I was in an election-monitoring group in Adjara, which was the region that was tightly controlled by a little tinpot dictator. We were doing what election monitors do. We were watching. There was nothing else but just watching. Naïve as I was, I just assumed that it was going to be kind of a waste of time, but I witnessed the most egregious and transparent election fraud that I've ever seen in my entire life. We went to a polling station for the vote count. Everybody was sort of doing the needful. They were opening the ballot box, and dumping the ballot box on the table. They were counting the ballots, and everyone was following the protocols. At a certain point one young (and skinny) gentleman walked out—presumably one of the vote counters—to go to the bathroom or whatever. It was winter. He came back in his black leather jacket, and he had grown in size two or three times. It was this bulging black leather jacket bursting at the seams. He sat down at the table, and

then the lights went out for about a minute. The lights came back on, and suddenly there is a large pile of ‘new’ ballots strewn around the table - and he is skinny again. Of course, we couldn’t do anything more than observe. We remarked, “You’ve got to be kidding!” They said, “What do you mean?” It was such a blatant example of the type of election corruption seen with my own eyes. So they counted and of course Shevardnadze won. It was no surprise, I guess, that people were fed up.

Working under the new government, it was fast. It was action packed. Obviously, Saakashvili had lived and studied in the United States. He knew the United States very well. The prime minister, Zurab Zhvania, was the leader of the civil society movement in Georgia—incredible credentials, wonderful human being and a civil society leader. They did their best to staff ministries with people who understood reforms. We worked with them closely and did our best to support their efforts rather than imposing on them. They basically came to us, the State Department and USAID, once they had kind of gotten their sea legs and said, “You know, we have nothing. The coffers are bare. There is no money. We have nothing.” And I think it was probably largely true. The U.S. cobbled together money where we could and came up with a package to kind of get people started. The best part of the experience to me was, we knew what needed to be done, but they knew what needed to be done, and they were the ones that set the priorities. They knew that energy was crucially important to attracting foreign investment, so we finally got serious about energy sector reform. They understood the importance of the banking system. It was a pleasure in that sense to be able to work with them. Not that there weren’t lots of problems, but given what we had experienced in Romania trying to deal with the corruption of the ministry, it was a pleasure to at least give it a fair shake. Saakashvili, to his credit, did a lot. And the United States, we were partner number one. Misha often told people that he had George Bush on his mobile phone speed dial.

During that time, the prime minister mysteriously died. I was somewhat close to the prime minister and shocked as was the entire country. Although married he was known pretty widely to be gay and the death had some sensitive rumors surrounding it which made it more difficult to address in the press. Yeah. Georgians are not without their intrigue by a long shot, in their clan mentality, in addition to just politics. Operating in such a small context. It’s a very small country, so you could almost know everybody. I think as I mentioned, when I arrived, we were more really focusing on Azerbaijan because we got more traction there. Well, once the Rose Revolution took place, Azerbaijan became the stepchild, and the ambassador in Azerbaijan was resentful of Georgia getting all the attention. We still ran a pretty robust program there, but it was so obvious that you were dealing with a Georgian government that was doing its best to work honorably as partners, and an Azeri government that was just corrupt beyond anything you could imagine. It was very difficult to make even small dents in the reform agenda in Azerbaijan, where we actually made big progress in Georgia.

Q: Where would you say the most important progress was for Georgia while you were there?

ROBERTSON: Energy. The energy system was so corrupt. Nobody was paying their bills. Money was being stolen all over the place. We had a very, very complicated USAID program that was helping to remove corruption from the energy sector, and it worked. There were death threats against the chief of party of this project because he was actually doing the work. He was finding the corruption and shining light on it. Having the support of Saakashvili and Zhvania and the energy minister, it helped to give credibility. We really made certainly the most visible progress because people were forced to pay their bills, and they actually got electricity 24/7 in return for it. When I arrived, it was unheard of that you could have electricity 24 hours a day.

Q: You had mentioned electricity and banking.

ROBERTSON: Yeah. Well, of course I think you can see almost any time in that part of the world Georgia is ranked one of easiest places to do business now because of the transparency, the credibility of the banking system. That's pretty much what we were working on doing.

Q: Fantastic. Did you do capacitation grants? Did you send a lot of Georgians for training in various things?

ROBERTSON: No. No. I think that was more USIA (U.S. Information Agency). I mean we did very limited—very, very limited.

Q: Okay. Because obviously in other countries, there are often programs for what you might call mid-career professionals or mid-level professionals. People who had kind of risen up, but had only very basic skills and really were at a point where if they did not get additional training they wouldn't even really be able to work effectively with USAID because the level of sophistication was already beyond them.

ROBERTSON: We did a lot of short-terms, where we would take people for a couple of months, or up to six months, and expose them to things, but degree programs we didn't do.

Q: Okay. Again, as you are now approaching the end of your time in Georgia, where actually you are keeping an eye on the Caucasus in general, how would you look back on it from this vantage point now?

ROBERTSON: A couple of things. One of them is that anyone who has ever worked in Georgia—well, not anyone, but I would say largely people who work in Georgia fall in love with the country. I remember as I was leaving Romania, going to Georgia, and I'm thinking, "I love Romania. What's the big deal? Georgia, schmorgia." But I fell prey to it, and I fell in love with Georgia. The people, the culture, the food—you know, it's pretty trite. So I look back on it extremely fondly from that point of view. I don't know if you have ever seen the Georgian National Ballet perform? Sukhishvili?

Q: No.

ROBERTSON: I have seen a lot of folk dancing in my life, in South America and Southeast Asia. I can generally take about ten minutes. Georgian folk dance is mesmerizing.

I think we were there at the right time, with the right tools, to be as helpful as we could be in USAID, so I really felt like it was time well spent, money well spent, given the complicated nature of Georgia's own geography and living on the border of Russia. Saakashvili hated Putin, and Putin hated Saakashvili more. I left before the Russian invasion, but I did live through South Ossetia and the occupied Abkhazia and South Ossetia. As complicated as it is to build a country and a national identity with that kind of neighbor, we did, I think, really, really good work, and I think you can see that when you go to Georgia today. Georgia has really pulled so far ahead of Azerbaijan in many ways with oil money.

As I was wrapping up my tour in Georgia and thinking about the future, I was offered El Salvador, so I accepted the job in El Salvador. But probably six months before I would have been meant to leave, I really realized that as far as my career in the Foreign Service, I could never have a job as good as I had in Georgia, and I decided to retire. I announced my retirement from the Foreign Service as I was approaching the end of my tour in Georgia and declined the opportunity to go to El Salvador for a variety of reasons, one of them being that I really felt like I couldn't top it. It was such an incredible experience. I also was 52. I said part of the reason I wanted to retire was because you can. That's part of what the Foreign Service allows you to do. I was not paying alimony. I was not putting kids through college. If I thought I wanted an Act II, then it kind of made sense to retire at that point.

Q: Today is July 18th, and we are resuming our interview with Denny Robertson, who has just retired from USAID.

ROBERTSON: Right. I retired out of the Caucasus. I was 52 years old. I thought, "Okay. I don't know what I want to do next." But the Foreign Service gives you this extraordinary opportunity to retire when you are still relatively young, and I took advantage of the one-month career transition program that gave me the opportunity to do a little bit of "blue-skying" and thinking about where to go next. I retired for what turned out to be three months. I remember shortly after retiring going to a child welfare conference in Washington, DC, and because I had worked so closely in Romania on child welfare issues, I attended. Eunice Kennedy Shriver also attended. She was a big supporter of the work that we were doing in child welfare. I was lucky enough to be introduced to her. I told her what I had done in Romania and thanked her for her support. And she said, "So what are you doing?" I said, "I'm retired." And she looked at me. "You're retired? You're too young to retire! Look at me!" So I blame Eunice Kennedy Shriver for shaming me back into the workforce! Just a cute little anecdote!

While I was trying to figure what my second act was going to be, I dabbled in, I would say, four primary areas. Dabbled may be too superficial of a word, but there were

basically four types of assignments that I did before I picked up another career track position with the Peace Corps.

