

A CAREER BUILT FOR TWO



Edith Bingham

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THE “BICYCLE BUILT FOR TWO” CELEBRATED IN SONG IS A GOOD IMAGE NOT ONLY FOR TANDEM COUPLES BUT FOR JUST ABOUT ANY COOPERATIVE RELATIONSHIP AROUND.

BY TATIANA C. GFOELLER AND MICHAEL GFOELLER

People often ask us: How does it feel, being two diplomats married to each other (since 1984, a month before entering the same A-100 class) and sharing full-time a home, an office and even a classroom for 18 years? After all, not only have most of our postings been joint assignments, but last year, we team-taught (tandem-taught) a graduate seminar at Georgetown University’s School of Foreign Service, which we developed from shared personal experiences in pursuing U.S. national interests in Central Asia and the Caucasus. And we’ve co-written a book on the same subject, *United by the Caspian*, which we had researched together, in addition to co-authoring numerous articles.

When we entered the same Foreign Service class in 1984 after both getting master’s degrees from Georgetown University in 1983 (Tatiana got her B.S. there, too), we were told that we had joined the ranks of tandem couples in the

State Department. Though at first the term surprised us, we grew to understand that it was an apt analogy. It comes from the “bicycle built for two” celebrated in song, which harnesses the energy of two individuals toward a common goal: getting as efficiently and rapidly as possible to the destination. One cyclist steers while the other brings powerful rear power; when one’s energy flags, the other compensates. We believe this is a good image not just for married diplomats, professors or authors, but just about any cooperative relationship around.

Of course, “tandemness” has plenty of challenges as well as rewards. We will never forget driving home one fall evening in 1984, after an A-100 class session on families in the Foreign Service. A senior statesman had warned us bluntly: “After a couple of tours at most, you can forget about ever serving together. The system just can’t bend over backwards for you.” We were dismayed. Had we both really made the wrong career choice? In the old days, only women had to choose between career and family. Would both of us have to now? But we refused to accept this limited view of our prospects and fortunately, we discovered that “the system” is indeed humane and flexible. As our story proves, it will go a long way in accommodating both families and the needs of the Service. We believe this is something the Foreign Service can be justly proud of.

There was plenty of other advice, too, both helpful and not. For example, early in our careers, one senior officer told us that while being part of a tandem was just fine, “It’s really time you decided which one of your careers will dominate and which one of you will be the more supportive spouse. It prevents a lot of heartache and misunderstandings later on if you just agree to it now, before either of you has invested too much.” We have no doubt that this advice was kindly meant and could be useful in a number

of cases. But it was not so for us. We are both in this to be the best we can be. So we learned that just as each individual is different, so is each tandem couple, and each has to work out joint career patterns best for it.

Still, after 18 years of leading this challenging and multifaceted life (and remaining just as enthusiastic about it as back in 1984), we believe we too have acquired some wisdom which we could share. Maybe we would not go so far as to call it advice — just “The Gfoellers’ Four Hints for Tandem Couples.”

1. Volunteer for Tough Assignments

We do not mean by this that members of tandem couples should never aspire to be assigned to non-differential posts. (See Hint #2.) As we’ve mentioned, the personnel system tries very hard to give members of tandems a variety of opportunities, which are good for both their careers and their families. But it is obvious that if two officers bid on the same hard-to-staff post, they will have a better chance of getting it than if both their bids are 1 out of 40.

We followed this policy during our first three assignments. To prepare for Warsaw, we both learned Polish at the 4+/4+ level in six months. Those were the grim days of Gen. Wojciech Jaruzelski’s rule, when Solidarity was underground and hope of a free Poland some day appeared terribly optimistic, if not outright naïve. But it was an honor to mingle with the likes of Lech Walesa and we never regretted our choice.

Riyadh posed a different sort of challenge. While the material aspects of life there were superb, it took some effort to adjust to a culture with considerably different standards from those of the West, particularly regarding the public role of women and religion. Tatiana tackled this dichotomy head on by researching the creative ways in which Saudi women do pursue careers and actively contribute to their society, while Michael used his 4/4 Arabic to get to know the more influential religious leaders in the country. So this sometimes underbid post turned out to be another excellent opportunity for us.

So did Moscow in 1988, which was then actively recruiting tandem couples out of security considerations. While working conditions were difficult (the old embassy offices have now been replaced with superb new facilities) and Americans were still perceived by many Soviets as “the enemy,” nothing could ever compare with the exhilaration of being present at the emergence of 15 free nations out of the redoubtable USSR. Subsequent evalu-

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ations of him aside, Boris Yeltsin was a genuinely popular hero when we had the privilege of working with him, and only such a tough assignment could have given us the chance.

