

Thumbnail Image:



The Stuff of PD ^[1]

I'm leaning on a glass case containing "Megamouth," an iconic shark on display at the Natural History Museum of Los Angeles County, a stone's throw from the University of Southern California (USC). Most visitors stop to gape at this monstrous fish gaping back at them through turbid alcohol. I'm using him to engage them in science. Now a father and his daughter stop for a look. I ask, "What do you notice about it?" We chat for a few minutes about survival in the wild.

What does this have to do with public diplomacy?

Everything.

I'm here learning to bring preserved fish and stuffed animals to life, to go all gooey over live spiders and butterflies and to find, in a single animal skin or mineralized bone, links to social issues and raw economics. Between shifts I chat with other volunteers about citizen science, renewable energy and the mountain lion roaming Griffith Park. Back on the floor, through considered listening and response, I offer my growing insights to strangers.

That mix of ideas, interaction and inspiration is the very stuff of PD.

Intentional Learning

Engaging museum visitors a few hours a week may not seem standard procedure for a Foreign Service Officer. But I've seen over the years how diplomatic entrepreneurs make things happen by first being curious and open to influence. They are intentional about their own training. Without that spark of learning, the smartest go-getter, when confronted with a 9-5 routine, can become just another pencil pusher. With it, even a weathered functionary can make himself useful.

That's why I'm here exploring the natural sciences and collecting stories and credibility so I may better represent the United States when the time comes. I'm old enough to know that when you practice the rhetorical arts, whatever the topic, you will use them one day. Challenges can take public diplomats into almost any field. Just as the military prepares for any scenario, so must our nation's peacemakers.

This is also about human interaction. Communicators need regular give-and-take. You want to get the most out of your profession? Find ways to expand your brain. Make your work and life enjoyable, interesting...and unnerving. Years ago, fresh out of college with a history degree, I volunteered with the Peace Corps in Sierra Leone—as a village agronomist. Hardest thing I've ever done. But it stretched me in ways that have paid off ever since.

So if you're thinking about a career in public diplomacy, try yourself out now in areas of non-expertise. Get into the thick of debates—with tough audiences, if you can. Make mistakes and learn from them. Or just volunteer for some kind of community service. It helps others and you

and is, after all, a very American thing to do.

Once overseas, my next challenge will be to escape the routine of emails and meetings to develop relationships—in other words, to do my job, not just what the job forces me to do.

The skeleton of a fin whale hangs at the main entrance. I've never seen one in the wild, so one Saturday I go whale watching. As a Humpback surfaces it spouts CO² like a child whose lungs are bursting after a long swim. Then you see the whale's back. If enough of it breaks the surface before re-submerging, you might see the tail salute before following the body down.

Through anthropomorphism I can now convert an aquatic mammal into our fellow traveler. Today I speak with museum visitors more confidently and can already imagine ways to deploy my nascent wisdom in the field. Maybe I'll describe my experience to museum heads and offer to speak in schools or give interviews.

Or I may only mention it once, over a pivotal dinner with some science professor and former Fulbright Scholar—and, one day, Foreign Minister—looking for encouragement and help brainstorming her Big Hairy Audacious Goal of modernizing her country's policies... Too fanciful? Nope. That kind of thing happens when you show up for your diplomatic calling.

You see, gaining smarts isn't enough. You also have to put them to work. Once overseas, my next challenge will be to escape the routine of emails and meetings to develop relationships—in other words, to do my job, not just what the job forces me to do.

Beyond Traditional Diplomacy

To be clear, I'm not a textbook diplomat. Public diplomacy officers must find the loci of influence outside government, coax foreign opinion leaders into cooperation toward some greater cause and, if warranted, bring American credibility and know-how in support. For that to happen, we first need to know the right people.

This networking begins the moment we land in our country of assignment, well before any desired outcome is known. Over months we listen to our foreign national colleagues, government contacts and ordinary citizens to understand social undercurrents. We travel and ask for meetings with respected editors, educators and heads of public organizations to look for common ground.

In these conversations we listen for the chance to turn a good idea—say, a new way to boost trade and economic growth through joint scientific research—into something bigger, maybe through a public education program or a study tour for leading experts to compare notes with American counterparts. Half of PD is finding our way to those catalytic moments.

The other half is toil and sweat. Sure, it helps in this business to be idealistic—that's why I signed up. But idealism alone doesn't solve problems. Market forces and politics are the big changemakers. Everything we do should help, at least indirectly, to nudge those levers in the

right direction. Getting support and turning ideas into outcomes can be a slog.

The process begins, though, with deliberate acts of learning and sharpening our skills, so that one day, when we're face to face with opportunity, we'll have stories to tell—personal stories that show skeptics that we care about the right things and make us credible advocates for novel solutions to the world's toughest problems.

Today I'm gathering scientific knowledge and stories with no guarantee I'll ever use them. Maybe it's enough to further the museum's mission to "inspire wonder, discovery, and responsibility for our natural and cultural worlds."

But I'm also a member of the world's finest diplomatic corps: when my country needs me to act, I plan to be ready.

Note from the CPD Blog Manager: *The opinions represented here are the author's own and do not necessarily reflect the views of the U.S. government. For more information on public diplomacy careers with the U.S. Department of State, visit careers.state.gov.*

Photo by Kerry Velez. Conrad Turner shows the cast of a saber-toothed cat skull to museum visitors.