The first one, what I would generally characterize as Human Resources Senior Leadership Selection in USAID. I did a number of jobs working with USAID on the selection process for mission directors, deputy mission directors, and other senior leadership positions.

Q: And, sorry, what year is this again?

ROBERTSON: This is 2007.

Q: Okay.

ROBERTSON: We did basically vetting. Very different I think than the way the State Department does it, but in USAID you don't really bid to be an ambassador, you are asked to be an ambassador. And not necessarily the equivalent, but for mission director, deputy mission directors, and the like, people bid. It's considered to be kind of a meritocracy. So I was responsible for doing a lot of the vetting for the applicants for those positions and really trying to develop the most complete picture of their experience and temperament. I think as anyone in the Foreign Service knows, you generally have two reputations as a Foreign Service officer. One of them is the reputation that is described in your performance evaluations, and then the other one is who you really are and what you really are. Frequently they are at odds with each other. Trying to align the corridor reputation with the performance evaluations in a file was a lot of fun, but also I think it showed just how much farther we have to go in government in doing legitimate performance evaluations.

Q: Let me ask a question here that may be relevant. It's 2007, and USAID has a lot of new responsibilities in a whole variety of areas—some post-conflict, some high-threat environment activities, some winding down of other activities. In the search for appropriate people to fill these positions, what were the general kinds of talents, skills, background that you were looking for? I guess what I am driving at is, had it changed since you were doing it?

ROBERTSON: Very much so, because I think when I came into USAID the idea of a USAID mission director was a kind of a feudal lord. You sought and tried to maintain complete independence from the embassy. You ran your own show. Nobody questioned you, whether it was up or down. It was a very autocratic, top down kind of a job. I think that is part of the transition that has occurred over time. By the time I rose into the ranks where I was doing that kind of work and also helping to select future people, what we were looking for was not so much that skill set but the ability to work across agencies. That was just never particularly important in the early days of USAID. There were ego issues, there's ability to work out turf issues, in addition to management and leadership skills.

I enjoyed it, and I think one of the reasons I enjoyed it so much as I will go on and talk, I think one of my strengths has been the ability to develop people. It was not something that I went into government thinking, and it just kind of happened over the course of years that I worked. But, increasingly, those became the types of positions that I wanted to focus on. I found it most professionally rewarding coaching staff and empowering them to achieve their best performance.

Q: One more question here. In terms of developing people, developing talent, what tools did you have, or what training or abilities were at your disposal, to be able to do that while you were in USAID at this time?

ROBERTSON: I don't think anything in particular. I think, as with many people rising in senior positions, I was given management skills training, leadership skills training. There was a fair amount of that. I don't know that it was necessarily designed to strengthen my ability to develop people, but it certainly helped me to realize that was an area where I not only got a lot of satisfaction, but also seemed able to make a dent—not even just people development, but also organizational development. There are a number of consulting companies that helped with USAID over the years on staff retreats, strategies. I really just took to that like a fish in water and, at one point, thought that would be my post-retirement career, but it turned out not to be.

Q: Can you give an example, because you are now talking about people that are relatively high level in USAID who are going to relatively high-level jobs? Without mentioning names, were there examples of individuals who coached or advised that they should acquire a certain skill set or so on?

ROBERTSON: Well, by the time people get to the level where they're bidding on senior jobs, they are who they are. At least insofar as senior leadership selection, it was more important to make sure that we knew what we were buying when we selected someone. Somebody might say they are collaborative, they're this, they're that, and then the reality is, they're a screamer and people run from them. You know, if a screamer's what you want, then go ahead and hire this person, but surely don't be fooled into thinking that this is Mahatma Gandhi or anything.

Q: Okay, okay. The other thing you mentioned was structures within USAID. Did you want to give any detail about how some of those changed while you were back now?

ROBERTSON: Well, it kind of leads into the next assignment because it really was a time of major change in the platforms for delivering development assistance. It really started during the Bush Administration when they created an entity called the Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC). It was meant to be the sort of purest form of development assistance that recognized government reforms, and only rewarded governments with development assistance if they genuinely progressed in a selection of metrics that included rule of law, fighting corruption, etc., etc. More than anything though it seemed to be a counterpoint to dissatisfaction with the work of USAID and creation of a parallel structure for delivering assistance. I believe the bigger picture strategy was to limit the

scope of USAID to humanitarian assistance and move most economic assistance to MCC. The structure of MCC gave greater authority to State in the creation of a board of directors headed by the Secretary. It began during the time I was in Georgia. We had a Millennium Challenge program there. There was professional tension between USAID and MCC due to the obvious overlapping priorities. MCC however had the benefit of strong political backing with a Republican Congress and a Republican administration. What are you going to do?

So there was Millennium Challenge, and then there was also PEPFAR (President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief), which is also a creation of the George W. Bush administration. Again, USAID had long provided support and expertise in the area of HIV/AIDS, since the beginning of the epidemic; but it was determined that a separate platform needed to be developed that was guided more strongly by State and more politically accountable to a Republican Congress. In this case, it wasn't a separate U.S. government agency, but it was an artificial cap over a group of agencies. So PEPFAR was a State Department driven platform for delivering assistance in HIV/AIDS that was implemented by principally USAID, Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS), Peace Corps, Department of Defense (DOD), and Department of Labor. It was a "collaborative" approach to implementation of addressing a global epidemic in a competitive budget process overseen by a State Coordinator (originally Randall Tobias).

Q: To take a quick look at PEPFAR as a platform—I mean this whole era of the George W. Bush administration you begin to hear this expression of “All-of-Government” quite a bit more. It started with the Homeland Security in the wake of 9/11, but then I guess also, as they begin to look at other sectors of the government, trying to end stove-piping, bring together as many experts and as much technical ability as possible to focus on one particular thing. Was that the goal that PEPFAR had just in terms of organization?

ROBERTSON: Well, I'll speak from the perspective of somebody in AID, if you will appreciate the potential bias. In the same way that I believe MCC was Congress taking a shot at lack of confidence in USAID's ability, I think PEPFAR was similar. Although USAID had been implementing programs worldwide combating HIV/AIDS, the scale of resources of PEPFAR was beyond the capacity of AID alone and incorporated components that were not traditionally part of AID's toolkit. Providing access to HIV meds was an important part of PEPFAR and DHHS claimed a large portion of the resources to address the medical research and testing aspects of HIV. Similarly to MCC, there was arguable overlap in priorities and abilities that created serious competition for resources largely between USAID and DHHS. DHHS, which heretofore had a limited presence internationally, all of a sudden expanded dramatically and competed masterfully for the resources.

Q: Did that include actually sending individuals into the field and expecting them to be able to interact at all levels of foreign government in developing a program with them?

ROBERTSON: Absolutely! Absolutely! They had an advantage over USAID. Actually, I've written quite a bit on this for my own use because I believe that the US has

unnecessarily fragmented assistance for internal political reasons and has diminished our influence with partner countries. DHHS is enormous. By comparison, AID is quite small. So DHHS had the staff resources to be able to pick and pull technical people to create this global infrastructure in the countries where PEPFAR was going to be concentrated. So yes. Their resources were MDs (medical doctors), epidemiologists—skill sets AID no longer had. However, DHHS leadership lacked management and leadership skills required to operate effectively with large international teams. We, at one point, had those kinds of high-level technical resources, but over the years, USAID had evolved from more of a direct implementation agency or entity into a sort of contracting agency with technical support. It wasn't an even playing field.

The more interesting thing to me was that HIV/AIDS at that time was still considered to be largely a disease, in the eyes of Americans, afflicting gay men. When it became apparent, I think, to the Bush Administration that it was much more than that internationally, and it really was male to female transmitted in most of Africa and Southeast Asia, then it legitimized a conservative investment and a faith-based approach to HIV prevention that was not scientifically sound. Basically, the Nancy Reagan “just say no,” don't have sex, and that's the way to avoid infection. Twenty-five percent of the PEPFAR budget was meant to be programmed for abstinence programs. I think most experts believed that was just silly, but that was part of the deal. That was how you got Congressional support to go forward with it, was we were actually going to programming and promoting abstinence around the world.

