

THE FOREIGN SERVICE SPOUSE NETWORK: A GLOBAL RESOURCE

The first words we heard were “You won’t want to enroll your oldest child into the embassy-supported school here — the first graders aren’t learning to read.” “Don’t let GSO put you and your three little children into that apartment building with the open staircases and water only three days a week.” “Even if you can type, don’t ever mention it when you’re looking for an embassy job.”

The year was 1983, at the start of our first tour, and I was welcomed and initiated with unexpected warmth and candor into the Foreign Service spouse network. Drawing on the excellent advice of an experienced, savvy group of spouses, we chose a private school and found more suitable housing; I even found a part-time job in my field. That first experience was my vivid introduction to the important role spouses have traditionally taken on — that of accurately assessing realities, sharing information with one another, and working together for the benefit of the entire FS community at post.

In those distant, pre-electronic message times, however, the spouse network’s strength and effectiveness were accessible only at individual posts, and the system relied on personal contacts and everyday interactions. Post reports were typically years out of date and aimed as much to avoid host country sensibilities as to provide useful information. Unless you knew someone who had served there, solid, practical, current information about other posts was not available until you got there and could take direct advantage of the spouse network. Nor could you

even call the post unless you paid personally for the call. And even then, would the personnel officer really be willing to discuss the realities of life at post candidly?

While the thrill of the unknown is part of the FS lifestyle, a little knowledge gives a measure of comfort that statistics, generalities and vague assurances don’t. After all, who knows the outside community, the job possibilities, the cultural considerations surrounding local employment better than the spouses on the scene? Who else can describe the local schools’ weaknesses and strengths, as well as the local transportation system and the local markets, as authoritatively? And who can advise new families what they need to bring with them to post and what they should be prepared to order?

We have fewer non-working spouses at posts today, but their traditional role as information-sources is as important as ever. Fortunately, the digital age has provided new opportunities for spouses to expand and solidify their network into a global forum.

By consolidating forces and channeling energies into online projects, the traditional spouse networks at each post are now linking together to become a powerful cyberspace network, exchanging information and providing support for all interested in overseas life, whether they are in Washington or overseas, at small, medium or large posts, all around the world.

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BY PAT OLSEN

Extending a Lifeline

Foreign Service Lifelines was the first electronic venture of FS spouses who recognized the potential for extending the information-rich spouse network into a unified, powerful resource and making it available worldwide. Created by Melissa Hess, an FS spouse, in 1998,

the Web site was initially privately financed, expanding through continued collaboration from spouses near and far. *Lifelines* now has a permanent home on the Web site of the Associates of the American Foreign Service Worldwide (AAFSW), www.aafsw.org. The articles and resources, contributed by spouses with been-there-done-that knowledge of overseas living, address the practical side of life in the Foreign Service that has traditionally been at the heart of the spouse network agenda. Managing editor Melissa Hess and webmaster Kelly Midura, another FS spouse, propel from local to worldwide distribution the sharing of information and the posing of questions, as spouses contribute articles on their own experiences and opinions. Through the site's archives, resources remain available on the wide variety of topics that active Foreign Service personnel and families address every month on *Lifelines*.

An online discussion group, *Livelines*, is a vital part of the site. Subscription is free, and because it is a moderated group restricted to family members and employees of the Foreign Service, the online discussions are direct and frank, with all participants free to address the highs and lows of FS life. This private, unofficial forum is proving to be a particularly valuable resource for new hires and their families, who are full of questions and anxious to tap the resources of knowledgeable people. Information management specialists have started their own online forum as a result of initial discussions on *Livelines*. (You can subscribe to the discussion group by clicking on the *Livelines* icon on AAFSW's home page.)

Meanwhile, the *Spouses' Underground Newsletter*, started by FS spouses Francesca Kelly and Fritz Galt as a small print publication in 1991, has also reinvented itself and expanded into cyberspace under the new name

Pat Olsen is currently in Chisinau, where her husband Norm is DCM. Previous postings with their three children have included Geneva, Tel Aviv, Majuro, Oslo, Kingston and Washington. Her article "Homeschooling FS Kids? It Worked for Us" appeared in the December 2000 Journal. She also recently completed a revision of The Essential Guide to Moldova, published by the International Women's Club of Moldova.

