

Nov 04, 2016 by **Jennifer Yael Green**

# **A Meeting with the Incoming Under Secretary for Public Diplomacy** <sup>[1]</sup>

**APDS Blogger: Jennifer Green**

Washington, D.C. -- We are just so excited to be in a place where others understand the term “public diplomacy.”

The “we” I am talking about is the delegation of 18 public diplomacy graduate students from the University of Southern California, on an inaugural trip to Washington, D.C. to meet with professionals working in our field at various organizations. The goal was to broaden our awareness of careers in public diplomacy, and to build connections and opportunities between the East and West coasts.

Here in D.C., everyone seems to speak our language. We are accustomed to blank stares and confused family members whenever the term “public diplomacy” is thrown around, and offering long explanations that involve words like “communications”, “foreign audiences”, and “global actors”. But at happy hour after a long day of meetings, one of my classmates excitedly noted that nobody at the bar has brought up the entertainment industry. “Even better,” she continues, “is that when I say I’m studying public diplomacy, nobody asks what the difference is from private diplomacy!”

We were far from the gridlock traffic and golden beaches of Los Angeles and here in D.C., public diplomacy is a term people understand. It is also where we had the opportunity and privilege to meet with one of public diplomacy’s biggest stars: Tara Sonenshine.

Ms. Sonenshine is currently the Executive Vice-President of the United States Institute for Peace (USIP), but was nominated by President Obama for the position of Under Secretary for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs in November 2011. Once confirmed, she will lead the country’s public diplomacy efforts abroad, so having the chance to speak with her at USIP proved to be the highlight of our trip.

Her experience in the fields of communications and public diplomacy is evident when she tells the group that she doesn’t like the term “winning over the hearts and minds”. It implies a battle, she explains, and that isn’t what PD is about.

Instead, she compares public diplomacy to filmmaking – being in your own head and also in other people’s heads – the director, the viewer, the choreographer. Similar to making a film, it’s a group effort that requires understanding different perspectives.

Sonenshine's definition of public diplomacy is “a shared means to a shared goal,” with the

goal being to extend America's reach and security by influencing how others come to know and understand us. It is a broad definition, but it encapsulates a lot.

As Under Secretary for Public Diplomacy, Sonenshine plans to spend her first few months engaging in the cornerstone of diplomacy: listening. She finds it important to listen to what those in the field are saying, and then use what she hears to form a narrative to guide her. She also intends to look at individual areas of the bureaus she will oversee, particularly the "American spaces," areas outside of embassies that showcase the United States.

Before meeting with Ms. Sonenshine, I read a handful of articles she wrote for The Huffington Post, including a small piece from 2009 that was intended to advise then-incoming Under Secretary for Public Diplomacy Judith McHale. The three-year-old piece showed a deep understanding of global communications, cooperation, and the importance of alliances and relationships. I think Ms. Sonenshine's work in peace-building and conflict resolution has prepared her well for this role, as her ability to look at the bigger picture was clear when she wrapped up her discussion with us.

"Don't always focus on direct cause and effect," she said. "Think in medical terms, in disease prevention. Because it's sometimes what you won't see that's successful."

*\*Editor's Note: You can read USIP's announcement about the MPD program's visit as a follow up to the blog.*

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