

Transcript for Cathy Elwell's ('73) Alumni Interview

IDIS 195 - Career in Languages

Lindsey Stone, Athena Alving, and Sarah Holt

Lindsey Stone: So what made you decide to major in French?

Cathy Elwell: Oh, if this is being recorded, I'm almost embarrassed. Although when I saw the question, I said, oh, they're gonna die laughing. I already divulged my reason to President Paino, so I mean, how bad could it be? The first foreign language I learned at age 10— it was fifth grade— was Spanish and I loved Spanish. I still love Spanish, because it's such a musical language. I'm very sensitive to music. Many times people who have musical sensitivities do very well with foreign languages. And the geopolitics at the time— ah, you know, back when dinosaurs still roamed the earth, and the Earth's crust was formed, compared to all of you— was very much Western Europe-centered. And I was really drawn to England in the mid 1960s, and actually I'm so embarrassed to even divulge this. Right this month, we are celebrating 60 years ago that the Beatles came to America. And I said, let me look at a map. Oh my gosh, I think France is a little closer to England. And I'd really like to get to England. And I was just fascinated. And then of course, what really sank it was Sir Paul McCartney wrote a song called *Michelle, ma belle*. I said, okay, that's a sign. When I was studying French, my teachers would bring in copies— this was in high school— my teachers would bring in copies of *Paris Match* and French journals and so the culture of France at that time was very vivid and very attractive to me.

How should one go about using their foreign language in a career?

Cathy Elwell: If you're interested in using foreign language, in a career, I would say strive to be absolutely the best you possibly can— on all of your skill levels. That would be listening, writing, grammar, understanding, reading, and especially because this one goes under the wire only too frequently, writing skills. Because in my job, now, in the International Monetary Fund, as you probably can guess we have an entire department that handles translations. I spent most of my career in the African department, which was a surprise to me.

What made you realize that you wanted to work for the International Monetary Fund?

Cathy Elwell: I think between Mary Washington, the year in Paris... just sealed for me that I was passionate about two things when I graduated. I wanted to use every French language skill I possibly could. And I wanted to travel. I wanted to get back to Paris. It was the Scarlett O'Hara

thing. The day I left, I said as God as my judge, I'm getting back here. And sure enough, the African department— this is what cinched it for me— the African department, you could go on mission. And many missions to Africa will transit through Paris. So you would have a stopover in Paris, or a stopover in Geneva, or a stopover in Amsterdam, or Brussels, or Geneva. So I said sign me up! Between my own innate abilities and the way Mary Washington and the year abroad honed me, I felt very strong, very passionate and also very motivated. Another clue I would tell grads is the more you can define what you want to do when you leave— I had two real simple goals and they were my yardstick. “Okay, is this job going to allow me to use my skills? My French language skills?” I was offered a job up in the US Executive Directors Office. This is the liaison between the IMF and the US Treasury and the US Federal Reserve. And smarty pants that I was, I asked the HR person: am I going to use my French there very much? The answer is “no, you're dealing with Americans”— nothing against my compatriots, but this was not my priority. And you know, in the IMF institute, that job, yeah, you use your language skills, but you wouldn't be traveling. Because I spoke French, and I applied for this job, our annual meetings—when the IMF and World Bank have any meetings outside of Washington, once every three years— I got to go to the annual meetings in the Philippines, which meant that I had an opportunity to travel in Asia.

Athena Alving: For people wanting to further their language skills, or learn a new language, and they're not in some sort of program where they will send you to school for that, would you recommend what you took— the Georgetown Further Education courses? Or what would you recommend to keep and further your language skills if you're not in a job where you can use them yet?

Cathy Elwell: If you're in a city like Washington, although I'm sure now with how diverse our country and our population is becoming— oh my gosh, there's a very large, Spanish-speaking community in Des Moines, Iowa. And there are affinity groups in Washington, there's the *Alliance française*, there's the French Embassy, there's all kinds of cultural— the *La Maison Française*, is that what they call it? Anyway, pretty soon your antennae go up, and you just find these people— and online, oh my Gosh, I would have thought I would have died and gone to heaven, if when I graduated, you could just sit down in front of your laptop, and listen to the news in French—[indistinguishable], which is TV— but I mean they've got audio and video feed online. And seek out groups that are interested in— share your interests. A city like Washington

is not the only one. It's like a toy store for liberal arts majors. We got STEM here we got, we've got recreational groups, we've got just folks who are interested. There are a 'jillion' ways to keep plugged in. If people are interested in translation, Georgetown University for a long, long time— Middlebury in Vermont also has schools of translation and interpretation— and they're very, very good and demanding. And if you were looking for, because I asked the question, if you were looking for a translator job at the IMF or the World Bank or another organization, what you would need is really strong foreign language skills and maybe one or two languages. And here's the key, another discipline— law, economics, medicine, public health policy. And you could chart your own course.

After retiring from the IMF, how have you stayed connected to the organization?

Cathy Elwell: I have a PowerPoint presentation on the basics of the IMF. And I share because students are curious, what did you do? What is this organization, the International Monetary Fund? Maybe you've heard of the World Bank, maybe you've heard of the IMF and I evangelize about the IMF because I'm still very connected. We have a terrific Retirees Association. I'm still very engaged with the IMF and it's fun to share my passions with people who are my captive audience on Zoom!