

We still have a lot of work to ensure

TODAY AS WE CELEBRATE THE 2016 INTERNATIONAL WOMEN'S DAY UNDER THE THEME 'PLEDGE FOR GENDER PARITY', **GLORIA NAKAJUBI** HAD A CHAT WITH THE NEW US AMBASSADOR, **DEBORAH MALAC**, SHE TAKES OVER THE MISSION IN KAMPALA.



Who is Deborah Malac?

I am a daughter of an immigrant to the United States. Someone who started out in fairly modest circumstances, but a product of parents and a family that believes in opportunity for all of their children. They inspired me with the curiosity about the world and helped me believe that I could accomplish anything that I wanted to.

Unlike people's perceptions of a diplomat, I pride myself in being approachable, but also direct and clear about what I think, as well as the US interests and policies.

As Ugandans see me over the years as I travel through the country, they will find that what they see is what they get.

A career diplomat with about 35 years in service, how possible was this for a family woman?

It has not been easy and certainly if you had told me 30 years ago that I would be serving as a diplomat today, I probably would not have believed you. I did not imagine, when I started out in my careers, that I would keep doing what I have been doing. I assumed that I would try it for a few years and see what happens.

Is this your childhood dream?

My childhood dream was just to have an opportunity to see the world, to travel, to do something that would allow me to go places that I had read about in books and watched in movies.

I was quite interested in archeology and read a lot about ancient Greece, ancient Rome and the holy land and I thought it would be wonderful to go and dig up old bones and old sites. And at university, I was focused on Eastern Europe' where my father comes from. But when I joined the state department, I was sent to Cameroon. It was wonderful and I fell in love with Africa. And I have spent many years in and out of Africa and working on issues of interest to Africans.

I think the fact that I was inspired by the potential and the optimism that the people I met demonstrated even in the face of difficult circumstances.

What was your first assignment like and how has it impacted your career?

I was naïve when I first became a diplomat. I really did not have an idea what someone who worked in the Foreign Service did. I had to learn a lot on the job about what we could actually do.

I have been fortunate throughout my career to have excellent role models and mentors who were willing to answer questions, give me guidance and frankly tell me when I



MALAC DURING AN INTERVIEW AT THE AMERICAN EMBASSY IN KAMPALA

"From what I saw in Liberia, simply investing in service delivery is not sufficient. One also needs to ensure that there is attention paid to the public health side of the house in terms of disease surveillance"

messed up and I needed to do something different. Certainly the first assignment in Cameroon was a learning experience for me but for many years in my career, I continued to learn from people. What kind of skills I actually had and what I needed to develop and what my strength and weaknesses were. It is an accumulation of work and effort to try and improve on those areas where I was weak.

How is your typical day like as an ambassador?

My typical day might actually be considered boring to some people. It can be anything from a number of indoor meetings within the embassy to discuss various issues both in terms of our foreign policy, and how to run the mission.

It is like being a mayor of a small town. You have the responsibility for the welfare of those who work for you and their families. And, of course, the external part of it, which is representing US values, interests and

foreign policy to the country to which you are credited. Ensuring the policies and programmes that we have in Uganda are being implemented properly and that we are doing what we have to do. But the most important bit is just those relationships with people and individuals and to help them understand US values and interests.

Talking about mentors, do you subscribe to the notion that women are their own enemies?

There is an element of truth in that. I have to say I came of age in a generation in the US where women felt like yes, we were being empowered to accomplish whatever we thought we could, but we had to do so by ourselves. Asking for help, guidance or even having a mentor was considered a sign of weakness.

We assumed that in order to be considered competent and accomplished, we had to work harder than men, look stronger and look twice as good as our male counterparts. As a result, women in similar situations were afraid to even have that conversation together and see how to help each other.

