

ST. TIMOTHY'S SCHOOL

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An Experiment in International Living:
LUCY TAMLYN '73

LUCY TAMLYN '73'S CURRENT POST AS U.S. AMBASSADOR TO BENIN IS THE LATEST STOP IN A PERIPATETIC LIFE FULL OF ADVENTURE AND PURPOSE.

An EXPERIMENT in INTERNATIONAL LIVING

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Left: Lucy with her children, Ben and Filipa, in Petra, Jordan, for family R&R during Lucy's tour in Iraq (Mar. 2009).

Right: Lucy answers a few questions from the press, while attending the annual Fête du Gaani in Nikki, Benin (Dec. 2015).

Years before she would get her first assignment with the U.S. Foreign Service, years before her appointments to the U.S. embassies in Vienna, Paris and Mozambique, years before she would help with the post-war construction of Iraq, years before being appointed U.S. Ambassador to the West African nation of Benin, and years before the idea of becoming a career diplomat had even taken up residence in her mind, Lucy Tamlyn '73 found herself in a foreign country feeling compelled to defend the United States.





Left: At St. Timothy's, with Lindsay Granshaw Northover (ca. 1972, photo: Lucy Tamlyn). Middle: With President Chissano and Ambassador Chris Dell (at the time the Chargé d'Affaires) (1991, photo: U.S. Embassy, Maputo). Right: Near Zakouma National Park, Chad (May 2007).



It was 1971, Lucy was a 15-year-old sophomore at St. Timothy's School, and she had traveled to southern France where she was doing a six-week homestay with a French family, a trip she arranged through a Vermont organization that puts together international experiences for adventurous teenagers. The family had a daughter, who Lucy says was nice enough, but also a teenage son, who was passionately anti-American. There was plenty of anti-American sentiment to go around in 1971, much of it coming from America itself. Opposition to the U.S.'s role in the Vietnam War had reached a peak – a poll found that 60 percent of Americans opposed the war, and protest marches drew hundreds of thousands of participants. News of war atrocities was still fresh in people's minds. But the French teen's virulent hatred of America caught Lucy off guard.

"I was a real Francophile," she explained during a conversation via Skype from her house in Cotonou, Benin. "I thought we were going to have long conversations about François Truffaut. But we didn't. I told him I liked France. I agreed that France was the pinnacle of art and cuisine and culture. I said, 'Quit banging on the United States. Can't we talk about France?'"

But the French teenager wouldn't relent, and eventually Lucy had had about all she could take. "I said enough is enough," she recalls. "It was time to take up the cudgel. I got to the point where I said I'm just going to have to stand up for my own country."

She calls it a "transformative event," a moment when this New York child who loved all things French realized that that was only part of the equation. "There were other aspects I needed to reconcile myself with," Lucy says, "including that I was an American."

Lucy Tamlyn grew up in Manhattan, the daughter of a cardiologist father and a homemaker mother who once ran for a seat in the U.S. Congress. They met when she was a student at Barnard College and he was in medical school at Columbia University. Lucy was a bookish child

who grew up in a household where people paid attention to global events and politics. As a girl she would fight with her three brothers over who would get to read the front section of *The New York Times*.

Lucy's mother was from Maryland, and she and Lucy's aunt attended boarding school at Hannah More Academy, the girls school in Reisterstown, Maryland, that would later merge with St. Timothy's. Another aunt was the St. Timothy's librarian.

Lucy liked the idea of going to St. Timothy's, which would take her out of downtown Manhattan and into rural Baltimore County, a place she found to be "astorishingly beautiful." She remembers being enamored of history teacher Christa Hollman's exotic German accent, and inspired by music teacher Shirley Matthews, who undid everything Lucy thought she knew about playing the piano and then rebuilt it by having her spend three months learning a single Bach prelude.

Music wasn't the only thing Miss Matthews thought was important to teach her students. In the spring of Lucy's freshman year, her piano teacher showed up at school one day wearing a black armband. "We said, 'What's that for?'" Lucy recalls. "She said, 'They're shooting students at Kent State.'" On the campus of Kent State University, members of the Ohio National Guard had opened fire on students protesting U.S. involvement in Southeast Asia, killing four and wounding nine others. The armband, and her teacher's choice to wear it, had an impact. "It was important to have teachers who made that effort," Lucy says.

"Lucy was different from many of the others," says her senior-year roommate, Lindsay Northover '73, who is now a member of the House of Lords in the British Parliament. "She was highly intelligent and profoundly thoughtful. She struck me as infinitely more mature than the rest of us."

