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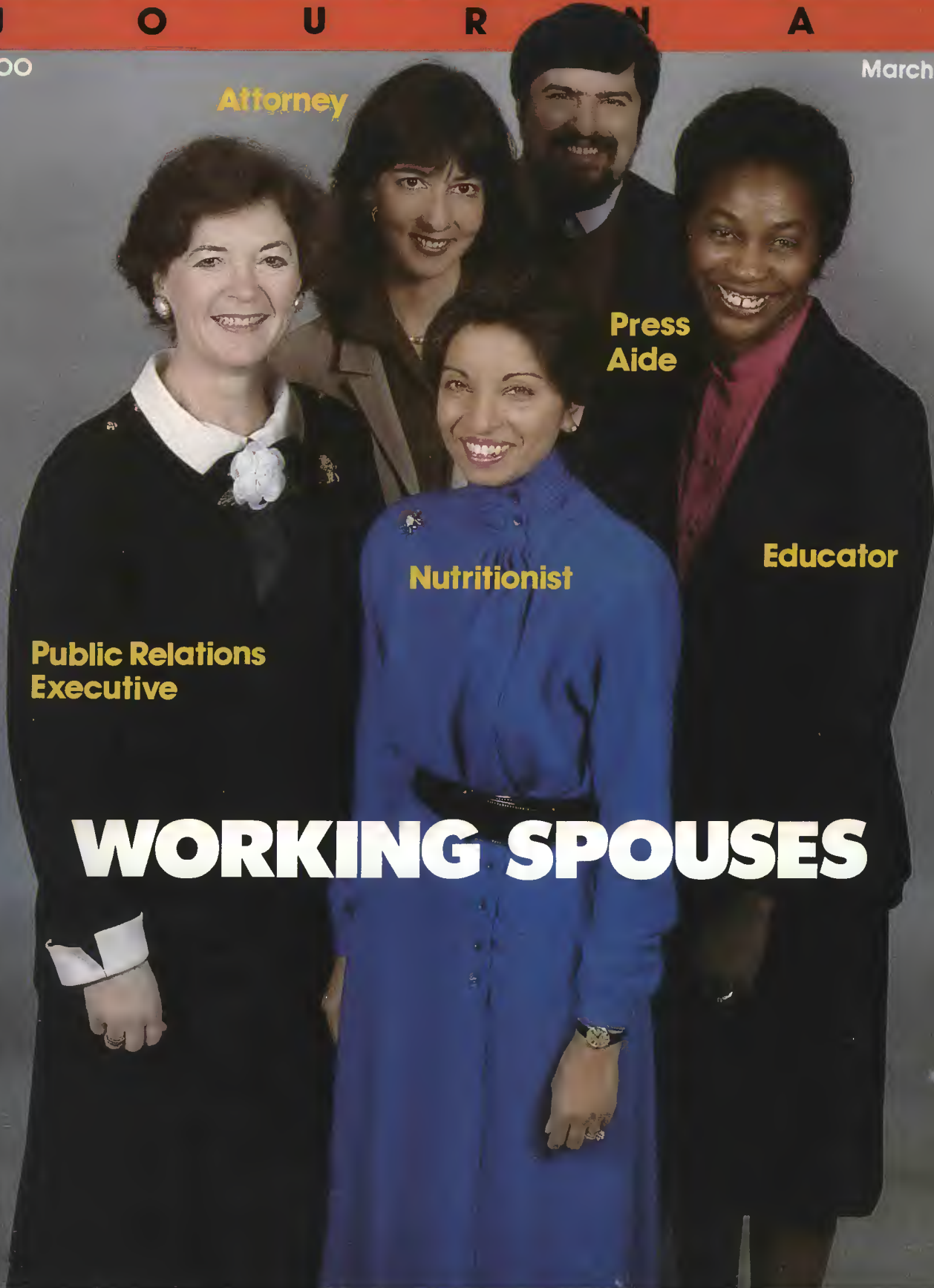
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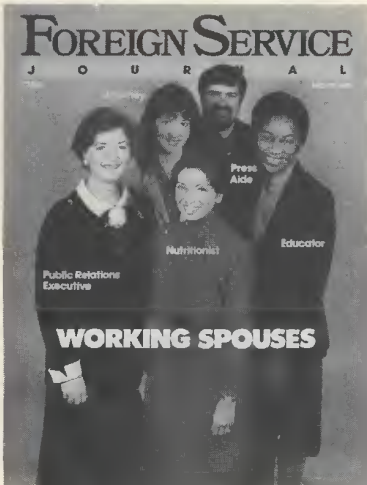
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WORKING SPOUSES





