

Krystyn V. Phillips

POL 307

Professor Christoff

12.1.2016

Final Project Interview Report

Section #1

Person Interviewed: Vanessa Johanson

Education: Bachelor degree in Politics, Graduate diploma in Journalism, Masters in Participatory Development.

Interviewee's title or position: Country Director, Myanmar. United States Institute of Peace (USIP).

Date: November 22, 2016

Time: 8:00 PM

Length of interview: 36 Minutes, 53 Seconds.

Objective in conducting the interview: To gain knowledge and insight into the world of USIP and how Mrs. Johanson's job fits into the entire spectrum. Also, to learn about her life growing up, how she became involved with USIP along with her contributions, and to hear her ideas and thoughts regarding the world at large within international relations.

Section #2

I must say the research behind the interview was just as exciting and fulfilling as the actual interview itself. I found myself delving into more than just the overall professional bio of Vanessa Johanson, I became enamored with USIP as a whole and wanted to learn as much as I could about the organization and its affiliates.

My first action was to give a definition to USIP so I would know and understand the initial topic, it therefore gave me guidelines in how to look for specific questions to ask during my interview. I looked into the organization's founders, current staff, their mission statement, the work they have accomplished, their "issue areas" (places that hold USIP's attention such as women's rights, conflict analysis and prevention, mediation and facilitation, media, countering violent extremism, religion, rule of law, gender, education, economics, science and technology, governance, training, and youth), and what specific countries they have been involved with over the years.

For her part, Mrs. Johanson is the Country Director of Myanmar, which prompted me to pose questions about her background and how she became invested in the organization. Mrs. Johanson has only been with USIP for about a year now but she has worked in Asia/ Middle East since 1996. Prior to USIP, she has held positions at other institutions such as Search for Common Ground, The Asian Foundation, BBC Media Action, and Internews. I tried not to be too invasive about Mrs. Johanson's private life as I wanted to make sure she felt comfortable with me throughout the entire interview. However, I was able to glean some information about how she grew up and what drove her to Myanmar. I made points to ask her about leaving her homeland (Australia) at a young age (22 years old) to engage in another culture. I made notes to ask her how she felt upon entering a strange and foreign environment; Having to learn whole new languages and customs. I held particular interest in the latter question because throughout the

“Women in U.S.- Asian Relations” course, when reading about the many times when foreigners enter another nation, they tend to be offset and not able to fully integrate themselves. I wanted to see if Mrs. Johanson struggled with any of these hurdles as well.

There was a mental aspect and a physical aspect to the actual presentation. Mentally I was slightly nervous. This was not in any way attributed to having zero experience, for surely, I have interviewed others before. No, my anticipation and anxiety came from hearing horror stories of how classes before me were paired up with grouchy and withholding interviewees. I felt that with my luck I would end up with a cold person and have to use my considerable charm to open her up. Needless to say, my fears were allayed when I finally met Mrs. Johanson. She is perfectly friendly, fun, engaging and most relieving of all, WILLING!! That in itself calmed my nerves considerably, causing me to have an utterly fantastic time conversing with her.

As to physical preparation, the interview was through Skype (After all Mrs. Johanson resides in Myanmar, 11.5 hours ahead of U.S. Eastern Time), therefore I was able to conduct it from the comfort of my own home. This is not to say I failed to exercise professionalism. I made sure that I was still dressed presentably, as though I was attending a real interview, and I made sure my surroundings were clean and clear. I spoke clearly and articulately, allowing space for her to add anything she so wished during my follow up questions.

I began my interview by greeting Mrs. Johanson, introducing myself and engaging in light pleasantries. I laid the groundwork then smoothly transitioned into my inquiries.

Here is a list of my initial questions:

- ❖ --Where were you born? How was family life growing up?

- ❖ --Were your parents much involved in your schooling? Were they encouraging as you reached higher levels of education and began to indicate the career path you wished to take?