At the end of her senior year at St. Timothy's, Lucy signed up for the School's Latin America Seminar, a program that culminated with two months of traveling in Panama and Colombia. The students met with Peace

Corps volunteers living in austere conditions while they rebuilt communities and improved health care. They met with a doctor who had given up her career in the U.S. to work with limited resources in an orthopedic hospital, helping polio patients and others with physical deformities. They met a man who studied birds and another studying Colombian kitchen pottery. A young man researching monkeys in the Amazon left a particularly strong impression. "I can't tell you how fascinating he was," Lucy says. "I had never seen anything like that."

One memorable part of the trip was a visit to a 24,000-acre cattle ranch in Colombia run by former Peace Corps volunteer Sandy Fisher and his wife Rossie, a 1962 St. Timothy's graduate. The two had met at St. Timothy's when Sandy stopped by and introduced himself during a Brownie-Spider basketball game. Five and a half years later they were married and working 400 head of beef cattle on the ranch southeast of Bogotá.

"It was one thing after another," Lucy says of her two months in Latin America. "We met smart people who were doing a lot of interesting things and who were fun to be with. It was a fascinating, eye-opening trip."

That next fall Lucy enrolled at Bryn Mawr College, but was unhappy there, and later transferred to St. John's College in Annapolis. Known for its Great Books curriculum, St. John's was a perfect school for a student who loved reading and discussing original works by authors and thinkers like Plato and Aristotle and Proust. And the travel bug had bit hard – she toured Europe, staying at youth hostels, and visited an aunt on a small island off the coast of Yugoslavia.

After St. John's, Lucy went to graduate school in international affairs at Columbia University. Inspired by her St. Timothy's trip, she decided to specialize in Latin America. On a summer internship she worked in an embassy in Costa Rica, where she got her first taste of what a career in government service might look like.

She found that first taste to be a little bland. Looked at through youthful and naive eyes, the Foreign Service officers appeared insular and isolated. They lived in a bubble.

"I'm sure I was way too harsh on them," Lucy says. "Part of my learning was that there's a balance. As a diplomat, yes, you want to know the local culture. But you have a job to do representing the U.S. That's different from someone who just goes off to live in another country."

Her first job after graduate school was with a Japanese government trade office. After that came her first appointment with the U.S. Foreign Service, in Colombia, where she worked as a vice consul conducting visa interviews.

"I thought she was so interesting and so smart," says her longtime friend and Foreign Service colleague Ginny Phillips, who met Lucy in Colombia at a time when they were both just getting started in their careers. Phillips remembers visiting Lucy at her apartment and finding her pinning a beetle to a board. "I said, 'What the heck are you doing?'" She said, 'I collect beetles.' I thought that was the most interesting thing I'd ever seen a woman do. She had such varied interests outside of her job."

After Colombia, Lucy returned to Washington, D.C., for a job with the Bureau of International Organization Affairs, working as a desk officer for U.N. agencies in Rome. The work was in multilateral diplomacy, which involved sometimes a hundred or more countries. She discovered that she loved it. "It was a turning point in my career," she says. "I enjoyed seeing how the U.S. positions were seen by other countries. I enjoyed seeing how we formed alliances with other nations. It was a very different dynamic. At a relatively junior time in my career, I felt empowered and able to be a real diplomat."

In the years that followed, she sought out multilateral appointments, and had success securing them. There was work with the U.S. Mission to U.N. agencies in Rome and Vienna, two tours in New York with the U.S. Mission to the U.N., a position in Paris with the Organization of Economic Cooperation and Development, and a post in D.C. working on negotiations related to GATT, the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade, which would evolve into the World Trade Organization. She has served in Mozambique, Chad, Brazil and Portugal. She has been head of a provincial reconstruction team in Erbil, Iraq,

and Director of the Office of the Special Envoy for Sudan and South Sudan.

While managing their careers, Lucy and her husband, Jorge Serpa, a native of Portugal and a now-retired energy industry executive (and photographer for this article), were raising two children. Being the child of a diplomat has its challenges. “Growing up was kind of fun, kind of hard,” says their daughter, Filipa, who has lived in 11 different places on four continents in her 21 years. She is now a senior at the University of Rhode Island. Her older brother, Ben, is a sous chef in Lisbon.