Q: Now, just aside from this particular aspect of the programming, that element along with many others goes into the question of the culture of the countries where you want to work, so in places where the AIDS rate was very high, the rate of infection high, and the rate of death from AIDS was very high, you had different cultures. There were countries in Africa, there was India, there were probably—I can't recall—but certainly Russia had a very high rate and other places. Were these HHS people able to work effectively in terms of delivering their assistance within different cultures? Were they able to make those cultural adjustments?

ROBERTSON: Well, in a word, no. Their toolkit—I have the highest regard for DHHS, but they didn't possess language, management, cross-cultural skills. These are largely staff who never served overseas, and they enter countries where they are administering programs of \$50 million, \$75 million a year -- drugstores and laboratory builders. Not that that's wrong! PEPFAR started before there was really a reliable medical approach to it, but everything that I think we had learned globally about dealing with the HIV/AIDS epidemic had to do with prevention and prevention had to do with safe sex, talking about sex—not judging it, talking about it. That was not DHHS's forte. That really was USAID's forte, however it is also true that trying to demonstrate impact from teaching people to wear condoms and practice safe sex is akin to running family planning programs by counting the number of children that are never born, the number of people who are never infected, so it's not always compelling. However, on the other hand, building laboratories so that you can test people is visible despite the sustainability and training issues. It's resources. It's equipment. Providing drugs to people when the drugs

became more available was an extraordinary change in the face of the epidemic - saving peoples' lives. However, it was an overlay on governments that still struggled to provided even the most basic health infrastructure to their populations - and the lopsided budgets of HIV/AIDS medications were not sustainable by host governments. Grossly described, "test people and get them on their meds; and that will address the problem." It was a high cost and short-term strategy.

Q: Did the abstinence programs ever have any measurable impact?

ROBERTSON: Oh no, no. I would say they were done minimally to be able to pass the Congressional reporting requirements. The reason that I talk so much about PEPFAR is because one of the jobs I took for a year was leading the Office of HIV/AIDS in USAID, working under the then AIDS Coordinator Mark Dybul. I remember when they expressed interest in working with me, and I thought, knowing what I knew about the heavily conservative roots of PEPFAR, I said, "Why would they want to work with me, a gay guy?" Come to find out, Mark Dybul was also gay. It turned out it was a much more friendly environment than I thought and there were resources dedicated to men having sex with men, but it was always a relatively small part of the overall approach.

I did that for a year, and realized how underprepared USAID was to compete because of the lopsided nature of technical staffing between DHHS and USAID. The heavy overhead of the architecture of PEPFAR is, I think, one of the least effective platforms for delivering assistance, given the heavy reporting requirements, the amount of competition that goes on between U.S. government agencies for resources and the conflicts that ensue in developing it. In the final analysis, here we are, what, 15 years into PEPFAR and really PEPFAR is about delivering drugs. The strategy (90:90:90) was that wide scale testing would result in a significant increase in people on med that would cause the epidemic to peter out. It also assumed that partner governments would have improved economically to the point they could assume the cost of continued medication. That has proven to be absolutely untrue. So really, where we are is, we are now somewhat trapped because if we walk away from these countries, then the governments will not have the funds to buy the medications. People will go off their meds. The level of deaths attributed to AIDS will skyrocket. And we will be responsible. Our current Administration does not strike me as being willing to carry these costs in perpetuity. .

Q: In the beginning, when PEPFAR was first rolled out, what was the AID role?

ROBERTSON: We ran prevention programs. We ran palliative care programs for children who had been orphaned due to their parents dying of AIDS. We were, I think, on the soft side because that's where we were most effective—in running prevention programs, educating people about what HIV was, how to avoid it. There were a lot of myths. There are still a lot of myths about how it's transmitted.

Q: Okay. Looking back on PEPFAR from today, whatever it was originally designed for, what you just said is that it has become the tool, or the platform, through which the U.S. is delivering anti-AIDS drugs or AIDS treatment medications?

ROBERTSON: Right. And there is nothing matter with providing meds; it is criminal NOT to. The protocols have evolved dramatically since the beginning, so the ability to basically take a pill a day is simplified. It certainly simplified implementation of that side of it. There are many issues with compliance and all the other sort of human sides of it, but the theory of addressing the epidemic has now changed.

I will say that really was a valuable opportunity for me to see from the inside how it worked and to advocate for the work of USAID missions. We really weren't trying to have any kind of leadership role over the overall implementation. The State coordinator, the current ambassador, Debbie Birx, is an DHHS employee, so PEPFAR has largely taken on the personality of DHHS, and USAID is definitely a secondary player.

Q: Okay. One last thing before we go onto disaster response. We talked a lot about PEPFAR, not quite so much about MCC, Millennium Challenge Corporation, but what I noticed about Millennium Challenge Corporation is that it seemed to borrow a variety of methods from USAID—using milestones, using conditionalities—but separated the platform out of USAID and focused the kind of aid that MCC gives to certain kinds of countries that are not at the very bottom of the poverty ladder, but somewhere above that. Perhaps not middle income, but somewhere above poverty. So you would be talking about Ghana.

ROBERTSON: MCC was meant to reward countries that were making measurable progress in reform. It never really was intended to be for the deeply impoverished countries. It was based on the premise of a cooperating government with serious political will to reform. That's where we would put our resources. Again, it's sort of a false equivalent to say that USAID didn't do that. It's just that USAID's responsibilities were broader. That was one of the aspects for MCC, that we worked with governments that were committed to reform, and we could map it, we could measure it, and wonderful. They developed "compacts" with countries that provided a framework for the assistance, and the compacts were five years. The expectation was that the reform progress over five years would be such that it would achieve the goals of the compact, you would bingo have a middle-income country. US political preferences did not drive it because this was all measurable using all of the metrics available to be sure. Politics did not play a role. Didn't care whether you voted with us in the UN.

The other part of it that was meant, I think, to show it was more effective than USAID. Our larger USAID missions would be from 30 to 200 people. Millennium Challenge boasted that it would put two, at most three, people on the ground in a country, so therefore we were saving huge amounts of money by not having this big footprint. In fact, what it was really doing was creating an off budget, locally run organization in every country it operated in that was easily as big or bigger than any mission. The range of activities that MCC implemented were often indistinguishable from USAID activities, though again I mean I realize it sounds a little bit like whining, but I think both of them are an unfortunate byproduct of a lack of leadership to have kept us in a central position on delivering this kind of assistance. As you know, certainly Armenia is a good example,

that despite the fact that we said they weren't political, that at the end of a compact, even when a country had failed abysmally on meeting its targets, there was another compact very much because of political reasons.

Q: One technical thing you mentioned, a kind of off the books budget ledger domain, but how did it get resourced? Was it on the ground and resourced by the USAID mission, or did it have literally its own resource funnel from Washington?

ROBERTSON: Oh, no, no. It was MCC resourced. They created a local entity implementation entity from whole cloth. A locally created entity by the host country, driven by a host-country national, that basically replicated the skills and staff of an USAID mission with technical people, financial people, contracting people, lawyers. They were bright, brilliant people, but it was no bargain.

Q: Was it audited sufficiently?

ROBERTSON: Well, again, when you think about the time frame for a typical compact, it was five years. Creating systems that would allow you to effectively manage hundreds of millions of dollars turned out not to be possible without engaging international accounting firms. Money, I'm sure, disappeared. But, again, I think it was this naïve notion that you will create this entity, and we will just run the money through the government because after all this government is one that is reform-minded and would never steal assistance.

Q: Okay, okay. But MCC lives on.

ROBERTSON: Yeah, right. To me, it's more a function of nobody is looking at this issue critically or the consequences of having several platforms for delivering aid. It's just resources, and people want resources. The platform exists. It has its own lobbying base now.

Q: [Laughs] Yeah. Okay. All right.

ROBERTSON: That's two.

Q: That's two. Yeah. Mmm hmm.