- ❖ --How were you inspired to join USIP? Although you have lived many places, how did you land as the country director in Myanmar as opposed to any of the other global stations the USIP controls?

- ❖ --I see that you have worked in some of the harshest environments one of them being Afghanistan, how did you dispel family and friends concerns when entering into such dangerous territory?

- ❖ --I read that you speak Bahasa Indonesia fluently, as well as conversational Myanmar (simple Burmese), was it easy to learn? I imagine this greatly assisted you in integrating with Myanmar, but did you still have to leap over other cultural hurdles? In a lot of my readings women outsiders found it difficult to fully immerse themselves and struggled to find common ground so they might go about their duties. How did you gain the trust of your country's indigenous populace?

- ❖ --When entering into your position at USIP, did you have preconceived notions as to how the organization was run, did you agree with all of its practices and policies? If there were instances where you disagreed, what steps did you take to accommodate or compromise?

- ❖ --When you initiated peace talks within foreign countries, naturally you interacted with numerous and diverse ethnic groups. What was your perception of how they interacted with one another? Were negotiations tentative, hostile, readily received?

- ❖ --Within some of my class readings I have noticed that throughout history, the U.S has not always been seen on the international stage in a favorable light (individually speaking) whether we are diplomats, doctors, journalist or simple missionaries. How receptive are the leaders of the countries/groups you have dealt with in regards to the fact that the U.S is spearheading such endeavors?

- ❖ --Many world leaders or just heads of different ethnic groups have voiced varied opinions regarding the results of our most recent U.S. presidential election. The U.S. is seen as the leading democracy and a cornerstone of peace and global stability; emphasis on stability. Yet I have been reading numerous articles written and released by renowned media outlets that show international heads of states (such as prime ministers, chancellors, presidents, royals etc.) hold concerns. How will these concerns effect USIP's missions abroad?

- ❖ --How do you think the United states will be seen? This organization is obviously American based. It talks of peace and wishes to construct congenial ties between two or more parties; But how does the U.S. intend to display that when they now have cultural/ religious division in their own backyard? How do we still present ourselves as the "good guys"?

- ❖ --Gender issues are one of USIP's focal issues. Often times domestic violence of non-Americans tends to be overlooked and attributed to a country's cultural formation, and historical precedent. How does USIP hope to spread even more awareness of the plights of women abroad seeing as these topics are generally in the background when examining overall conflicts?

- ❖ --Professor Christoff's course centers on the involvement of women abroad. To what extent have you seen the women in the countries you have worked in be a part of the reformation? Do native women play a pivotal role in helping to bring about change within their own societies?

- ❖ --I would like to talk about Acceptable solutions: In September of this year an article was published in which you gave an interview on the results of the Union Peace Conference, which was created to end the decade long conflict between Myanmar Government and rebels. You stated that finding an agreement that suits the government and three different factions is a particular challenge going forward. My question is, with such diverse groups and cultural disparities, how DO you even start to find common ground? What constitutes an acceptable solution? How do you make sure every party is equally satisfied with the outcome?

- ❖ --Another main route of quelling conflict is the media. From my understanding, USIP uses this method to reach out to the surrounding communities and globally to inform, connect and empower. How effective has this technique been (that you have seen)? You yourself worked with BBC Media Action, while there did you find that providing an open airway started

dialogue between a government and her constituents? Are there any success stories you would like to share that show a particular area that benefited greatly from this method?

- ❖ --You've been around the world, seen and experienced alliances and tensions all across the globe. Are you optimistic about the future of international relation? On a micro scale or macro scale?
- ❖ --Has your career path in any way changed your worldview? Is it significant? Or marginal?
- ❖ --During your time abroad, have your perceptions of the U.S. changed while seeing it from the "outside" so to speak?
- ❖ --You play a significant role in shaping the future of those internationally, how would you like to apply your leadership and shape the future of your homeland's (Australia) next generation?
- ❖ --What advice (if any) do you wish to pass onto me as I continue my own academic/professional journey?