These working spouses of Foreign Service employees are (clockwise from left) public relations executive Patricia Q. Barbis, attorney Barbara Finamore, congressional press aide Ben Zuhl, educator Mattie Sims, and nutritionist Sushma Palmer. For an overview of our three articles on the problems of finding employment for working spouses and compensating those who do community or embassy-support tasks, turn to page 21.

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ASSOCIATES OF THE SERVICE

A new proposal widens employment options for spouses by providing a framework in which careers can be developed and U.S. interests furthered

SUSAN LOW

A YOUNG FEMALE ATTORNEY works in the environmental field in Washington. Some time ago, her husband, a Foreign Service officer, received his first overseas assignment; this summer he will move to Moscow. Ever since the day they first learned of the assignment, she has been exploring the possibilities of finding work there in which her experience and training would be relevant. Like many other Foreign Service spouses, she has come face-to-face with the "frustrations of attempting to mesh my professional goals as an attorney with his career":

To my dismay, I have discovered there is no existing framework within which to search for employment either in the embassy or in the international community there. My own efforts to find some meaningful employment at post have thus far turned up nothing. I am faced with the wrenching choice of setting all career goals aside for a two-year period or remaining at my current job in Washington during my husband's tour.

One male spouse, who resigned from the National Park Service to accompany his wife abroad when she joined the Foreign Service, has spent a great deal of time as a volunteer, assisting government and private conservation efforts in two Third World countries. Free-lance writing has brought in far less than his earlier professional salary. Now, he is seriously rethinking whether he can afford to stay overseas.

Such are the dilemmas that Foreign Service life poses for its younger members, and for more of its senior members than many of us realize. The possibility—and, for many, the need—for spouses to be able to build and maintain professional careers within the context of the Foreign Service lifestyle has become a central issue for Service families. This, along with the desire for recognition (as a contributor to mission efforts) and compensation (including retirement benefits in one's own right) is causing increasing dissatisfaction and disaffection. Tensions are building not only between families and the Service, but within families as well.

Susan Low has been a Foreign Service spouse for 29 years and has lived at a number of posts in Africa and Latin America. During Washington tours she has worked at the Atomic Energy Commission and the Overseas Development Council. Recently she served as AAFSW Forum chairman.

These are legitimate concerns, and it is important that they be addressed if the Foreign Service is to retain the allegiance and the participation of its employees' families. Many spouses have chafed at the inequities of the system, but have gone overseas anyway. Others have chosen to stay in the United States to pursue their careers. Some families have left the Service for these reasons. The situation continues to deteriorate and there is no sign of offsetting factors to bring it back into balance or dispel the unrest.

After widespread discussion of these problems, a new proposal has emerged for overcoming the limitations imposed by the mobile lifestyle of the Foreign Service. Last fall the proposal for a Foreign Service Associates program was approved by the board of the Association of American Foreign Service Women and presented to the State Department management team. The program incorporates the elements of careers, recognition, and compensation, but it is more than the sum of these parts. It is also much more than an updating and dignifying of traditional functions. The intent of the FSA program is twofold: first, to provide a participatory framework in which *all* spouses at posts can opt to contribute their skills and experience to mission activities; and second, to create new job options that will advance U.S. interests while enabling spouses to build solid careers during the years they are linked to the Service.

The program would not be a panacea. For the highly trained professional, it would make possible the pursuit of a coherent, long-term career. But there would be trade-offs. A career developed while accompanying a Foreign Service employee will be different than one pursued in the United States. It would, however, open up possibilities that would not otherwise be available. For the less-specialized spouse too, it would permit the development of a meaningful career. For both, the Associates path should make it possible to reconcile the two worlds—remaining in a Foreign Service family and creating a satisfying and far from prosaic career.