ROBERTSON: The third opportunity that came along was another unique challenge both in innovation and delivery mechanism. These are assignments that, had I stayed in the Foreign Service, I would not have pursued. More likely I would have led the missions in Afghanistan or Iraq and these did not interest me. It was great for me to have the freedom to pick and choose some of these jobs that were much more diverse.

The next thing that came along was this concept called the "development counselor." In many of the countries where we were exiting, or trying to exit, we realized we still wanted to work with these governments, but we couldn't necessarily justify a full USAID

mission. These are countries that had economic resources available, had technical resources available. We began to say, “Let’s talk about how can we work in partnership with these governments instead of shoveling money into American enterprises and NGOs to implement these programs.” The concept of development counselor in Eastern Europe was raised. Bulgaria was one of the countries where we decided to experiment on it. We had a very strong relationship with the government. They were in the European Union. They were doing well. They wanted engagement, and they were willing to cost-share in a way they had not been previously.

Q: Okay.

ROBERTSON: The development counselor position was created. It was meant to sort of round out a country team in a typical embassy and basically take responsibilities from the economic officer and other parts of the embassy and allow an Ambassador to have one person who would be their development specialist, which made sense to me because economic officers, skilled as they are, usually have very little experience in delivering foreign assistance. And other parts, whether it’s Department of Commerce or others... Anyway, it made sense to me to see if this would work in a transition country, to work in the development of partnerships, functioning as a development counselor. With a very small budget and a very small staff—I had two local staff—we set about trying to create partnerships in Bulgaria.

Q: Ah, so wait! So you literally went out to Sofia?

ROBERTSON: Yes.

Q: Okay.

ROBERTSON: We created a position. Got an NSDD-38 (National Security Decision Directive 38). There was no job description for this in the past, so we created the job description. I went out as a personal services contractor, not as a direct-hire. Then working with a very small staff, set about trying to work with the government to identify areas where they wanted to concentrate, help them figure out where the resources would come from to support partnership activities, and really just see what we could create. We were fortunate to have I think one of the best ambassadors that I had ever worked with. I had worked with many wonderful ambassadors, but Nancy McEldowney was special. She was very supportive. Even though it was not germinated on her watch, she embraced it and was incredibly supportive throughout the time we worked together.

That’s the set up. It turned out to be a two-year experiment that ended for a variety of reasons after that. One of them is that there was no institutional framework in USAID for these positions. We were supposed to be getting out of countries, so nobody was in a career track of hoping they could be a development counselor. In USAID, like in the State Department, you want to rise to be an ambassador. You get to be a mission director, then you’re done.

Governments change. The Government of Bulgaria at the time the position was created was very different from the government that was in place at the time I was working there. They were much less interested in the idea than the previous government, so that's something that needed to be worked into it. Difficult to sustain, because it depended upon the host government providing, at a minimum, matching budgetary resources, but, at a maximum, even more. The Bulgarian government by the time I got there, they were polite. They were not much more than that. The partnerships we ended up developing were more private sector partnerships, which is fine. The private sector should always have been a part of it, but it shouldn't have been exclusively the private sector, so we did several partnerships in IT, which was the area that seemed to make the most sense given the economic comparative advantage of Bulgaria at that time. It was an experiment. It showed what we don't know about creating effective partnerships I think more than in what we did. At the same time, the administration changed in the US and the idea did not achieve traction with the Obama team.

Q: In conceptualizing this innovative idea, what added value would the position give when the U.S. ambassador can use convening power to bring together a World Bank representative, an IMF (International Monetary Fund) rep, the local Chambers of Commerce, all of the other players who would need to be there to identify what Bulgaria needs, and what in theory could be done? What, in addition to all of that, did this position, in theory at least, offer?

ROBERTSON: I think in many ways the ambassador's role is as a convener, right. But ambassadors really don't have specific expertise in developing partnerships. If you can get the right people in the room, then the role of the development coordinator is to talk about the mechanics of partnerships. What it is. What it isn't. That's exactly what Ambassador McEldowney did. She was very helpful with that.

Q: Well, you know, it wasn't a bad idea, but it just wasn't as....

ROBERTSON: It was as cooked as it should have been. Certainly, one of the things I felt strongly about was, and I still believe this, that ambassadors need to have a person with a USAID skill set on their staff, not as a mission director and freestanding. In many embassies, the DCM coordinates assistance. They coordinate assistance, and then USAID is just one among equals of all—you know, Department of Justice, Department of the Treasury, and so on. I have always felt very strongly that USAID should aspire to provide senior leadership to embassies where the DCM runs the inside of the embassy, the mission director oversees all assistance, and they're co-equals reporting to an ambassador. That's my dream model.

Q: I tend to be sympathetic to what you're saying, if only because USAID people at that level, after they've had some experience in the field and in Washington, know a great deal about where the money is, if nothing else.

ROBERTSON: Right.

Q: And a lot of ambassadors from State Department and DCMs from State Department do not know that, nor do they know how it gets spent, because it's a different spending model.

ROBERTSON: Right. And I don't think it plays to the strengths of what a DCM does or an ambassador should do.

Q: All right. So you did that for two years. Just as an aside, how was Bulgaria to live in, or Sofia to live in, at that moment?

ROBERTSON: Having lived in Romania for four years somewhat earlier and always being told, "You don't ever want to cross the Danube because those Bulgarians are all thugs," I then saw it from the other side where I lived in Bulgaria and was told, "Don't ever go north of the Danube. There are all those thieves in Romania!"

Q: [Laughs]

ROBERTSON: It was delightful. It was a delightful experience. It was a tough year, a tough time for government. There were a lot of government corruption issues. It was also notable that it was only then that they began to experiment with having pride parades. That was the first time I went to a pride parade where I was surrounded by the police to protect the 50 or so people that were brave enough to march. This is 2009. Even though they had been in the European Union and supposedly demonstrated their respect for human rights, it was not socially the right place to be.

Q: Okay. All right, so you did that for two years. You provided your end-of-term report to USAID, and we know what happened to the development counselor concept. What happens next?

ROBERTSON: So then Obama is president. A friend of mine says, "You know, we should see if we can get into Peace Corps as country directors." I was, "Sure, why not?" Funnily enough, the Peace Corps director while I was in Bulgaria said to me one day, she said, "You know, you really should be a Peace Corps country director." I don't know based on what she was saying it, but I threw my hat in the ring. I began the process of applying. I didn't know where it would ever lead, but in the interim I was asked to go to Brazil for a year as the acting mission director. Again, it's a position that I never would have had access to if I had stayed in the Foreign Service because it was a very small job. The program was very modest and the Brazilian government was at its economic peak. It just would never have been an appropriate position for me at my rank. I just thought, "Well, what the heck? While we wait and see whether Peace Corps comes through, let's go to Brazil!"

The most interesting part about Brazil for me was that while there was an important environment earmark to work and protect the Amazon, the most important part of the bilateral program. And Brazil was economically booming. These were the years of the BRIC countries (Brazil, Russia, India, China). Brazil's economy was just wiping

everybody up. The principle for USAID assistance in Brazil was going to be partnerships. As in Bulgaria, it had the attention and support of the ambassador, Tom Shannon, another extraordinary person. In this case, it had a lot of private sector and government support because they had money to burn. For a year, while I waited for my Peace Corps to clear, and while we were waiting for the incoming permanent mission director to get through Portuguese training, I was able to steer that program and develop the partnerships component quite a bit working with a whole range of businessmen and government appointees. I think it demonstrated that where you have the commitment and the economic wherewithal, you can do really innovative things bringing together American expertise to solve Brazilian problems.

Q: Now, the first question is, how in general did your Brazilian counterparts, in whatever the ministries were, regard you?

ROBERTSON: Hmmm. I'm not sure I know what you mean.

Q: In other words, if you're creating partnerships, you're working with some elements of the Brazilian government, and there have been problems in the past with Brazil feeling that the U.S. is dictating things to them. They know perfectly well what they need to do, and "What are you doing? You're telling me how to run my Amazon." So I'm wondering how you handled that or what the view among the Brazilian interlocutors were?