As I mentioned earlier, these were tailed by follow-up questions, depending on Mrs.

Johanson's answers.

Section #3

- (1) I did get complete answers to my questions. Mrs. Johanson was very thorough in her responses, often elaborating and in turn answering questions I hadn't even thought to ask. This was extremely helpful.
- (2) I would say our interview was more or less "Unstructured". My questions were purposefully open-ended so that Mrs. Johanson could expand on an idea or opinion.
- (3) I used 7 probing questions (point of view, information, problem, assumption, goals, clarification, and summarization.) I found these to be the most natural and useful ways of obtaining the replies I sought. I say natural because most of the time, in normal conversation, people like to add on and share their opinions; this method allows them to do so at will.
- (4) For this particular project, I did not have a team member. I was given this task to complete by my lonesome. However, this did not dampen my experience in the least. It may have been more work to do on my own, but I enjoyed the challenge to see if I could succeed with just me, myself, and I. I believe I did.
- (5) Mrs. Johanson did not give me any specific articles or person to approach. She herself admitted in her reply to my "Thank You" email, that all of my research was in depth, well done, and she couldn't possibly add any more seeing as I had dug into every nook and crevice already.

Section #4

In almost every segment of our conversation, Mrs. Johanson emphasized the need for strong communication, consideration, and respect wherever USIP contributed their vast resources. In doing so I was immediately reminded of the Appiah reading I did earlier in the semester. In that reading the author spoke highly of respect for another nation's tradition/cultural identity. In order

to start a dialogue to enact change one must first recognize the heritage that comes along with ideas. New policies are hard, if not impossible, to implement if precedent practices are ignored. Mrs. Johanson insisted that USIP allowed themselves to only work with other nations, not for them. She left no doubt in my mind that change and resolution is a joint effort. All parties must understand the contributions each bring to the table. Only then can restoration be contemplated.

Section #5

Due to the outcome of the U.S. presidential election, Mrs. Johanson held some reserve as to how the world would shape up now that the chosen leader of the most powerful country in the world is controversial. She was careful not to be overly opinionated, however, her sentiments aligned with the majority of the international world and I found this to be more poignant than anything. Here I was seeing and hearing firsthand how our country's affairs were already affecting those outside our realm. I would have liked to go more in depth with her involving this outcome, but I sensed that it would be unwise to have the conversation become saturated in that direction.

All in all, my original questions were given attention and that is all I could ever ask for. Mrs. Johanson was kind enough to take time out of her morning to sit and have a thoughtful discussion with me. To end with, I was heartened by her encouragement towards me in my studies and future endeavors. She wished me good luck and success.

Even though I see my overall interview as an accomplishment, it was delightful to see that my peers had similar enlightened, fun, and intriguing experiences as well. Listening/watching the presentations put forward by other students, I began to fully appreciate that work that went into

this project for all of us. Based on the presentations, the entire class benefited greatly from the exercise and was able to clearly convey the information they received from their interviewees.

A lot of the interviews were similar to mine, in the fact that many of us talked to members of USIP. It was interesting to see the many different roles that women play throughout that organization and how they are using their positions to further relations between the U.S and Asia. Apart from USIP, it was rather illuminating to learn of the many ways in which women are touching the world: Through art, commerce, theatre, fundraising, communication, politics, and just simply by being explorers in their own right.

After seeing all of the presentations it has become abundantly clear to me that being a woman should first of all never be seen as a hindrance or impairing function. Their unique outlook at the world around them offers diverse ways of searching out how to impact it. As women, they cannot always go the route of men and therefore their path provides insights that add to the sometimes-unorthodox molding/advancement of society at large. Secondly, if there is one thing that every interviewee encouraged us young adults to do, it was to go boldly and explore. As simple as it sounds, it was profound to hear it from women who expressed how that notion caused them to race forward and conquer, grasping for the highest bar and achieving goals they may not even had thought to set but reaching them nonetheless.