

Taking Environmental Management to Paris

Political internship using language skills

In the spring of 2005, I learned that the State Department was recruiting interns from academic fields not traditionally associated with diplomacy for summer posts abroad. A civil engineer and urban planning Master's student, I was about as far as you could get from the fields of history and political science, but I had kept up my French and had recently completed a year of Italian during evening courses at a local university. I applied and was selected for a position in the political section of the U.S. Embassy to the Holy See in Rome. On my first morning of work, I attended an all-staff meeting during which the Chargé d'affaires (the person in charge when the ambassador's post is vacant) passed around a final proof of an invitation to the embassy's largest social event of the year, the Fourth of July celebration. He asked everyone for any final comments before the invitation was sent to the printers. When it was my turn, I pointed out an error in the French spelling of the Chargé's title. Although it was a minor observation, I think it demonstrated to my superiors that I was careful and detail-oriented. By the end of the internship I was attending political events covering a wide variety of topics (Human trafficking in Europe, negotiations between rival ethnic groups from Darfour, for example) and documenting the proceedings in official embassy cables, a task not typically entrusted to interns.

City of Chicago international relations

When I returned from Rome, I was hired by the City of Chicago Department of Environment (CDOE). In my capacity as Coordinator of Research and Development for the CDOE, I spent a good deal of time on projects concerning residential and industrial recycling and the green building industry. Mayor Daley, as you may know, repeatedly stated that his objective was to make Chicago the 'greenest' city in the world. Naturally, the CDOE often receives request for interviews from cities in and out of the US concerning the City's environmental initiatives. On one occasion, my Commissioner was being interviewed by a reporter from the Canadian Broadcasting Company. Given the large number of francophone listeners in the reporter's targeted audience, he inquired about the possibility of another employee from the department providing an account of the Commissioner's interview in French. My Deputy Commissioner suggested that I step in for the interview. I did my best to rephrase the major points covered by my Commissioner, and employed the technique that Madame Jo Ellen Sandburg taught for getting around words you simply don't know – she called it 'circumnavigation' – and I did quite a bit of it that day. From then on, I was asked to attend other meetings with visiting international groups.

Collaboration with the City of Paris

In the fall of 2007, the City of Chicago hosted a visiting delegation from the City of Paris. Representatives from Paris were interested in learning about Chicago's street cleaning methods, waste management, and accounting practices. I was asked to attend a meeting during which we discussed our recycling initiatives and our strategy for achieving 'zero waste' generation. After the meeting, I was invited to a dinner honoring the delegation hosted by the Paris Committee of Chicago Sister Cities International (which I had recently joined). I was seated next to one of the delegates and spent a pleasant evening chatting in and out of French, recounting my impressions of France during my travels, my study of the language and my hopes to one day work abroad. At the end of the meal, my dining companion turned to me and asked if I was interested in coming to work for the City of Paris. I was startled but responded in the affirmative immediately. She asked me to send a cover letter and résumé to her attention. Fortunately, I had recently earned a certificate in Business French from the *Chambre de Commerce et de l'Industrie de Paris* through coursework at the local *Alliance Française*, so I had some idea of preparing these documents. Two weeks later, I sent the requested documents and waited anxiously for a response. A few months later I received an email requesting a telephone interview, and a few months after that I received a formal offer of employment. I went to my Commissioner and explained the details of the proposed work, and the unique opportunity for international collaboration. She gave me her blessings and wished me luck.

I've been in Paris since last July, working for the *Direction des Espaces Verts et de l'Environnement*. I have a 2-year appointment, during which time I am responsible for implementing an environmental management system (conforming to ISO 14001) in the *Bois de Vincennes*. I have grown professionally by communicating in a foreign language, managing a project covering several hundred acres and involving over 300 employees. I've been encouraged by the warm welcome I have received and the patience and understanding displayed by my colleagues.

Why do I value the study of French? I suppose it is because the study of this language has always been a passion of mine and it has now allowed me to achieve a number of personal and professional goals. I've been exposed to people and places I may never have encountered without it, and I believe it has truly provided me with a 'world vision', something for which I think we all need to strive as the world becomes more interdependent. For this reason, I am indebted to a small number of foreign language educators that instilled in me a great curiosity for the French language and culture.

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