2. Bid on Posts Where There Are Several U.S. Missions

Brussels has been called a “tandem mecca,” and justly so. With three large U.S. missions (the U.S. Embassy to Belgium, the U.S. Mission to the European Union and the U.S. Mission to NATO), as well as a fourth assignment opportunity (U.S. Foreign Service slots on the NATO International Staff), it is probably unbeatable in this category. We lucked out with Tatiana joining NATO’s International Staff, where she served as the Secretary General’s adviser on post-Soviet affairs, and Michael doing fascinating economic work at USEU.

But look around for other opportunities, too, particularly for tandems where one member is not from State’s Foreign Service. Paris, Geneva, Rome, Vienna and Nairobi are among the posts you should investigate for such possibilities.

3. Be Flexible, Creative and Accommodating

With all the best will in the world, both “the system’s” and your own, you still cannot expect everything to always turn out “just so.” When it does not, it is as much up to you as to the good men and women of Human Resources to come up with solutions that work for everybody.

This happened to us after the end of our tour in the USSR. After three hardship posts in a row, we were really keen on a post in Western Europe. In addition, we wanted our toddler, Emmanuel, to have the chance to get to know his French family on Tatiana’s side. So we tried very hard to get Brussels. But while NATO was a cinch, there were simply no openings at that time in either USEC (later changed to USEU) or the bilateral embassy. So Michael worked out a bridge assignment for himself in a hard-to-fill assignment at the department for a year with the understanding that he would join Tatiana in Brussels later.

Being (even temporarily) a single parent makes life in a foreign country even more challenging than it would otherwise be, particularly when (as in Brussels) you have to use a living quarters allowance to find your own apartment and negotiate your own lease, enroll a child in a foreign kindergarten, organize after-school child care, figure

out transportation routes, etc., all on your own. Of course, it’s also no fun living alone back home knowing that you are missing something new of your child’s development every day. But there are such things as telephones and airplanes (and e-mail, now) and time passes quickly when you have set yourself a reasonable timetable and goal. And when we were reunited together as a family a year later in Brussels, it had all been worth it.

4. Be Prepared to Take Separate Assignments at Some Point

Still, chances are that no matter how flexible you both are, at some point in your careers, your choice will be to either work in Washington or take separate assignments abroad.

This may be less necessary for those tandem couples where one partner is appreciably more senior than the other. Thanks to the personnel system’s commendable flexibility, rating and reviewing patterns can often be arranged to obviate the nepotism problem, allowing couples to serve together even in medium-sized posts. However, another danger lurks in that case: that the “junior” partner will have to take jobs that do not conflict with those of the senior partner, whether or not they do anything for his or her career. At the time, such trade-offs may seem reasonable, precisely because the more junior officer “still has his or her career ahead.” However, care should be taken that this not become a persistent pattern, lest the junior partner never get the chance to develop a career comparable to his or her partner’s.

Because we had both joined the Service in the same class and had been promoted at a similar rate, that unhappy choice confronted us relatively early on. By the time we were ready to bid on serious management jobs such as deputy chief of mission slots, we realized that: a) we were too junior to obtain a DCM position in a non-differential post such as Brussels, where there are several missions and b) the smaller embassies simply do not have two such senior-level jobs.

Making the best of the situation, we each bid on DCM positions in two relatively small embassies, Ashgabat (for Tatiana) and Chisinau (for Michael). Having enjoyed those management challenges, we followed up those assignments with a DCMship in Yerevan for Michael and a posting as deputy principal officer (as well as acting consul general for half a year) in St. Petersburg for Tatiana.

Choosing separate assignments for your professional

F O C U S

development is not easy and may not be for everyone, especially if children are involved. We were encouraged to do so by a particular set of circumstances. Just as we were preparing to return to the U.S. after a second joint tour in Moscow, some senior-level officers suggested we help forge a new corps of post-Soviet experts by going out as DCMs to some of the new countries of the Former Soviet Union.

These embassies had been open for only a couple of years at most, set up by a group of pioneering FSOs who should always be proud of themselves for the miracles they performed in often unimaginably difficult circumstances. But there obviously remained plenty of administrative challenges to be addressed, not least of which was the need to raise morale. In addition, the host countries themselves had only recently inherited rump diplomatic corps from the USSR and in some cases were only finding out through a process of trial and error how to run their own independent ministries of foreign affairs.

When put in those terms, not only of professional development but indispensable service to the depart-

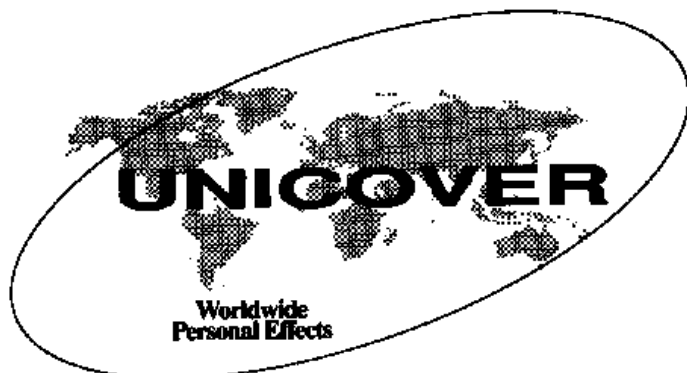
ment, we felt the old pledge of "worldwide availability" had to take pride of place. So instead of going home to Washington, we ended up with four straight years of separate assignments.