One of Filipa’s most vivid memories is of a time when she was in sixth grade, living in N’Djamena, Chad, making pancakes in the kitchen of the Embassy housing compound while a coup attempt was unfolding outside. Tank guns boomed in the distance. Navy Seals were on the roof. “It was an exciting time of my life,” she says. Filipa and other embassy family members were safely evacuated later that day.

Filipa says there are two types of children of diplomats – those who want to establish their roots in one place, and those who like to keep moving. She puts herself

in the latter category. “Staying in one place makes me antsy,” she says.

The job of a U.S. diplomat is to represent the interests and policies of the United States overseas. As job descriptions go, that’s a broad one. A Benjamin Franklin quote outlines some of the traits a good diplomat should possess; namely, “sleepless tact, unmovable calmness, and a patience that no folly, no provocation, no blunders may shake.”

There have been some provocations along the way, most notably in Chad, with its recurring coup attempts, and unmovable calmness can be a powerful asset when you’re trying to get dozens of countries with competing interests moving in the same direction.

Lucy thinks a diplomat’s job is misunderstood, that a lot of people think it just means going to parties and social events. Though she acknowledges that diplomats do in fact go to a lot of parties and social events – they are a way to get to know the people you’re working with and among, and that’s a big part of the job. There’s



Clockwise from top left:

Nomad kids near Lake Chad, Chad (Jun. 2007).

Lucy with her husband, Jorge, at the U.S. Marine Corps Birthday Ball (Nov. 2015, photo: U.S. Embassy, Cotonou).

Nikki, Benin (Dec. 2015).

Musée de la Fondation Zinsou in Ouidah, Benin (Sep. 2016).

Overlooking the Green and Blue Lakes of the Sete Cidades Lagoon in São Miguel, Azores (Jul. 2016).

At the annual Fête du Gaani in Nikki, Lucy’s audience with His Imperial Highness Sabi Naina III (inside the Case Ronde) (Dec. 2015).

Near Zouarke, in northern Chad (Dec. 2006).



Left: By the Gonçalo Velho lighthouse, near Maia in Santa Maria, Azores (Jul. 2016). Right: In Savalou, Benin, during the annual “blessing of the yam harvest” fest (Aug. 2016).



training for rookie diplomats – “to learn what the acronyms mean,” she jokes – but the best way to learn to be a diplomat, is to watch others who are good at it.

One diplomat Lucy studied and admired was George Kennan, U.S. Ambassador to the Soviet Union during the Truman administration. Kennan is best known as the author of the *Long Telegram*, an 8,000-word missive he sent to the State Department that played a central role in shaping American Cold War policies. Lucy admires Kennan for his diaries and memoirs, in which she found him to be not just a thoughtful diplomat, but also a romantic dreamer.

Someone she sees as a role model is former Secretary of State Madeleine Albright. Lucy worked with her when Albright was U.S. Ambassador to the U.N., and admired her “gumption and enthusiasm for her work.” She recalls the day Albright gathered her staff together at offices in New York City, bouncing with excitement as she gave them the news that she’d been asked to become Secretary of State, which would make her the first woman to hold that post. “It was a great moment,” Lucy says, “and we all shared in that.”

One project that was a good test of Lucy’s own diplomatic skills came in the early 2000s, when she was First Secretary to the U.S. Mission to the U.N. in Rome and worked on something called the International Treaty on Plant Genetic Resources. It was a complicated project. On one side were countries that sought to retain rights to the plant resources within their borders and to the wealth that might flow from those resources. On the other was an international community that saw benefit in making the plant genetic material more broadly available for purposes of research and breeding. Farmers, especially those in developing countries, wanted to be compensated for the use of seeds they had cultivated for years, and feared losing rights to large multinational seed companies. The project pitted common allies – the U.S. and Europe, for example, which had different philosophies about patent rights – against one another.

Negotiations began on a Monday, with a Friday dead-

line. Days into the process, much remained unresolved. The man chairing the negotiations, Fernando Gerbasi, an experienced and respected Venezuelan diplomat, grew frustrated by the lack of progress. Lucy recalls that at one point he said, “You know what? This is not going anywhere. I’m leaving, and I’m going to go play golf.”

“It was a brilliant negotiating move,” Lucy says. “It sent a strong signal to everybody to get their act together and come up with an agreement.” Which they did, completing work on a treaty that created a multilateral system that put 64 crops – which together made up 80 percent of the world’s plant food – into an accessible genetic resource pool and made it available to all countries that signed the treaty. It also protected farmers’ rights, and ensured that they would share in the benefits.

