

Briana Saunders '00

portrait



Creative Diplomacy

By Kim Ode

PHOTOGRAPHED BY JAY WESTCOTT | POLARIS

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.

Becoming a diplomat was not the career she'd envisioned as a St. Olaf freshman.

"Like a lot of students, my ideas of a major changed during my first few years at St. Olaf," she says. "I checked the pre-med box before the college year even began, not really knowing what I wanted to pursue. Then my first year, while I was becoming frustrated with learning about the 'cell' in a biology class, I was being strangely drawn to calculus."

She changed her major to math, only to experience a different sort of frustration in a class that tried to mathematically describe things that don't exist. "I'm quite a practical person, so this bothered me," she says. "I still loved math, but wanted to find a way to apply it more practically. After experimenting with an economics course, I knew I had found my major."

Before graduation, Saunders took advantage of three study abroad programs that enabled her to become fluent in French. (She also describes herself as "proficient" in Russian and can also speak "basic" Spanish.)

She strongly advocates learning languages beyond English. For one, it's convenient: "It certainly makes finding a restroom, giving directions to a taxi, or doing business in a foreign country a lot easier. But more importantly, learning a language is also learning about another culture, opening your mind to another way of thinking, and seeing the world. Reading foreign literature, studying the culture and politics — it all broadens your horizons and makes you aware of a world outside your own. That's what studying French at St. Olaf did for me, and was really the precursor to finding my way into the Foreign Service," she says. "There is an excitement I feel from seeing the world through a different perspective, an excitement [that] I continually find with every language and in every country in which I have lived."

However exciting her career, she gained it only through an understandably challenging process.

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.

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She recalls the exam as rigorous and random, with questions on every topic imaginable: from the names of various African rivers to the different articles of the Constitution to famous poets and musicians, as well as questions about math and economics.

“I think what makes it difficult for most is that the exam is really looking for how well-rounded a person is,” Saunders says. “And someone who may be an expert in one area, say history, may not meet the standard in another area, say math and economics. I think that my liberal arts education at St. Olaf definitely served me well in this regard.”

After completing the Foreign Service orientation course in 2003, Saunders was posted to Mumbai, where, as vice consul at the American Consulate General, she investigated and oversaw visa fraud investigations in India. She also managed the foreign sea crewman visa program.

She uses two words to describe Mumbai: sensory overload. It was her first assignment overseas. “India is an extremely exotic country, in both the best and worst senses. It was a tough two years for me. What surprised me the most was the sheer density of Mumbai, witnessing the millions living in extreme poverty,” she says. “My greatest enjoyment was making friends with Indians from all walks of life. They really are one of the friendliest cultures in the world. Along with the delectable food and fabulous shopping, it is the Indians themselves whom I miss the most.”

Her next two-year assignment was at the U.S. Embassy in Moscow, where, as an economic officer, she analyzed the impact of Russia’s economic growth on the population by assessing socioeconomic development across the country. It was a completely different experience.

“It was exotic as well, but more in a historical and political sense. It was fascinating to live in a country with such an interesting past which really explains current Russian society. What surprised me the most was that in public, no one smiles. It’s just a different cultural norm. Definitely a change from Minnesota!”

She does miss the Russians she worked with at the embassy, the wonderful borscht soup, and the great parties, “but my real highlight was meeting my fiancé, who was a U.S. Marine also working at the embassy.”

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.”

“With the global economic crisis affecting almost every aspect of geopolitical life, it’s a fascinating time to be an economist in the Foreign Service, but it’s also humbling.”

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 in the next generation,” she says.

With the global economic crisis affecting almost every aspect of geopolitical life, it’s a fascinating time to be an economist in the Foreign Service, but it is also humbling.

“One thing I have learned is that, while hindsight is 20/20, economics isn’t an exact science, and there are always imperfect human elements that go wrong,” she says. “There also aren’t always perfect solutions, and a good solution for one country may have negative effects on another. What I do know is that there are many, many people cooperating all around the world to bring us out of the crisis and trying to make sure this doesn’t happen again.” 🍷

KIM ODE is a longtime staff writer for the *Star Tribune* and a frequent contributor to *St. Olaf Magazine*.