But with time, women have realised that it is important in any kind of career to have

MALAC'S PICKS

FAVOURITES

BEAUTY PRODUCT

Moisturiser

QUOTE

"To thy own self be true. You have to go to sleep with your self every night, so you have to be happy with what you have done during the course of the day or life for that matter."

women are willing to make choices



THE AMBASSADOR SHARING A LIGHT MOMENT. PHOTOS BY MIRIAM NAMUTEBI

those people who can give you advice, male or female. And particularly for women, it is important that we do work together.

It is important we look out for those who come behind us and help them not make the same mistakes we have had along the way.

What is your idea of emancipation?

I think it is an individual thing. Cultures and countries will have different approaches to this. But the fundamentals remain the same. You have to find ways to include the 50% of your population that is female.

There is historical data that shows that countries that want to develop and build a vibrant economy and successful in providing livelihoods for their citizens can not do that if they leave 50% of the population out of the equation. They have to be given the same opportunities, otherwise, it is like tying one hand behind your back and not making full use of both arms if you leave them behind.

It is not about making one better or putting one out in the front. It has to be a partnership of both men and women to help move countries forward.

From Liberia after the Ebola crisis to Uganda at a critical time of election, what do you think are those skills that inform your appointments?

It has to do with my approachability, candidness and willingness to take on tough issues and to address those challenges.

Throughout my career, I have moved

from assignment to assignment to look for not just places that are interesting to go because I would like to visit and learn about that country, but places where there are actual issues and problems to be addressed. Where I feel I personally, but also we as US government, can help make a difference, support programmes or activities or just support people to be able to resolve conflict or resolve issues.

And in this instance, certainly when I went to Liberia, I knew it would be an

interesting place to work, a lot of challenges for a country coming out of conflict but certainly I had no idea we were going to be confronted with the world's first ever epidemic of the ebola virus disease. But we worked together and we made it through.

Uganda, from my perspective, is yet another opportunity that I and this mission, under my leadership, can help to strive towards achieving a more prosperous, healthier and educated Uganda that can be moving forward in the direction that it needs to go.

Coming in at a critical election time, what were your observations as regards to women participation in the election process and what should be the way forward?

I have watched what was going on in the campaigns even before I came. I believe there are some positives especially for women especially the set aside seats for women. But the bigger challenge is how to get women

not just campaigning for those seats but competing against men.

This is a challenge even in the US and some of it stems from the fact that women have a lot of demands on their hands, not to say that this isn't true for men as well. It goes back to looking for ways in which women who have been in that kind of space can encourage others to come and participate but also educate them about what is actually needed.

What do you think needs to be done to ensure women stay longer in careers?

We still have a lot of work to do in ensuring that women stay longer enough and are willing to make the choices in order to move on to the next level. But we need to appreciate that it becomes hard when you are trying to balance career, family, and a relationship with a spouse and all the demands that come in the course of a career.

With maternal mortality still a challenge in Uganda, what lessons can be drawn from your experience in Liberia towards strengthening health systems?

From what I saw in Liberia, simply investing in service delivery is not sufficient.

One also needs to ensure that there is attention paid to the public health side of the house in terms of disease surveillance and building capacity to identify what the risks are and ensuring that is incorporated in what kind

of health services are offered. Some of this is already being done here and there is a lot of capacity.

I have to say I met a number of Ugandans in Liberia that came to help in the midst of the ebola crisis not just in Monrovia but in the countryside too.

What have been your career highlights?

Meeting Nelson Mandela in the mid 1990s has been one of the most fulfilling moments in my life.

At the time, I was working with the South Africa desk and we had a number of meetings with him and the secretary of state at the time. Having the opportunity to meet and be in the same room is something one can never forget in their lives. His life was a reminder that we as human beings really need to harness our anger about issues because if we allow that hatred to overtake our lives we become victims in other ways.

The other one is the fight against ebola in Liberia. This was an incredible event to be part of that lasted many months, very humbling to be part of. It is one thing I am personally and professionally proud of.

What are you passionate about?

I am passionate about opportunity for girls and education, but also agriculture and have done a lot of work on that. Those are things that I have long been passionate about.