

THE LONG ROAD TO THE FOREIGN SERVICE

BY MASHA UDENSIVA-BRENNER

EMILY NELSON TEICKENSON ('10) IN PROFILE

Emily Teickenson (SIPA '10) first started contemplating a career in the Foreign Service while serving as a Peace Corps volunteer in Snihurivka, Ukraine, a small town three hours east of Odessa. She arrived in October 2005, not long after the Orange Revolution, and was surprised to see how greatly the events, which had taken place in Kyiv, more than thirteen hours away by train, had resonated with the town's 5,000 residents.

Her host father, who once worked on freight ships, had joined the protests and liked to spend evenings over drinks and photos from Maidan, discussing his hopes for the country's future. "Even in this little village, people wanted to see politics in Ukraine develop," says Teickenson.

It was an exciting time, and Teickenson, who had been interested in Eastern European culture and politics since she started studying Russian as a freshman at Smith College in 1999, saw many opportunities for Snihurivka's development. After visiting various organizations in the village, as instructed during her Peace Corps orientation, she decided her skills would be most valuable to Snihurivka's City Council. The local river, where people continued to fish and swim, was polluted

with toxic chemicals, and Teickenson would help organize the cleanup effort. A major part of her work was to research potential grants and write grant applications to fund the project. Eventually, the town was able to afford a small cleanup. It did not produce striking results, but the experience led her to solve another problem: the town's lack of a functioning trash collection system, which left residents dumping household trash in a ravine. Teickenson realized that some of the grants she had come across while trying to clean up the river could help pay for trash bins and garbage trucks. Snihurivka received funding to cover the trash bins—the local government pitched in to pay for the trucks—and spent the next year setting up the system. The remaining





Teickenson on her birthday at T.G.I. Friday's in Kyiv (November 26, 2006)

grant money went toward a marketing and education campaign informing the residents how to use it. The program was a hit—it continued to function for years after Teickenson's departure. "That's pretty remarkable for a grant-based Peace Corps project," she says.

In addition to environmental work, Teickenson took advantage of the pro-European atmosphere inspired by the Orange Revolution, and focused on social outreach. She went to various schools, universities, and summer camps to teach seminars on LGBT rights and "other really Western ideas." Throughout these endeavors, she met diplomats working on political development projects, such as HIV prevention. These encounters sparked her interest in the Foreign Service.

"Wow," she thought, "someone will pay you a decent salary to live in Ukraine and work on really cool projects?"

In late 2007, after she returned to the United States, Teickenson applied to graduate programs in international affairs. She had already put down a deposit for Yale, when Columbia's School of International and Public Affairs (SIPA) informed her that the Harriman Institute had offered her two fellowships. Enticed by the money and the Harriman Institute's certificate program, she accepted. "My experience at SIPA was really a Harriman experience," she says. Her first year, she spent the summer interning at the U.S. embassy in Kyiv, which made her realize how much she enjoyed consular work. Not only was she hearing interesting stories from people applying for visas, green cards, and adoptions, but also her daily efforts produced tangible results. "Even if you can't issue someone a visa, you can still explain the law to them and how they might qualify in the future," she says.

Teickenson began the rigorous three-part application process for the Foreign Service in October 2009, during her final year at SIPA. In 2013, after her second attempt at the oral portion, she passed. It was a great feat, but it still did not guarantee her a job. Teickenson, like all candidates, was put on a ranked waiting list to join an orientation class. The list is

malleable—new people pass every day, and they can move past you on the list with a higher score. As a result, some people may never be called. But, the good news is you can start the application process over again and raise your scores at any point. "It's a long and arduous process," says Teickenson, "but anyone who has the patience and commitment can do it."

Fortunately, Teickenson was called quickly. Her first assignment was in São Paulo, known for having the highest-volume non-immigrant visa section in the world. Initially, she was apprehensive about the workload; she and her wife were due to have their first baby just two months after arrival. But when she started, in March 2014, after a seven-month intensive course in Portuguese, she found a well-managed operation and friendly, interesting colleagues. Aside from conducting visa interviews with Brazilians, who are generally very qualified visa applicants, she also spent eight months working at the visa fraud prevention unit.

In March, after Carnival 2016, she starts her second tour, in Kyiv. She is excited to return. "It's kind of like going home," she says. "I've lived in Ukraine longer than I've lived anywhere else in my adult life." □

"Dnieper River in Kyiv" by Dmitry Mottl, licensed under CC-BY-SA 3.0

