

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

STEPHEN REILLY

*Interviewed by: Fran Leskovar
Initial interview date: May 8, 2025
Copyright 2025 ADST & Fulbright Association*

INTERVIEW

Q: Today is May 8, 2025. This is Fran Leskovar from ADST. Please state your name for the record and spell out your name.

REILLY: Stephen Reilly. S-T-E-P-H-E-N R-E-I-L-L-Y.

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

REILLY: I originally grew up in South Jersey but moved to Annapolis, Maryland around the age of ten, which is where I've spent most of my life.

Q: When did you apply for a Fulbright program? Why did you apply?

REILLY: I applied in '97 for the '98-'99 student program. Prior to that I had applied, and was a finalist, for a British Marshall Scholarship. I also got into the early rounds of Rhodes. There's no second place as it turns out for any of these scholarships. Unfortunately, I didn't win those, so I just kept feeling my way around because I had been very fortunate to travel a little bit when I was in my teens. I got the bug, and I wanted to stay overseas.

I didn't come from a silver spoon family and had to find a way to pay my own way. I started looking into international scholarships as a means of continuing my travels and education abroad. I excelled academically in undergrad and realized I was capable of finding something unique, so I found Fulbright and applied for it. I had moved to Hong Kong when I graduated undergrad to teach English as a second language and decided to travel around Asia. I found out that I won the Fulbright in an internet cafe in Bangkok of all places. It was a pretty awesome opportunity for someone like me. Nobody from where I came from ever had anything like it. I'm very grateful.

Q: Can you describe your Fulbright experience? Where did you go? How did it go?

REILLY: Yes, I went to Uppsala, Sweden. I got a master's degree in peace and conflict studies from Uppsala University. It is the oldest university in Scandinavia, founded in

1477. It was amazing. I spent a year there, and it was very intense. It was basically a two year master's program that was condensed into one year. It was a very unique program, and it was the first year that they had run it.

There were twenty students, so it was very competitive to get into. Ten Swedes and ten foreigners. And they weren't traditional students, including myself, and who became my wife of twenty-five years, Emily, who was from Sydney, Australia. I met her in the program, so Fulbright means a lot more to me than it does to some others. There's a lot of those stories out there about Fulbright and mine is certainly one of them. I ended up with three kids and an amazing life as a result of it.

The other students in the class, the non-Swedes, included the wife of the Peruvian ambassador, a human rights lawyer from Uganda, an economist from Tallinn, Estonia, and a professor of economics from Jakarta. It was the most amazing experience. I was super fortunate to get into the program and to spend a year in Sweden.

Q: What would you do in your free time during the program? Did you volunteer? Did you do community engagement?

REILLY: It was a very intensive academic curriculum because they really did condense two years into one, wherein I wrote two theses in a single year. We had to defend them. We had class every single day. For a master's program, it was more like an undergraduate program just in terms of the number of hours that were committed.

We had so much fun, though. It was such a great town. There were 250,000 people, around 50,000 were somehow connected to the university, and half of them were international students. So, you're talking about 200 different countries worth of undergraduate and graduate students living in a very small town in a place that loves to have fun and party a little bit. We worked hard, and we played hard. It was great.

Then there was a lot of travel as well. On the weekends, I would go to Copenhagen, Amsterdam, and sometimes Paris. We would take the trains and the ferries, and occasionally fly. The program itself, Fulbright, also brought us to some amazing events. We went to the Nobel Prize ceremonies. We went to NATO [North Atlantic Treaty Organization] headquarters. We went to the EU [European Union] commission. We met with some of the top diplomats of our day. This was the height of the Kosovo crisis. We were sitting in a classroom filled with these highly intelligent people from all over the world, talking about the democratization of the third world, human rights in Africa, and the myriad of global issues of the day. Clinton was also in office, so it was a really interesting time to be the only American in the room.

Q: What general lessons did you learn from Fulbright? How did Fulbright change you as a person?

REILLY: That experience was an undeniable inflection point in my life. A shift from where I had come from and what I could be. I had not only survived but thrived in an

academic environment that I initially did not feel like I belonged when I first got there. By the end of the course, I was one of the leaders of the class and felt confident in my position among my peers. I learned at the speed of light in that program about everything from the Security Council of the UN to what's driving the Kosovo crisis to what food tastes like in Estonia to everything in between. It was awesome. It totally changed the way I wanted to be and wanted to live. It changed everything from that point forward.

Q: How did your Fulbright experience make America safer, stronger, and more prosperous?

REILLY: Safer. I came from a place where nobody does things like this. Among my best friends growing up, there were seventeen of us, and only two of us went to college. For me to go to Hong Kong, go on a Fulbright, and do the things that I did was so foreign from what we had all known growing up. When I came back, at first it was difficult to reassimilate. I had all these experiences, and I just wanted to tell everybody about them. Most could not relate and I was disillusioned by the experience. I was able, over the course of many years, to help some understand how valuable it is to travel, not just to Sweden, but all of my travels, and just how different cultures, languages, and foods are amazing. In doing so, I was able to influence enough of them in my small world, which I think makes America safer. It definitely makes it stronger.

More prosperous. I took that experience, and went on to start my own business. I started an international education company in 2001. I had that for eighteen years, and sent more than 12,000 university students abroad for international internships. It is like a study abroad program, but instead of going into a classroom environment, they went into a full-time work experience, which propelled them out of the classroom and into their careers. It was kind of our version of a mini Fulbright. We had hundreds of employees along the way. Most were very idealistic, recent graduates of liberal arts programs across the U.S. They were helping other students find their way to do those things. I certainly paid my fair share of taxes, while we built a very prosperous business that also was a servant and a good ambassador for the rest of the world for Americans. All those kids would go, and they would come back and do awesome things.

These days I own a painting and contracting company. It's a complete departure from what I was doing before. I employ sixty people from twelve different countries. Our guys are awesome. My love for the business and the team is probably more attributed to my global travels in Fulbright than anything else.

Q: Anything else you have?

REILLY: Fulbright as a program is so undervalued in the world because of its disparate network of graduates and the way the program was originally set up. As a bilateral program, the U.S. has direct relationships with, at different times, 160 different countries through Fulbright alliances. I think that makes it difficult to tell the real story of what Fulbright has done for the world. But if you look at the body of work, you have more than sixty Nobel Prize winners, over eighty, ninety Pulitzers, CEOs that run some of the

biggest companies in the world, and heads of state.

If you were to just look at the top 500 down, and try to figure out the influence, the web that they've touched, what goodwill they've brought to the world, and how much stronger, safer, and prosperous it's made the U.S., there's nothing like it. The fact that it's under threat right now is beyond sad. It's scary because the program works. I think we just need to do what we're doing here, just tell a better story.

Q: Great. Thank you very much.

REILLY: You got it.

Q: This is the end of the interview. Thank you.

End of interview