The process was intellectually invigorating for Lucy, and she came away impressed by the Venezuelan diplomat, who displayed so many qualities that are crucial in her profession. “He was tough when he needed to be tough,” she says. “He was patient when he needed to be patient. He was neutral and able to bring all sides together. He let the subject experts do their work, but he kept his eye on the political objectives. For us as diplomats, it’s all about finding the common good.”

In 2014, Lucy was working in the State Department’s Bureau of African Affairs when one day she got a phone call from a department official asking her if she would like to be considered to be nominated to become Ambassador to Benin. Well, yes, she would, thank you very much. After background checks and security investigations came an official nomination from President Obama, then Senate confirmation and then, in October 2015, Lucy was sworn in as U.S. Ambassador to Benin, a crowning achievement in a 35-year Foreign Service career.

Benin is a skinny, tree-shaped country on the West African coast with a land area about equal to Ohio, wedged between Nigeria to the east and Togo to the west. Historically it’s known chiefly for two things – as

the birthplace of voodoo and as the center of the trans-Atlantic slave trade that lasted from the 17th through 19th centuries. The stretch of African coastline along which Benin sits was once known as the Slave Coast.

“Benin” has been the country’s name only since 1975. Before that it was the Kingdom of Dahomey, then (under French control) French Dahomey and then in 1958, when it gained autonomy from the French, the Republic of Dahomey. The country endured more than a decade of political turmoil after gaining independence, before a Marxist-Leninist government took control in 1975. Marxist rule ended in 1990, and over the past two and a half decades Benin has established itself as a respected, functioning democracy, with free and fair elections and, with the March 2016 election of a new president, three peaceful transfers of power. The country ranks better than average on press freedom and has a solid record on human rights. Right now Benin’s story is a success story on a continent that could use more of them.

As Ambassador Lucy is charged with coordinating all of the U.S. government activities in Benin, advancing U.S. commercial interests and ensuring the safety of American citizens living there. She observes that when most Americans consider the U.S.’s relationship with African nations, they think about it primarily in terms of humanitarian aid the U.S. is supplying: food, for example, or peacekeeping support, or help battling HIV infection. And such support is not unimportant. It’s in the interest of the U.S. to help improve the quality of life and stability of nations like Benin. To understand why, one need only look as far as Benin’s next-door neighbor, Nigeria, where the Islamist militant group Boko Haram has grown to become one of the world’s deadliest terrorist organizations. In Benin, the U.S. is investing in health care and in efforts to advance the interests of women and to fight the spread of terrorism.

But another part of the U.S.’s role is to work with Benin on an international stage. To illustrate, Lucy cites Benin’s participation in U.N. peacekeeping missions in other African nations and elsewhere. “That’s an example

of Benin reaching outside its borders to be a force for peace and stability in the world,” she says. “If a group of like-minded countries can work together in a coordinated way, you’re stronger.”

Lucy expects to stay in her position as Ambassador to Benin for about two more years. Hers is a presidential appointment that could change under President Trump, but as a career ambassador, she thinks the odds are good she’ll be able to stay. In two years she’ll be 62, and mandatory retirement for career Foreign Service officials is 65. What her post-Benin future holds in store isn’t entirely clear at this point, but regardless, the end of a Foreign Service career that has touched four decades is in sight.

Lucy confesses that what drew her to a career in Foreign Service all those years ago wasn’t that she was a policy wonk or had a deep passion for public service so much as wanderlust, the romantic idea of a life spent traveling and living overseas. Growing up she had become enamored of the world of writers and travelogues, and it was a life she wanted for herself.

“If you had asked me as a teenager what I wanted to do, I would have said I wanted to be Lawrence Durrell and live overseas,” Lucy says, referring to the 20th century British novelist and travel writer known for his books about or set in places like Greece and Egypt and southern France. “The lure of the exotic was very powerful for me.”

The name of the organization that four decades ago arranged 15-year-old Lucy Tamlyn’s trip to southern France – the trip where she found herself defending her country against the anti-American onslaught of a relentless teenage French boy – was called the Experiment in International Living. That name might be a good description of Lucy’s life as well. It’s been an experiment whose hypothesis was to see if adventure and purpose could be melded in meaningful and fulfilling ways, and whose outcome has been to shape the woman Lucy is today.

“Journeys, like artists, are born and not made,” Lawrence Durrell wrote. “They flower spontaneously out of the demands of our natures – and the best of them lead us not only outwards in space, but inwards as well.” ♦