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Tales from a Small Planet (www.talesmag.com), providing an online resource for overseas living not just for the FS, but for the world community of expatriates. Now assisted by a team of volunteer managers, Editor-in-Chief Kelly's compilation includes the accurately named "Real Post Reports": up-to-date, first-hand descriptions of what it's like to live in many cities around the world, written by those who have lived there.

Editor Victoria Hess (no relation to Melissa) offers a writer's template to encourage and simplify submissions about each post. The "webzine" portion of *Tales from a Small Planet* offers essays, fiction, poetry and humor about surviving overseas life, a cheerful forum both for those who like to read and those who like to write. The site's discussion group, *abroadview*, follows the ups and downs of expats who share their personal experience and perspectives. (You can sign up from the talesmag.com home page.)

Electronic Collaboration

The global electronic spouse network continues to generate new resources, too. In March, Intercultural Press published *The Expert Expatriate: Your Guide to Successful Relocation Abroad*, with a foreword by Mrs. Colin Powell. The two authors, Melissa Hess and Patricia Linderman, both FS spouses, developed the book proposal, exchanged chapter drafts back and forth between their posts in Germany and Ukraine, submitted the manuscript, and received the publisher's acceptance entirely by e-mail. In fact, the writers first met each other face-to-face only at a pre-publication meeting at their publisher's office.

Drawing from the authors' wealth of experience living overseas in the FS, *The Expert Expatriate* is a persuasive example of the possibilities opening up for FS spouses to share their knowledge and expertise through both electronic and print communication. Authors Hess and Linderman were so struck by the ease and power of electronic collaboration that they have decided to join forces as editors on a second book, *Realities of Foreign Service Life*, to be published by AAFSW later this year. This compilation of essays, written from the individual perspective of Foreign Service spouses located in posts around the globe (who submitted their material to Hess and

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Linderman electronically), will address such topics as spouse employment, culture shock, foreign-born spouses, kids, pets and transitions. It is worth noting that these issues are of particular interest to newcomers to the Foreign Service, as well as those considering a Foreign Service career.

Societal changes are increasing the need for such conduits to unprecedented levels. If spouses ever were completely content to flit from hither to yon with their own options severely limited, they are no longer. Now many couples are desperately looking for ways to keep two careers thriving, despite the transitory and overseas lifestyle required by an FS career. Similarly, single employees want and expect access to such information just as much as families and couples.

Fortunately, the lore of the spouse network is now

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more accessible than we could have imagined even a decade ago, when most of us did not have e-mail. It's already hard to remember, even for FS veterans, the posting when we didn't have a telephone at home, and the days when we couldn't check the bank balance until the diplomatic snail mail crept ashore. And for the new generation of FS spouses and employees, global

communication is already a fact of life. Secretary of State Powell's mandate that every State desktop have Internet access will only encourage the continuing growth of an Internet network accessible to everyone in the Foreign Service.

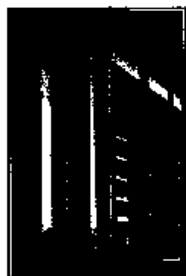
Precisely because global networking allows the sharing of questions, insights, ideas and empathy, FS spouses will continue to find innovative ways to carry on the irreplaceable tradition of the Foreign Service spouse network. ■

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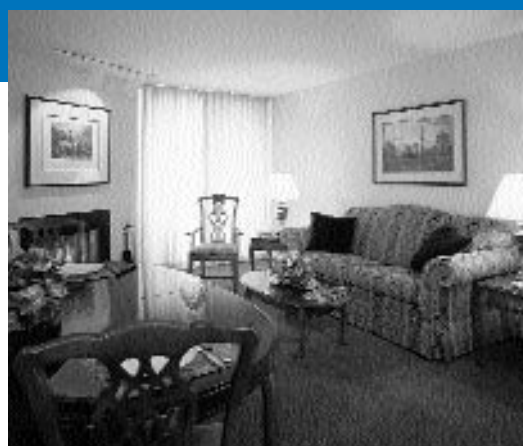
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