ROBERTSON: I would divide up.... The whole programming of the environmental earmark—there was one person in Congress that cared about it, and it really ran itself. The rest of the country and the bilateral programming, and the idea of using partnerships, that was done through, and again it's an important point to recognize the regional importance of Brazil. Brazil was implementing development programs in other countries. So we had a parallel entity to be able to talk to and work with that had a similar role in life.

Q: Interesting.

ROBERTSON: So the U.S. and Brazil collaborated on—this is also at the time of the Haiti earthquake—so we collaborated and worked together on implementing programs in Haiti that took advantage of the U.S. government's expertise as well as the Brazilian government's expertise. So that model of trilateral cooperation partnerships was... And you can only do that when you have a like entity to work with.

Q: That's very interesting. I think a lot of people probably don't know that Brazil is now large enough and has at least as reasonable a treasury as it needs to have some kind of development programs of its own, even though there are plenty of places in Brazil that could theoretically benefit from such programs.

ROBERTSON: Well, but you know, that's an easy argument that people often do make domestically in the United States. "There are poor people in Appalachia. What are we doing giving our money?" Well, what do you do for the benefit of the global world as

opposed to just the benefit of your own country? It wasn't a big deal, but it was significant. Brazil also has a colonial legacy of working with Portugal and Guinea Bissau and the other former Portuguese colonies, so there was that sort of natural group of countries. But also they went beyond that. They are the leaders in agriculture and in many areas that, frankly, they're sometimes better at it than the U.S.

Q: Before we leave Brazil, were there any other examples you wanted to cite about the kinds of cooperative agreements we did?

ROBERTSON: We worked in youth empowerment. That was probably, domestically, the most important thing we did with our partnerships, working in the favelas with underprivileged youth, combining U.S. resources and corporate resources. Corporate social responsibility is also an important aspect in a country as economically successful as Brazil. The companies have money. Of course, corporate social responsibility always has a selfish aspect, but that doesn't diminish its importance. We would cooperate on skills-building training programs for underprivileged youth, scholarship programs, and internship programs that would try to bridge young people out of economic hardship into self-sufficiency. Those were great programs.

Q: Good enough! Wonderful!

ROBERTSON: That gets me basically through. By that time I had been selected for a country director position in Peace Corps. I think that's the last chapter we'll do.

Q: All right. Now your tour of one year in Brazil takes you up to what year?

ROBERTSON: 2011.

Q: In the next session then, we'll go on with you to the Peace Corps?

ROBERTSON: Right.

Q: This was absolutely fascinating.

Q: Today is August 3rd, and we are concluding our interview with Denny Robertson as he leaves USAID and goes to Peace Corps.

ROBERTSON: Right. Following retirement in 2007 and doing a few years of interesting short-term types of jobs that we talked about the last session, I decided I kind of wanted to "own" something again, and to assume full responsibility for a program. I was recommended to go to Peace Corps by the Peace Corps Country Director in Bulgaria, Lesley Duncan, who comes from one the Peace Corps dynasty families. Her father was associated with Peace Corps for many years.

Q: What year was this?

ROBERTSON: 2010. Getting into Peace Corps, HR (Human Resources) being no better in Peace Corps than it is in any other government agency, it took quite a while. But eventually, for the Class of 2011, I was hired to come in as a Country Director (CD) for Peace Corps.

A few things about Peace Corps that I think are interesting. First of all, I wanted to do it because I wanted to give back. Peace Corps was where I started, and I felt it would be really appropriate to sort of wrap up a career by going back to Peace Corps and giving back. My experience as a Peace Corps Volunteer really laid the groundwork for what I did for the rest of my career, and what I hoped to be able to do was provide the kind of guidance and advice to other Peace Corps Volunteers who wanted to follow a similar path.

Peace Corps has a five-year rule. It's the only U.S. government agency where you must leave at the end of five years, with a couple of exceptions. It was written into the original legislation for Peace Corps. It's controversial, and I would say there is a kind of a wave that goes back and forth of should we have it, shouldn't we have it. There are pluses and minuses to it for sure, you can imagine, in any institution, but I think on balance it helps to distinguish what Peace Corps does by having a constant through-put of people coming in and out. You go into it knowing that, and I think that makes you value your time in Peace Corps more than you might in a typical job where there really is no required end date. As a Peace Corps Country Director you serve at the pleasure of the Director. It's not a political position, but also you don't have the job security of a traditional Civil Service employee. You can be released on a moment's notice. I had several colleagues for whom that occurred.

Going in as CD, I had no idea where they would send me. I thought that given my most recent experience with AID in the former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe that would be the likely place to send me. They offered me the Philippines. The Philippines was where I began as a Peace Corps Volunteer in the 1970s, as we covered. I immediately wondered whether that was a smart thing to do, partly because of the adage, "You can never go home again." I also didn't want my experience as a country director to be trying to relive my Volunteer experience. I wanted it to be about the Volunteers. Nonetheless, I was pretty excited about the possibility. That was the job, so I accepted it. In 2011, I took off for Manila for what would be three-and-a-half fantastic years of sort of going home, but not necessarily.

Q: Wait. Did you say 2007?

ROBERTSON: 2011. And 2011 coincided with the 50th year anniversary of the creation of Peace Corps and also the Philippines. The Philippines was one of the first countries, I think. In 1961, they sent one planeload to Nigeria and one planeload to the Philippines and 50 years later, still there.

Q: Just one very quick question here. Before they sent you out, did they give you training as a country director?

ROBERTSON: There's a one-month orientation prior to going out as a CD. What I observed as I looked at my fellow country directors, there really is no mold for who becomes a country director. In fact, over the years I think, AID and State Department people have been in vogue and out of vogue. There's a sense about Peace Corps, you know, granola bars, and kumbaya. Peace Corps really is, as an organization, it's part of the U.S. government, but it has a truly distinct culture. I used to say culture with an emphasis on the word, "cult." It is almost cult-like to be in Peace Corps. The composition of the workforce changes, but the organizational culture remains pretty much the same. I joined with a group of people that included former USAID contractors. We had a former Member of Congress as a Peace Corps country director. We had a lot of people with public health backgrounds. Generally, they were Peace Corps volunteers before. That's not a prerequisite, but I think in general we find if you have been a Peace Corps Volunteer, you will make a better country director. Organizationally, I think one of the interesting things about Peace Corps is that there is no sort of track in Peace Corps that leads up to the position of country director. They hire you as a country director. In a sense, it is a kind of a political appointee type position, because you basically parachute people into the highest positions in your organization who may or may not have much organizational background or country-specific knowledge. It's a pretty risky approach to staffing.

But, anyway, I really won't say a whole lot about the organization, except that I still believe the mandate and the goals of Peace Corps are every bit as valuable, if not more valuable, today than they were in 1961 when they were created. The three goals of Peace Corps are as old as the organization—the first goal being to provide trained men and women to assist in a country, the second goal being to teach other cultures about the United States, and the third goal to teach Americans about other cultures. There's a constant debate whether Peace Corps is a development organization or a cultural organization. My approach to it, and my experience in it, is that it is a development organization. I told Peace Corps Volunteers that this will probably be, as your experience in Peace Corps, this will probably be the only time in your life that you really do real development at the grassroots, without government intervention, without enormous sums of money driving you, where you really work with the community to do what a community wants, with all the frustration and all of the reward.

It was fantastic to be back in the Philippines. The Philippines had changed quite a bit in 40 years, as you can imagine. The most distinguishing change was that there were a lot more Filipinos. As a Catholic country, it went from I think somewhere around 40 million people when I was there as a Volunteer to over 100 million. It was pretty crowded. *[Laughs]* But the heart of Filipinos was still there. They are still the most joyous, uplifting, optimistic, generous people that I've probably ever met.