Family Considerations

People often zero in on probably the most important aspect of this: what impact did it have on our child? Not a toddler anymore, Emmanuel made up his own mind about things and was a full-fledged partner in this enterprise. We explained to him from the get-go our reasons for opting for this scenario and impressed on him both the sacrifices and the opportunities he would be sharing with us. His reaction was both spontaneous and sustained. He would miss one of his parents for sure, but he did not want to miss out on this common adventure and common service. By consulting him and empowering him to share his reactions with us every step of the way, we not only made him feel that he was an equal member of our team but — paradoxically — we made this challenge much easier on ourselves. As Tatiana and Emmanuel were boarding the

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Frankfurt-to-Ashgabat flight, she remembers feeling that she was not going there with an additional child-rearing responsibility, but with her best friend, who would see her through thick and thin. And that is exactly how it happened.

Again, telephones and airplanes played an enormous role in the next four years of our lives. There were fiascos, to be sure. For example, once we decided to meet for a mini-vacation in Istanbul (the easiest — albeit fairly round-about — halfway point between Ashgabat and Chisinau) for Michael's birthday. Because of the press of business in both embassies, we each only had a weekend to spare.

On taking off from Chisinau, Michael's plane ran into trouble somewhere over Bulgaria. Denied landing privileges, the plane had to return to Chisinau. By the time Michael finally made it to Istanbul, we had lost a precious day and Michael had a raging fever. But Tatiana still got to visit the Topkapi Palace (alone), and Michael rallied for an excursion to the famous Istanbul Bazaar. And we still had the birthday dinner on schedule.

Mid-course adjustments constantly had to be made in other areas, too. Both of us have always been involved in our child's rearing on an equal basis, and the last thing either of us ever wanted to be was an "absentee parent." So to mitigate the pain of parental separation, we decided that Emmanuel would spend his first year in Ashgabat with Tatiana, then move to Chisinau with Michael. But when the time came for the switch, we realized the flaws in our plan. While both were hardship posts, elementary amenities (such as heat during the harsh winters) were much more problematic in Chisinau, whereas Ashgabat benefitted from a splendid compound (the first built in the former Soviet Union after the collapse of the USSR). Emmanuel had also developed a cadre of friends, was doing well in school, and was thoroughly enjoying the unique opportunities of living in Turkmenistan, such as amateur archeological expeditions and camping in the desert. Wrenching him away from a lifestyle he was enjoying seemed pointlessly cruel. While all Foreign Service children go through this challenge, we realized it was unfair to put him through this twice as often as we ourselves would be switching posts.

So Emmanuel ended up spending two uninterrupted years with Tatiana, then two years straight with Michael in Yerevan. Luckily, we found that his two posts had a lot of continuity. The American school was administered by the same outfit in both countries and his favorite pastimes,

archeology and outdoor activities, were equally available.

Tag-Teaching

Still, after these tours, all three of us were more than ready to go home and live together in the U.S. In doing this, we fulfilled a dream we had cherished ever since joining the Foreign Service: participating in the Virginia and Dean Rusk Fellowship at Georgetown University's Institute for the Study of Diplomacy, instituted by former Secretary of State Dean Rusk in his wife's and his own name. Tandems are particularly encouraged to apply for this year-long teaching and research fellowship, though non-tandems are often also selected.

In the classroom, we put to good use our 18 years of Foreign Service experience, as well as our experiences as a married couple playing to each other's strengths. For example, Tatiana's special area of expertise is Central Asia, while Michael's comparative advantage lies in the Caucasus. Yet both of us have had lengthy stints in Russia, other post-communist countries, and the Middle East. So whenever the subject matter was Central Asia, Tatiana would research and write the lesson and lead the class. Michael would do the same for the Caucasus. But we would each go carefully over the other's material, make suggestions, and not be shy about jumping in with comments and comparisons with other countries during the question and answer period of each class.

Thus we ensured that our students got the feeling of a real seminar, where constructive debate is not just tolerated, but actively encouraged. By the end of the course, we were able to relax a bit, even as our students were going full throttle. We took the same tandem approach to grading. Both of us went over each student's paper and overall performance separately, then we thrashed out a consensus evaluation. We followed the same approach when tandem-writing our book. Initially, we concentrated on our individual strengths, then we turned our attention to improving the overall product and melding it into a seamless whole.

In sum, having a tandem career is great, despite all the challenges, and maybe because of them. As our students were preparing their evaluations of us as teachers, one of them approached us to say this: "I just want you to know that I learned about much more than just Central Asia and the Caucasus in your course. I learned about how a genuine partnership works." We could wish for no better endorsement of our approach. ■