The Associates program would encompass a wide range of activities, determined by each post under guidelines from Washington with the purpose of furthering U.S. interests. Spouses of all Foreign Service employees (hopefully of all U.S. employees at post) would be eligible. A voluntary agreement would be established between the individual spouse and the mission, designating specific functions that the associate would undertake for an agreed number of hours

per week at a fixed rate of pay. Performance would be monitored and evaluated regularly.

Four major areas of activity are included within the program:

- Community-building within the mission. This would include all the functions that go into building morale within the official U.S. community at post. It would support and augment the activities of the community liaison offices.

- Catering to fill the mission's representational needs. The services of those associates who manage representational events would be available to all within the mission who have such responsibilities. (A reassessment of what constitutes "representation" and how it is delegated would need to be undertaken at the same time that this service is put into place.)

- Outreach to the host country through community interaction. This would take many forms, involving exchanges with community groups in varied sectors of the host society.

- Seconding of professional skills to the host government. Associates' skills would be matched with the needs of the host country and would be used in local projects.

The last two in particular have the potential to make a substantial contribution to U.S. understanding of the local scene. All four areas together would constitute a significant addition to the effectiveness of U.S. representation abroad. Furthermore, the Associates program would use skills possessed by those already at post and would encourage spouses to go abroad by incorporating them into the system in a meaningful way.

The exact nature of the program's activities would be determined by the needs of the specific post at any given time. The *esprit* of the program is to do what needs doing, and to seek out new projects and opportunities that could benefit the mission. It is unlikely that there will be too few jobs for those who want them; instead, once the program is in full swing, there will probably be more jobs than available people.

Adoption of this program will not spell the end of other job opportunities for spouses. Other routes to employment would remain open and doubtless be expanded: more "part-time, intermittent, and temporary" (PIT) positions will probably be created, and efforts to negotiate work agreements with other governments will continue. An associate would remain free to take the best option available at the particular post. In fact, an associate could opt for active or inactive status for any particular tour depending on personal circumstances and job conditions at post. An associate who has young children or other personal reasons might thus choose inactive status. Many might find that a 20- or 30-hour week would fit best with other commitments. Some spouses might choose not to join at all. During the initial phase, while the mechanics are being smoothed out, a fairly small proportion of spouses may choose to be active members of the program, but participation would probably become widespread after a few years. A rough estimate of total employment in the introductory years of the program might be the full-time equivalent of 1000 associates.

T*he need for spouses to maintain professional careers within the context of the Foreign Service lifestyle has become a central issue*

An associate's pay would be based on a common rate. Increases would be awarded after a certain number of hours in active status—even if those hours had been interrupted by periods of inactivity in the program. Having a standard rate of pay underlines the *service* orientation of the program. It would also make it less onerous for those who cannot find an opening in their preferred field to take a job that ranks lower in their priorities. Standard pay also makes it less cumbersome for an associate to put together a package of functions, such as 20 hours as an urban planner and 10 as a caterer. Perhaps most important for post morale, it avoids invidious comparisons of the value of different functions, sidestepping the delicate question of which are more valuable at post. Who can say, for instance, that a lawyer is more useful than a caterer in Ougadougou?

Some of those who have reviewed the Associates program have objected that a professional—such as a lawyer—should be compensated in terms of salary for the high cost of education and training. But the purpose of this program is different: it is designed to make possible the use of professional skills so that the associate can accompany the Foreign Service employee abroad. If this is the primary objective of the spouse, the pay scale ceases to be of overriding importance in most cases. If, however, the individual has different priorities, such as receiving a salary based on probable wages in Washington, this program may not be suitable.

To equip associates to perform professionally overseas in the fields in which they are working, training should be considered an integral part of the program. Ideally, the associate should be paid during training. If this is not feasible in the initial stage of the program, however, the time spent in training should be credited toward future increases in pay.

Training should include: language and area preparation; updates on a wide range of happenings in the United States (cultural, political, economic, sociological); and instruction in specific skills (such as catering management or community relations) related to the function the associate will perform at post. The aim of such training should be to ensure that these functions are carried out at a professional level. This is clearly in the interests of the mission and the United States. Why, for example, should the Service expect a spouse, however good a cook, to handle with aplomb the planning and execution of a sit-down dinner for 100 guests? How can a person, even with years of

experience in inter-cultural skills, function effectively without speaking the language of the host country?