We ran a three-project program in the Philippines. Teaching English as a foreign language, which is a little bit unusual in a country where it's an English medium, but there were still enough aspects to classroom management and education that Peace Corps volunteers could make a contribution. We had a program in coastal resource

management, which was working with local communities to find ways to reduce the degradation of the marine environment and to preserve the environment for fisherman, because coastal fishing is really one of the most common forms of sustenance in the Philippines and environmental degradation is a huge program. The third program was youth development and that was also because given the incredible overpopulation and high levels of extreme poverty, there were large numbers of marginalized youth that ranged from street children in metro Manila who were involved in some of the most dangerous activities involving trafficking, all the way to just sort of idle youth in the rural areas, trying to find ways to keep youth from migrating to the big cities where they could become victims. Those are pretty basic Peace Corps programs, and for the most part they are designed to be able to match with the types of skills that Americans brought.

Peace Corps Volunteers in the 1960s were, I would say, largely white, largely male and largely in their early 20s. Peace Corps Volunteers today are extraordinarily diverse, with a much larger percentage of people choosing to volunteer following their own retirements, so in 50s, 60s, 70s. One of my volunteers was over 80. There are people who do this later in life. The very common stories I would hear from older women is, "I wanted to join Peace Corps when I finished university, but I got married, I raised a family, and now it's my turn!" They would come sometimes with their spouses, sometimes without their spouses. They of course brought incredible skills, not necessarily language skills, but they brought incredible technical skills and, really, I think it helps Peace Corps in the long run. Peace Corps also has become much more diverse in reaching out to ethnic minorities. A much larger percentage of African-Americans, Asian-Americans. That's really been to dispel the myth that Peace Corps is kind of an effete, elite, white, middle-class organization. It really isn't anymore. Also, Peace Corps has been experimenting with placing same-sex partners in countries where it works, which I think is also very innovative for a U.S. government agency.

Q: In the case of same-sex partners, they're not doing the same program, they're just in the same country?

ROBERTSON: Well, they're assigned together as a married couple.

Q: Oh, I see! Oh, that's interesting. I did not know that Peace Corps assigned married couples. In my experience, it had always been single people. But marrieds had been part of Peace Corps from the beginning, or had there been kind of a change in the culture to allow for that?

ROBERTSON: It's been an evolution. In the early years, Peace Corps assigned married couples, I think in a very kind of patronizing approach. They assigned the husband with a job, and then the wife got to "go along." Then she had to figure out what she was going to do. It has evolved to the point where a married couple is placed only if their skills match what a community requires. Yeah, there have always been married couples, but today I think it's a much more professional approach to placing and supporting married couples.

In that vein, placing same-sex couples is very innovative, not only because if you accept the fact that largely Peace Corps Volunteers are going to be placed in rural areas as opposed to large cosmopolitan cities, you are going to immediately encounter more conservative communities, and you have to assess whether that will work or not. In some countries, it absolutely will not work. It's less about the culture and more about the safety of placing people.

LGBT volunteers have been a part of Peace Corps forever, since the very beginning. There's a much higher profile for that aspect of diversity today than there used to be, but that's really nothing new. But the idea of placing transgender Volunteers is also very innovative, and also I think speaks well of Peace Corps because Peace Corps volunteers are provided comprehensive medical support while they are Volunteers. Medical support for a transgender Volunteer is unusual. Because Peace Corps employs host-country doctors in all of the countries where they operate, a Peace Corps doctor may or may not feel equipped or comfortable to deal with someone who is transgender, but in select countries it has worked. We had a transgender Volunteer

Q: Wait, one second. I paused only because I wanted to tell you that I have interviewed other people who were in the Peace Corps early in the Peace Corps' existence, in the early 1960s, and they describe a homophobic environment in the early '60s. In fact, they said they knew people who were sent home when it was found out they were gay. This is not being recorded, but I just wanted to let you know that it may have been true that gay people did serve in the Peace Corps in those early years, but probably closeted.

ROBERTSON: Oh, sure, but I mean if you were gay anywhere in the world in the '60s, except for maybe the Netherlands you probably spent some part of your service in the closet. Yeah, for sure, you're absolutely right.

Q: Okay. All right, sorry, go right ahead.

ROBERTSON: I think one of the really great things about Peace Corps is the way that it has embraced diversity over the years. First of all, to avoid becoming kind of stereotyped as an organization, but also because teaching American diversity is a really critical cultural lesson that we try to impart in other countries that are frequently totally monoculture. I will say that diversity Volunteers, they carry a big burden in many countries, not just because people have prejudices, but there are many stories I could share. One of the obvious ones that happens in many countries is you go to a community and say you are going to be giving them a Peace Corps Volunteer. So, great, they want a Peace Corps Volunteer because they have a great youth program, and they're so excited. So the day comes when their Peace Corps Volunteer arrives. In the Philippines right, let's say it's an Asian-American that's been assigned to that community. The community, they get all disappointed, and they say, "We wanted a real American."

Q: [Laughs]

ROBERTSON: So that's the beginning of the burden of diversity. We wanted a "real" American. Everybody knows exactly what that means. It's blue eyes, blond hair. It's the same for African-Americans. It just is such a really instrumental way that diversity is taught, and I think it's underappreciated in the role of Peace Corps. I think the same thing with older Americans often, because people feel like, "We wanted somebody bubbly, young, and we get somebody who has bad knees."

Peace Corps Volunteers serve for two-and-a-half years. It's basically three months of training plus two years of service. We teach language, we teach cultural competence, we teach technical skills, we teach medical skills, we teach health skills, we teach security skills. There are several things that are very different about Peace Corps today from the '60s. One of them is the importance that is placed on safety. Of course, when I was a Peace Corps Volunteer, there was no Internet, there were no cell phones. They sent you out and said, "Good luck!" Today, in Peace Corps, everyone has a cell phone. Everyone must report their whereabouts. Whenever they leave their village, they must report their whereabouts. I guess it reflects American culture, too. It's become a little bit of a nanny-state, and that's how I try to describe it to Volunteers. You know, "You may have lived independently for the four years you went to college. You may have lived independently for 40 years. You may have raised a family. But you're still going to call in when you leave your community, or you're going to be sent home." It really takes a while for people to get used to that level of monitoring, but it is done because we are obsessed about security, and when something bad happens to a Peace Corps Volunteer, we are blamed instantly. I mean, it is just self-preservation.

Q: Right.

The other aspect of Peace Corps I think has changed, which is a reflection of culture, is the emphasis on treating sexual assault. You can see today that it's a reflection of culture, but in Peace Corps it has had a couple of very, very tragic stories where Peace Corps Volunteers have been raped or murdered or assaulted, and the suggestion has been that Peace Corps as an institution was not sensitive enough to how it dealt with the sexual assault. To my great surprise, I spent more time learning how to deal with allegations of sexual assault, both by host-country nationals on Peace Corps Volunteers, but also by Peace Corps Volunteers on Peace Corps Volunteers, and providing support to people who became victims. It was all based on the a law, the Kate Puzey Volunteer Act of 2011 based upon the murder of a Peace Corps Volunteer in Benin, where it was learned a Peace Corps staff member's indiscretion led to the stalking and murder of a Peace Corps Volunteer. It was very tragic, very tragic.

When I was a Peace Corps Volunteer they just worried about whether you would get an STD, and of course they were rife. But now sexual assault, and also just teaching the principles of the word consent, was a bigger challenge than I ever would have dreamed and was a cause of quite a number of issues.

A few other things about the Philippines, I guess going back a little bit to safety. The Philippines is a hurricane-prone country, an earthquake-prone country, a volcano-prone

country, in addition to dengue fever and any number of tropical diseases that you can pick up. Managing the safety of Volunteers during hurricanes became an important part of the job. I was in the Philippines in 2013 when the Super Typhoon Haiyan occurred that swept through the southern Philippines. Fortunately, no Peace Corps Volunteers were lost. Unfortunately, a number of Peace Corps Volunteers were dead center in the hurricane. Our prevention approach of consolidating Volunteers in anticipation of extreme weather worked well, and thank goodness for cell phones and all of that. So we had a number of Volunteers who were together in a hotel, hunkering down, so fortunately they survived, but they also were exposed to the aftermath of one of the largest typhoons in history. It was traumatic for them. It was a very difficult time. Not for sissies. When people would say, "Oh, the Philippines, it's the posh corps. Life is great. You can go to McDonald's." Well, it's really not the posh corps when you are subject to events like that, and they were on a regular basis, even though they weren't as extreme as Typhoon Haiyan.

