

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

LELAND LAZARUS

*Interviewed by: Fran Leskovar
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INTERVIEW

Q: It's May 8, 2025. This is Fran Leskovar from ADST. Can you state your name for the record?

LAZARUS: My name is Leland Lazarus. That's L-A-Z-A-R-U-S.

Q: Great, can you tell me a little bit about yourself? Where did you grow up?

LAZARUS: I'm originally from New York, from Long Island, but both my parents are actually from Panama. And so, I've always had that desire to learn about the country of my heritage, try to see the world, and actually the Fulbright gave me that opportunity.

Q: Did you travel anywhere before your Fulbright experience, or was that your first international experience?

LAZARUS: Not really. There were always— maybe some family trips, or a college trip overseas, but the Fulbright was the very first time that I spent a long time, an extended period of time, to get to know another country's culture.

Q: How did you find out about Fulbright programs and experiences and why did you apply?

LAZARUS: Oh, when I was in college, there was an international affairs office, and the international affairs coordinator told me about a program called Fulbright. And I was so grateful that she did, because that opened up a window to the world.

Q: Great, can you tell me a little bit about your Fulbright experience? Where did you go, and what did it look like?

LAZARUS: I did my Fulbright in Panama. I was an English teaching assistant, and so I taught in the rural area and at the University of Panama, and it was an incredible personal experience and educational experience. Personally, because again, my family's from Panama, and so I had the opportunity to get in touch with the country of my heritage,

meet family members there. I remember distinctly while I was there, my grandma, and my parents, and my aunts and uncles came to visit, and we got to actually see the house where my grandma raised my mom and my aunts and uncles. So that's from the personal side. On the educational side, I learned so much more from my students than I could have ever taught them. One student in particular, his name is Julio Moreno, and he would wake up at three, four a.m. every single morning in order to get on a bus from the rural area, on a bumpy road into Panama City, in order to learn English, and I think that story really inspired me and stuck with me; and I actually just connected with him again last week, and he's become a principal of a school and so it's an incredible experience.

Q: Great. So can you tell me about— how did your Fulbright experience make America safer, stronger, and more prosperous?

LAZARUS: Well, my time in doing a Fulbright really, again, opened up a window to the world and inspired me to then serve my country as a Foreign Service officer with the State Department. So I ended up serving in China, serving in Latin America and the Caribbean, and so I was out there advocating for U.S. values, and I wouldn't have done that career if it had not been for Fulbright. I then served in the Department of Defense. So again, working on national security issues, trying to defend the United States and outcompete China, our biggest competitor, that would not have happened had I not had the Fulbright. So, I keep on saying that Fulbright is an incredible international exchange program, but it's also the United States' best and most cost-effective national security tool to outcompete China in this global struggle of hearts and minds.

Q: Right, and then what is your hope for a Fulbright's future?

LAZARUS: That it continues, that it continues to grow, that we are able to help to bring more Americans abroad, to help spread American values and the values of Western society, because we're in this global struggle of hearts and minds, and China's out there and it's playing to win. And I think the Fulbright program is a very key program that we have to help to outcompete and win strategic competition in the 21st century.

Q: Great, anything else you'd add?

LAZARUS: Yeah, if I can just tell one more story about Fulbright. There's another student that I had, his name was Adrian Sanchez. And Adrian, he learned English, he went to the United States to Murray, Kentucky— a really small town, Murray, Kentucky. He fell in love with an American girl, and now, fast forward to today, he's got his green card, he's a small business owner, and he's got a kid who's an American citizen. I mean, if that is not American soft power at its best, I don't know what it is.

Q: Great. Thanks.

LAZARUS: Thank you.

End of interview