

Public Affairs Officer

SHARON HUDSON-DEAN

EMBASSY TBILISI, GEORGIA

The public affairs section manages the embassy's informational and cultural programs, which support and explain official U.S. policies and actions to host country government officials, media, and citizens. A large embassy divides these responsibilities between an information officer and a cultural affairs officer, but at a smaller embassy, all public diplomacy duties fall solely to the public affairs officer (PAO).

Sharon Hudson-Dean, 34, is the PAO in Tbilisi, Georgia, a small former Soviet republic nestled in the Caucasus.

As Embassy Tbilisi's representative to the media, Sharon is the only officer at post besides the ambassador who is authorized to speak directly to the press. "The U.S. government must speak clearly and with one voice on issues of key national interest," she says. By working closely with all mission sections and the ambassador, Sharon keeps on top of



Sharon introduces speakers at a Georgian Fire Department ceremony in commemoration of September 11.

fast-breaking issues as well as long-term strategic American interests in Georgia and the surrounding countries. When she speaks to the media, she tries to make sure she can unequivocally explain U.S. policy on any given issue.

When wearing her cultural affairs hat, Sharon manages cultural programs that play a critical role in educating foreign citizens about the United States. While there will always be foreigners who disagree with U.S. policy and actions, Sharon explains that the U.S. government believes that they should understand why Americans think and act the way they do, rather than make false assumptions about who and what America is. Therefore, the PAO sends foreign citizens to the U.S., for both short and more extended visits, to study and meet with American professional colleagues. "When these people return to their home countries, they have a new and deeper insight into the United States, which helps them to better interpret information they receive at home about America — one of our primary goals," she says.

The public affairs section also sponsors visits for American speakers, like academics and writers, and cultural groups, such as performing artists of all varieties, to familiarize Georgian citizens with American culture. For example, in one of her proudest achievements at post, Sharon brought retired managers of the U.S. National Symphony Orchestra and the Kennedy Center to Tbilisi to teach seminars on fundraising and arts management to Georgian gallery owners and cultural institution managers.

Sharon begins her day by greeting her staff of 10 in the embassy's public affairs section, located in the ballroom of the Orbeliani Palace, the former home of an aristocratic Georgian family. She then meets with the ambassador and the deputy chief of mission to discuss international and local events about which she may receive media inquiries. She also meets with Georgian contacts who present her with proposals for and reports on cultural exchange projects.



“When exchange visitors return to their home countries, they have a new and deeper insight into the United States.”

Sharon’s office frequently drafts and sends out press releases on items ranging from the start of a new exchange program to the visit of a high-level official from the United States. If she anticipates that a press release will generate numerous inquiries, she will schedule a press conference or one-on-one interview with the ambassador or herself. She will then direct her staff to draft and send to Washington a transcript of the interview and a summary of how the Georgian press covered the media event. A typical day also includes a visit to a partner institution, such as a university or media outlet, either to give a presentation or to make arrangements for a visit by the ambassador.

For a PAO, the day seldom ends when the sun sets. Several times a week, Sharon attends evening events such as receptions or concerts. Three or four times a month she hosts a dinner or reception at her home or at a local restaurant to honor an American visitor or celebrate the start or conclusion of one of her programs.

According to Sharon, a public affairs officer must like talking to people — giving media interviews and lectures and conducting meetings. The best PAOs, she emphasizes, have a keen ability to understand their audiences, what their predispositions are, how best to engage them. While calling PAO duties “the fun work of an embassy,” Sharon stresses that a PAO must also be good at more mundane tasks like managing programs, budgets, and personnel. Sharon believes that taking care of her people and investing training in them pay off in high morale and a true team spirit. “Above all,” says Sharon, “attention to detail is key for a public affairs officer.” One area where even the smallest detail is important is protocol. “A U.S. ambassador is the personal representative of the president, so when I make arrangements for a visit or speech by the ambassador, every aspect of the event must run smoothly and reflect positively on the government and people of the United States.”



Sharon during an interview with Reuters TV.

Sharon received her bachelor’s degree from Georgetown University’s School of Foreign Service. She completed one year of graduate study at the Monterey Institute of International Studies before joining the United States Information Agency in 1993. Her previous assignments have included Canberra and Sydney, Australia; and Moscow, Russia. Her hometown is Allentown, Pennsylvania. Sharon is part of a tandem couple. Her husband, Nick Dean, is the political/economic section chief at Embassy Tbilisi. They have a 3-year-old son.