I served in the Philippines for three-and-a-half years and worked with about 250 Volunteers, annually coming in 75-100 Volunteers, and really enjoyed the experience, but at the end of three years I really felt I was ready for a change. Of course, I knew the Philippines. One of the things about being country director in the Philippines was, I think I had a bit of additional credibility with Volunteers because I still spoke the local language. I had worked there as a Volunteer. So when Volunteers would complain, "Oh, I can't do this" or "I can't do that," I had a lot of credibility to dispel. "You can do it. If I can do it, you can do it."

Q: Mmm hmm. [Laughs]

ROBERTSON: Knowing there was a five-year rule, I kind of wanted to spread my wings and try something else, and so I was given an opportunity on spec to go to Ukraine. Ukraine has at different times been the largest program in the world. I will never really understand why that is, but that's not important. However, at the time that I was offered to go to Ukraine, it was in 2013, shortly after the evacuation of all 240 Volunteers following the incursion of Russian forces into eastern Ukraine and the annexation of Crimea. No one knew what would happen. No one knew how far Russia was going to go in Ukraine. No one knew whether Russia would turn off the pipes and freeze Ukraine. It was a time of real uncertainty, and this was the Revolution of Dignity where the Ukrainian people ousted President Viktor Yanukovich, who, as you know, today's Paul Manafort trial is kind of taking us back to remember those days.

Anyway, there was no country director in Ukraine at the time. They were about to lose all of their American staff. Peace Corps, organizationally, was trying to decide whether to shut it down and let all of the local staff go, or whether there was a strong enough commitment to try to keep program open and resume when it was deemed appropriate. I took a risk. It's one of the country's I was very interested in because I had lived around the Black Sea. I liked the Black Sea from my years in the Caucasus and Romania, Bulgaria, so I was interested in it, and I was willing to take a risk.

I went in 2013, and we basically watched. We tried to kind of keep spirits up of local staff. The director at the time, Carrie Hessler-Radelet, was deeply committed to reopening the program as soon as possible because it had been an important program. The Government of Ukraine was extraordinarily positive and supportive of Peace Corps. We stuck it out for over a year without Peace Corps Volunteers, periodically trying to test the waters in Washington to get the headquarters to allow us to reopen. It was pretty frustrating, because the game we were all playing was, “What will Putin do?” As we know today, in 2018, nobody really knows what Putin is going to do. We have a much better idea of what he wants to do, but back then it was really very unclear. We became pretty comfortable with the fact the incursion was never going to go farther than the Donbass in Crimea. Ukraine’s a big country, so we were given provisional approval to reopen Peace Corps in the west of the country, which borders Poland, Hungary, and places like that. Because the lead-time in Peace Corps is so long, you don’t just open it on Monday and have Volunteers on Friday. It takes a good eight months from the time that you advertise the opening, the positions. You fill the positions. You organize it before people actually land in a place. It took until mid-2015 for the first Peace Corps Volunteers, almost a year-and-a-half, before the first group of regular Volunteers returned to Ukraine.

Q: When they returned, they were all placed west of the area of military conflict?

ROBERTSON: Oh, far, far west. Yeah. That was the deal that we cut with headquarters to be able to resume, even though I would say most people felt like it was overly conservative. But again, safety being one of the highest priorities of Peace Corps, we accepted it, even though it might have been more conservative than necessary. We went from zero Volunteers in 2014 to beginning the program in 2015. By the time 2017 came around, we were the largest program in the world again. We placed a huge number of Volunteers.

Again, the myth about “posh corps” I think affects.... You know, if you’re in Africa, people feel like, “Oh, I’m hauling my own water. I’m sleeping in a hut. This is the real Peace Corps.” But I must say, the hardships of living in a small, rural village in Ukraine in winter, it’s a major challenge for anyone. Loneliness. Just, basically, diets. It’s a tough place to be. Ukrainian is one of the hardest languages in the world. If you’re in a village, it’s unlikely that anybody else speaks English, so if you don’t develop strong language skills, it’s even lonelier.

But it’s a beautiful country, extraordinarily generous people and so, so appreciative of Americans and Peace Corps Volunteers coming to teach English. Teaching English is still one of the most important programs in Ukraine because as they try to move westward and change from a Russian medium to a Ukrainian-English medium, there is no other way of getting the skills out to the rural areas besides Peace Corps Volunteers. We had English teachers. We had youth programs, working with the youth organizations and schools. We also had community development Volunteers working with civil society. All very relevant in a post-revolutionary Ukraine, and I think a very successful program.

Q: And the Ukrainians were accepting of diverse Americans, because you know there's been a history of sort of you know the whole right-wing thing and rejection of outsiders?

ROBERTSON: It's true, especially when you think about rural Ukraine, or actually, to be perfectly honest, not rural Ukraine, because far western Ukraine, which is more economically developed than the east and more closely associated with Poland and all the other EU countries, really the fascist organizations were much more pronounced there. Again, what I would tell Volunteers, especially diversity Volunteers when they arrived was, "You will notice that Ukraine is very, very, very, very white. Anyone who is not white stands out." LGBT Volunteers have served in Ukraine since the beginning. I think Ukrainian culture still is a long way from accepting those aspects of diversity. But I believe, and I think experience proves this out, that as an American or as a foreigner you are given wider swath. People may not agree, but being a foreigner or being an American sort of compensates for whatever element of diversity you bring. Safety issues, while potentially present, can be managed, I think, by being responsible. And, you know, Volunteers had to decide when to come out. I think that's an interesting part about being gay in Peace Corps in the 2000s. I came out of a closet because I was in a closet. Young people today, they don't even know what a closet is.

Q: Right, right.

ROBERTSON: When you tell somebody that you may need to go back into the closet, it's a very foreign idea to them. Number one, they don't understand it, and number two, they certainly don't accept it. But when you explain that you are going into a rural community, you have to meet the community where they are, and there will come a time when it may be appropriate to share. But if you want to maximize the effectiveness of your service, you really kind of have to work with the community and not shock people, and then be defined by one aspect of you instead of the many other things that you have come to that community to contribute. For the most part, it worked. But it really is a very foreign concept for many young people today. They don't think about that. The U.S. has become, in many cases, so open and so accepting. Not always.

The five-year rule, I exceeded the five-year rule because there are exceptions, and I agreed to stay for a couple of extra years. I completed three-and-a-half years. I did what I came to do, which was I took a program where there were no Volunteers and no promise of Volunteers, and I supported the relaunch in a way that was responsive to U.S. foreign policy interests in Ukraine in today's world and grew it to a strong program—strong staff, strong Volunteers—and I feel that it makes a significant contribution to not only the U.S.-Ukraine bilateral relationship, but also has development impact in a way that I think we can all be very proud of.

Q: Great, great. Now, this takes you up to about 2012?

ROBERTSON: No, 2011-2014 in the Philippines and 2014-2018 in Ukraine.

Q: Ah, okay. Was it still possible in principle for you to get another, separate five-year country director contract?

ROBERTSON: No. The way the system works is, you're allowed five years. Five years in Peace Corps is two two-and-a-half year tours. For I think 15 percent of Peace Corps employees, you are allowed by statute to give a third tour. That would be seven-and-a-half years. Then for I think five percent, you can get a one-year extension. So the absolute maximum you can remain a direct-hire in Peace Corps is eight-and-a-half years. I completed seven years just because then I decided I was done, and I was ready to go back and try to retire again.

Q: Okay. Once again, the basic reason for this relatively short period is that people burn out, or the Peace Corps has simply learned over time that it's better to have this churn than people building up expertise and staying too long in a country, or too long in the service?

ROBERTSON: Really, the idea was to keep it fresh. Arguably, it keeps it fresh because you leave after five years and somebody comes in who has no preconceived notions. But organizationally, it's very disruptive. There's no question it's very disruptive, so there are workarounds. One of the workarounds is this idea that you can stay up to eight-and-a-half years in certain circumstances, and then, like any government agency, they have figured out sort of a parallel consultant approach where a personal services contractor can work in Peace Corps, but you don't have U.S. direct-hire authorities. There are quite a few people who are in Peace Corps who have been there a lot longer than eight years!

