Briana Saunders knows what many people think of economics: It’s about supply and demand and the stuff of monthly indicators, lately delivered with frowns. Economics is charts and graphs; it’s macro and micro. It’s all about numbers, dry as dust.

Turns out it’s about flesh and blood, and the occasional bowl of terrific borscht.

“There is a gigantic human element involved, and ultimately the human element is what economics is trying to explain,” says Saunders, who was accepted into the U.S. Foreign Service in 2003.

“I find it really interesting to see time and again how every person on earth is touched by economics, whether they live in a tribal village in Africa, an urban slum in India, or New York City,” she says. “Economics is powerful and influential, explaining why governments and societies make the decisions they do. A look at economics really does show this, and, in the bigger picture, also shows how interconnected and codependent we all are.”

At thirty-one, Saunders has served as a U.S. diplomat for two years each in Mumbai, India, and Moscow, Russia. She’s currently at the State Department in Washington, D.C., working as an international financial economist analyzing economic and financial developments in Latin America. Her particular focus is the effect of the global economic crisis on other countries and how this affects U.S. policy approaches for the future.

Baptism by Fire

After St. Olaf, Saunders got her master’s degree in international economic policy from American University in Washington, D.C., and worked as an intern at the State Department. She still remembers the warning phrase her new boss used on the first day of her internship: baptism by fire. Except she didn’t regard it as a warning.

“They were right on, and it was exhilarating,” she says, adding that she’s never lost that feeling. “One thing that separates the Foreign Service in particular from the private sector is that this job is not just a job, it’s a lifestyle. Diplomats are entrusted to serve as model representatives of the United States both on and off duty. So in a way, when you are overseas, your workday never ends; you are expected to uphold an exemplary image of the United States at all times and to make sure U.S. interests are represented and protected.”

During her internship, she was encouraged to take the Foreign Service exam, and she was among only 3 percent who passed.
Now back in Washington, D.C., she’s planning a February wedding in Minnesota, while remodeling a just-purchased home. If there is a moment of free time, the couple enjoys packing their Rottweiler into the car for day-trips to Virginia’s vineyards and taking Latin dance lessons.

It’s a habit of varying pursuits that’s rooted in childhood. Saunders grew up in south Minneapolis and Edina. She played the violin, did some school theater, and was on the downhill ski team.

Despite seeing firsthand many of the world’s challenges, she sounds like an optimist at heart. “Absolutely,” she says, “but I’m also a realist. Depending on the job, you do see a lot, and coming from Minnesota, you realize that most people around the world are worse off than we are. But I also have met so many people who, while they may not be happy in their situation, are still happy people.”

If Saunders wasn’t optimistic, it would be difficult to do her job. “Optimism is what propels you to change the world.”

Her days vary depending on whether she’s stateside or overseas, but most are a tightly scheduled series of meetings and briefings, monitoring developments, and writing reports.

Her resume is a daunting recitation of accomplishments: Acquired hard-to-obtain economic information by establishing and cultivating 150+ new high-level contacts…. Authored fifty in-depth analytical reports and 350+ briefs on aforementioned topics that provided U.S. policy makers an understanding of Russia’s future development and convinced them to support key reforms…. And so on and so on.

As to where she might be in ten years, Saunders says she honestly doesn’t know.

“This career is like a ‘choose your own adventure’ book: Every choice you make leads you down a very different path. If you string a few of those choices together, you can end up someplace you never expected. But my dream job is being the sole officer at an American Presence Post in France.”

The post is tied to the U.S. Embassy in Paris but works more at the local level to pursue U.S. business interests in the country. “I would love to get back to the country that started me on this path of international adventure.”

It’s slightly ironic, then, that she chose St. Olaf because she wanted to stay in the Midwest. “The big universities were just too big and impersonal for me,” she says. She also learned that the liberal arts classes she imagined as a “numbers” person having to suffer through “turned out to be real eye-openers that really helped me become well-rounded.”

While at St. Olaf, Saunders studied in Martinique for a January Interim, Paris for another, and then Montpellier, France, for a semester. “Those experiences showed me how much there was out in the world that I didn’t know. At St. Olaf, the more I learned, the more I realized there was to learn.”

Now, the more she learns about economics, “the more I understand why the world is the way it is. Economics combines math, sociology, psychology, politics, and even geography to try to explain how we arrived at where we are today and what we can expect for the future.”

Saunders will remain in Washington for the next two years and next summer will assume a new position running the rigorous orientation program for incoming Foreign Service officers. “I’ll be ushering for the next two years and next summer we can expect for the future.”

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