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### Westgate

I have always lived in a safe place. In Vermont, I enjoyed a nearly Rockwellian childhood. We never locked our house, knew our neighbors, had routines, close family and shared a common culture with the community. Life was simple and I never worried about my safety. A world of violence, robberies and terrorist attacks happened on TV, in books, and articles. Then I moved to Nairobi. My most memorable Foreign Service experience was the loss of that innocence.

My mom had recently joined the Foreign Service and I had to change schools in my senior year and relocate to Africa. My senior plans, which had included concerts, friends, extracurricular activities and a carefully selected class schedule, were abandoned. Instead, I was moving to a place nicknamed “Nairobbery” and sent to a class called “Safety Overseas,” where I was taught what to do if I was kidnapped, held at gun-point or evacuated. While the class was interesting, I thought it was fairly useless information.

I arrived in Nairobi and found my life was quickly similar to Vermont. I made friends, ran track, and had good classes. Nairobi didn’t seem that different from other places, but on September 23rd, that all changed.

Al Shabaab attacked the Westgate Mall, a place where I went to see movies and sipped coffee with my friends. A girl from my school was killed and one of my track teammates sustained a gunshot wound. The siege dragged on for days and we feared there would be more attacks. The community was devastated by the horrific losses and the fear was paralyzing.

This event changed me almost instantly. Immediately, I began to draw on my “Security Overseas” I had dismissed just 2 months earlier. When I walk into a restaurant, I assess the best escape routes and try to sit with a view to the door. I time my outings so I’m not in crowded places during peak times. I observe my surroundings closely, to pick up on anomalies quickly and assess if they are dangerous. I am a far cry from the teen I would have been, had we stayed in Vermont.

The Westgate Mall terrorist attack was terrible, but it is also my most memorable Foreign Service experience in positive ways. After resenting my mother for moving me in my senior year, I witnessed first-hand how important her work is, as she and her colleagues spent hours in

hospitals and morgues to make things easier for Americans in devastating situations. I became inspired by the Kenyans' response to the attack, as they descended on hospitals to give blood for the injured, just a few miles from the ongoing siege. People had the choice to hunker down in fear or to rally and meet the challenge. Witnessing the response to Westgate has shaped who I am.