Q: [Laughs] Right!

ROBERTSON: But they're not fulfilling the role of a direct-hire employee. The other part of the culture of Peace Corps, which is especially interesting is, you may come back to Peace Corps after you've been away. So if you have been in for five years, you leave for five years, you can come back for five years. And then you leave for five years, then you come back. There are a significant number of people who do that. They do it because they love the job. It was an extraordinarily rewarding job. It was a very hard job. In many ways it was harder being a Peace Corps country director than being an USAID mission director because of the human nature of it, dealing with the highs and lows of individual behavior, and the vulnerability. When you send somebody out into a little village somewhere, you're just banking on the fact that they're going to be responsible, and there is no guarantee. I was so fortunate not to experience the death of a Volunteer, which is one of the things that every country director prays doesn't happen, or anything as serious as that. But I dealt with a number of human tragedies. Victims of rape and other kinds of things like that. Very, very emotionally demanding position.

Q: Now, as a director, how often would you get out to the Peace Corps sites?

ROBERTSON: I traveled probably a third of the time, I'll say. It's hard to do, but I certainly felt like my value as a country director was increased by understanding what

Volunteers were going through. Peace Corps had a very unusual system of evaluation. Every year they would do an all-Volunteer survey where they would ask Volunteers a whole variety of questions about the quality of their service, the quality of their support. The Volunteers evaluated the country director. Does the country director understand what you're going through? Is the country director accessible? It was the ultimate 360 degree evaluation but I think I did pretty well.

Q: In your travels in Ukraine, what were the major impressions you got? Because this is a rare opportunity to see at a very grassroots level what's going on with the country.

ROBERTSON: Well, the first thing you can say about your experience when you travel outside of Ukraine is Ukrainians hate their government. They genuinely believe that their government is corrupt beyond repair. Despite the enthusiasm of the Revolution of Dignity and the thousands of people that came out and protested, there's a huge pessimism about the future in Ukraine because of corruption. It features as probably the highest priority for U.S.-Ukraine relationships, helping to address issues of corruption.

Then, not surprisingly, many young people really believe that their only hope is to leave Ukraine, so there's—I don't know if you want to call it brain drain—but there is a lot of out-migration, legal and illegal, just to earn money and to gain international exposure. I think in any of the Eastern European countries, you find there is the mystery of what lies beyond the Iron Curtain. That still very much exists in Ukraine, where a lot of people don't have the wherewithal.

The Revolution of Dignity also created a huge economic shock. The devaluation of the currency, following the departure of Yanukovich, took the currency and devalued it by about a half, so people's livelihoods were very affected by that. It was tough. I mean it's tough. You will not find tougher people than Ukrainian women let me tell you. They grow the crops. They cook the food. They tend the animals. They teach the kids. They can pretty much do anything.

Q: Wow! Okay. Interesting. I really just wanted to get that impression because it's rare that someone gets to that level of the society on a regular basis from the embassy, even USAID mission directors.

ROBERTSON: Sure and the same in the Philippines. It is an important point to make about Peace Corps. There is a firewall between Peace Corps and intelligence agencies. Our embassy staff who have had their wrists severely slapped for trying to kind of bridge that gap.... In fact, I loved my RSOs (Regional Security Officers), and I was happy to have my RSOs talk to Peace Corps Volunteers, but it was a very carefully scripted discussion that took place. Not a complete firewall, but I was very, very careful to prevent the overlap of Peace Corps into the embassy. The embassy is like a lantern to the Peace Corps moth.

Q: [Laughs]

ROBERSON: It was very difficult to number one, keep Volunteers away from the embassy, but more than that was all of the embassy staff who were former volunteers and wanted to adopt a Peace Corps Volunteer to relive their experience. That separation was a really difficult part of the job, but one that I felt was very important for the integrity of the job. In the Philippines, to be accused of being a CIA (Central Intelligence Agency) agent, it's been going on since I was there. There's nothing new. In Ukraine, given what we know about Russian theatrics, it was a much more dangerous sport, so being sure that Peace Corps Volunteers were not giving any impression that they were associated with an embassy was especially important to maintaining the integrity of the program.

Q: Now, at the end of your tour, looking back, were there development goals that you can say that you saw accomplished by the Peace Corps while you were there?

ROBERTSON: Because the work of Peace Corps is at the community level, you have to be careful not to over represent accomplishments. The people-to-people accomplishments are extraordinary, not only in how local communities benefit from having an American living with them, and I think anybody would agree with this, what it does for America to have Americans come back having seen another culture, lived in another culture, in a way that is nothing like tourism. America gains so much from Peace Corps by what happens to Americans when they serve.

Scale is always difficult. In the Philippines at any given time, we had up to 200 Volunteers in a country of 100 million. In Ukraine, we had up to 350 Volunteers. Still, scale makes it very difficult I think to draw too many conclusions about overall impact. I believe that Peace Corps is focused in the sectors where it can make a difference. Teaching English in a country like Ukraine is exactly where they need to be. Working in coastal resource management in the Philippines is exactly where they need to be. Working with youth is the perfect role for Peace Corps in any country. To roll it up and say we have changed something at a national level, much more difficult to do. Lots of anecdotal examples of presidents of countries who have said they first experienced America by having a Peace Corps Volunteer as their English teacher. It was interesting listening to former President Benigno Aquino in the Philippines talk about having a Peace Corps Volunteer in his little town when he was growing up. It has legs as an institution in a way that I think is so important to what we need as a country.

Q: The other sort of 10,000 foot question is, looking back then on your period in USAID, with all of the changes that USAID went through, where do you see it going, or where should it go in the future?

ROBERTSON: USAID?

Q: Yeah.

ROBERTSON: Mmmm. I think as I touched on in one of the earlier sessions, USAID needs to be the portal through which all development assistance is implemented and managed. We need to stop the fracturing of U.S. government support to development.

I'm not talking about law enforcement. I'm not talking about military. I'm talking about development assistance, which is economic, democracy, health and environment. We need to consolidate the programs and empower USAID. Many people have said USAID needs to be a Cabinet position. I don't know that it needs to have Cabinet-level representation to do its job because it still, at the end of the day, I think works hand-in-glove with the State Department, so that relationship is fine. It needs to be staffed up dramatically larger than it is. When you think about the 250,000-300,000 people who have served as Peace Corps Volunteers, you ought to be able to find the technical talent to staff a greatly expanded USAID. USAID is very often criticized for having become a procurement agency as opposed to a development agency, and all we do is issue grants and contracts. That has some truth, and part of the reason it has some truth is because the technical side of USAID has been stripped over the years by budget concerns and by competition from other development platforms like MCC and PEPFAR.

Q: Yeah, that's what I was wondering. If you were making the case now for the kind of USAID you're looking for, either to Congress or even an average voter, what would you say?

ROBERTSON: Well, I think you can take the sort of small examples that you learn from Peace Corps about the impact you can have at the community level. With an expanded role of USAID, it's the soft power that Hillary Clinton talked about so effectively. Here we are, we're becoming a country of threats and menace instead of soft power. USAID is the best example of soft power, if it had a budget. It's a distinctly American face on a bilateral relationship. It's not the World Bank. It's not the IMF. It's not the World Health Organization. But it's a distinctly American face on partnership with a government for bettering the lives of its people. Then the obvious downstream effect of that, which is what I think we've seen in Latin America for so many years, to the extent that you strengthening the economies of countries in Central and South America, you reduce the desire and need for upward immigration. It's much easier to do that than pretending that you can build an impermeable fortress or barrier to keep people out.

Q: All right. Well, on the basis of what you've said up until now, I would say that we're at the end of the interview, unless there is another reflection you have that I have not thought of or thought to ask you.

ROBERTSON: It's been such an interesting experience to go through this. I thank you for the opportunity to share my story.

End of interview