The Associates proposal raises a host of administrative questions: Who will run the program? Who will write the job descriptions and choose among applicants? How will performance be evaluated? Who will monitor the spouses of senior officials? What happens if an associate is not performing adequately? The State Department, which is giving serious consideration to the proposal, now has these and other questions under study. All posts have been queried and their responses are being assessed to help shape the program.

ANYONE WHO MIGHT play down the value of spouse contributions to mission efforts, or who doubts the scope for career development in that role, would do well to note the perspective of a Foreign Service officer who is on leave without pay to accompany her FSO husband to a post where he is principal officer. Her account of the unaccustomed role of dependent spouse shows a new awareness of that role's importance in the functioning of the post. She cites wide-ranging use of managerial and interpersonal skills to support morale both within the mission and the larger American community. She notes the range of tasks required to prepare and execute official entertaining. And she effectively points out the intercultural skills that a spouse can bring to bear in a wide variety of representational activities if she is aware of the broader picture in the host country. In brief, she has found the role of spouse to be "a job with enormous scope and responsibilities."

Some spouses have objected that the proposal trivializes their current activities by suggesting that a monetary value can be attached to them. But those who support the program tend to see it the other way around—being paid is a good indication that the activity is valued. Critics from the other direction object to paying for services that have traditionally been performed without charge, some of them adding that the government cannot afford the expense. In all fairness, however, the government *should* expect to pay for such services. In fact, its failure to put these services on a businesslike basis has had two effects: it has put an increasing burden on those spouses who do volunteer, a group that is growing smaller; and it has induced a cutback in the provision of these important services. As a result, post morale, the adequacy of entertaining efforts, and contacts with the host society beyond the official realm have all suffered. With an increasing proportion of Foreign Service employees going abroad as singles or without spouses, the Service needs to look elsewhere than to volunteers to maintain these vital functions.

A clear majority of early responses from posts to the department's request for evaluation of the proposal have shown positive endorsement of its objectives and thoughtful consideration of the means of implementation. From a Third World mission:

Consensus is that proposal is enormous step forward. Proposal assumes that spouses at post have skills to fill existing needs of both mission and host

country. Experience has shown this to be true. Proposal was met with enthusiasm and popular support at this mission, but with the knowledge that successful implementation...will require command emphasis and depend upon mounting a strong mechanism for its management.

From an Eastern European capital:

There are many problems in creating such a program, but we feel the FSA program is worth pursuing. It does not answer the needs of all spouses, but it is a start, providing personal recognition as well as financial rewards.

From a Western European capital where "every response showed an enthusiastic reaction and strong support":

For the program to succeed, everyone needs to take it seriously. It will take time for the Foreign Service community to accept the idea that these people are being paid fair wages for work that deserves remuneration. For that to happen, the evaluation of individuals' work has to be reasonably vigorous and fair... These are serious jobs and it should be clear to everyone that they will be treated, paid, and evaluated seriously.

The two spouses whose predicaments opened this article epitomize what the Associates program is about and why it is important. The lawyer supports the program as addressing the concerns of two-career families by offering "the vital framework now conspicuously absent for negotiating job opportunities." She urges that it be put into effect rapidly, confident that it "could create job opportunities that would otherwise not be available and significantly reduce the uncertainty which presently confronts the spouse interested in working at post." The conservationist concludes that the program would make it possible for him to use his professional background in an effective way and give him a sense of being part of the embassy community. He believes that the program would do much to strengthen Foreign Service morale and would both attract and retain people in the Service.

The Foreign Service Associates proposal is not yet in final form. It is now being studied within the State Department and shaped into a viable program. It will then be submitted to Congress for authorization and funding. The costs involved are not large in comparison with the benefits to U.S. objectives. Current management of the department has demonstrated both its willingness to seek and its ability to get the resources needed to represent this country abroad most effectively.

It is clear from the responses of posts and of spouses that adoption of the program would go far toward improving morale overseas and enhancing mission contact with the host community. With support from Foreign Service families and the department, the program stands a good chance of becoming a reality and contributing an important dimension to the future shape of the Foreign Service. It is an idea whose time has come. □