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Life after CDC:

Journey into Public Health on the World Stage

Deborah Rugg, EIS 1987

My passion for public health – and a 40-year journey battling epidemics around the world – started when I was bitten by the “public health bug” in 1981 during my work with the first frighteningly deadly cases of AIDS at UCSF in San Francisco.

I started at CDC as an EIS Officer in 1987, and ended as the Global AIDS Program (GAP) Associate Director for Monitoring & Evaluation (M&E), where I had the opportunity to integrate my skills in health psychology, epidemiology and evaluation in the fight against AIDS. My passion for public health had only grown since joining CDC, but after almost 20 years, I felt it was time for a change. I was keen to have an impact on a higher level. This led me to a major life transition. With much excitement, fear and trepidation, I left CDC and accepted a headquarters position with the United Nations Joint Program on AIDS (UNAIDS) as M&E Team Leader in Switzerland. I had no idea what it would be like, but I quickly discovered CDC was in my DNA and I wasn’t really leaving it behind. It would stay with me and guide me as I tackled public health and political challenges in the UN over the next 15 years.

On my third day in my new job at UNAIDS, my boss handed me a ticket to Rome with a wry smile on his face, knowing he was throwing me into the deep end. The Vatican needed technical assistance on their new HIV prevention policy. I was sent there along with a UNAIDS expert on faith-based organizations, which I was clearly NOT. During this meeting, church leaders would decide on an HIV policy for their roughly 1 billion members. However, I soon learned there was even more at stake. The Vatican’s opposition to birth control had sparked very public disagreements with UNAIDS, at times pitting church leaders against scientists at

UNAIDS over condom use—the most effective available weapon against the spread of HIV. The essential relationship between these two entities was in dire need of repair. They hoped that, as a fresh face, I might help mend some fences.

We arrived in Vatican City, a tiny nation unto itself, filled with inspiring architecture and manicured gardens. A receptionist led us down a polished marble corridor to the interior meeting chambers. As I entered, the knot in my stomach tightened. Catholicism had faded from my life long ago, yet I still felt reverence for this holy place and the people in it. I pictured a room of stern priests and scowling nuns, chastising me about the evils of birth control. Reality proved far different. Our hosts were welcoming, cordial, and genuinely interested in what we had to say. They belonged to the Vatican's Carmelite Order, tasked with developing all of the Church's health-related policies, including messages about HIV and AIDS prevention. The depth of their knowledge on the issues impressed me, as did their insightful questions. "I must confess," I said to one of the nuns during a coffee break, "I came here with a preconceived notion of what to expect, and I was way off. The dialogue is so thoughtful and comprehensive." She smiled knowingly, as if she had heard similar comments in the past.

The group grappled with Church doctrine on birth control and the obvious need for condoms to prevent disease transmission. They delved into the "situational ethics" of condom use by a married couple for disease prevention, when one partner was HIV positive and the other not. Everyone in the room seemed to recognize the need for a balanced, circumspect condom message as part of the Church's comprehensive policy on HIV/AIDS prevention and care. I found their conversations far more open and pragmatic than the U.S. administration's rhetoric shaping U.S. policy on HIV when I left CDC. The Sisters of the Carmelite Order, in particular, grasped the pitfalls and how to avoid them. Their male colleagues simply wanted to issue a Church-wide statement, or encyclical, but the nuns encouraged a more horizontal and inclusive strategy. A mandate would be of little use to the Church's frontline workers, who needed practical, flexible guidance. I knew this to be true from my field work, where priests would hand out condoms. They still preached abstinence on Sundays, but the rest

of the week they did what was needed to keep people alive.

As the final meeting ended, they thanked us for our constructive contributions and helpful technical guidance. On my way out, I spotted a small, secluded chapel. I had no desire to return to the faith, but at this particular moment I did feel a need to reflect. So, I went back and slipped inside the chapel and sat in a pew, then knelt on the hard, wooden kneeler that took me back to my childhood in Wisconsin. I reflected on the nuns I had met, who were making a difference in this most male-dominated of environments. I also reflected on the parish priests who had found the courage to rise above religious dogma for the sake of their flock. I was inspired and started to reflect on how incredibly complex public health practice truly is the world over and how grateful I was to be part of it.

In the chapel's stillness, I realized I needed to get better at keeping an open mind. The Catholic Church had caused many problems during its long history, but there was plenty of good too. The meeting participants were committed to developing the best HIV policy they could. All around the world, Catholic hospitals and relief services provided invaluable care to countless people living with HIV/AIDS. As with most things human, the Church could not easily be viewed as black or white, but a kaleidoscope of grays. I've learned to avoid holding rigid preconceptions too tightly, especially when walking into different cultural contexts and potentially volatile situations. Sometimes people will surprise you, so it's always best to go in with an open mind and really listen and learn from what they have to say. This is something I learned in my early CDC years and was a skill I would sharpen and find more and more valuable over the years in my career with the UN.

After returning from Rome, I began settling into my new home in the beautiful Jura Mountains of France. From those windows, I could see Lake Geneva shimmer in the distance, and the ever-inspiring snow-capped peak of Mont Blanc in the French Alps beyond. It was idyllic. In addition to the fascinating work, my life learning the French language, culture and culinary scene offered many fun and funny adventures too.

Grateful friends always enjoyed leaving the city to attend a festive event in the mountains. For many international colleagues, a traditional American

Thanksgiving dinner was a real treat. My first time hosting an American Thanksgiving dinner in France, I was met with culture shock at every turn. Starting at the butcher shop in my neighboring village of Divonne, where I had ordered a famous Borg-en-Bresse turkey weeks earlier. When I arrived, I stood patiently in line. Finally, it was my turn. I approached and told the butcher my name “Je m’appelle Madame Rugg.” And in the best French accent I could muster, I said, “J’aimerais ramasser ma dinde, s’il vous plait” (I would like to pick up my turkey, please). “Oui madame,” he said, and scurried to the back to get my turkey. Nothing could have prepared me for what happened next. When he came back and handed me my turkey, I screamed! It was a dead turkey all right, freshly killed, with its head, neck, feet, insides, and all its feathers still perfectly intact . . . just like the French prefer it, I later found out. I regained my composure and tried to ask as diplomatically as I could, using my limited French and silly hand gestures, for him to pluck all the feathers out of the bird and prepare it for cooking. He looked totally confused. It was quite a hilarious sight for all the French people watching in line behind me, and they started laughing. The kind lady right behind me fortunately took pity on me and figured out what I wanted and explained it to the butcher. He looked really annoyed and dismayed. Thankfully, she talked him into doing what I wanted. He told me gruffly to come back in a couple hours. So, I politely said, “Merci beaucoup monsieur,” and went off to a lovely village cafe. I came back promptly in two hours. My turkey was ready and the butcher handed it to me politely as if everything was back to normal. I walked out of that butcher shop grinning from ear to ear, so proud of my accomplishment of “becoming more French every day” . . . but also laughing at the spectacle I had made of myself.

As the largest bureaucracy on earth, the UN moved at a glacial pace, hamstrung by endless demands from governments around the world, all with their own viewpoints. There were cultural differences on my team to navigate, as each member hailed from a different country. The new ways of thinking were wonderful, albeit sometimes challenging. But I knew I could count on them and our accomplishments were always the result of solid team efforts.

With the help of my colleagues, I slowly learned to navigate the obstacles

and settled into a comfortable routine. I felt I was truly making a difference.

Even better, humanity was finally making great strides against HIV. I helped strengthen and manage the UNAIDS M&E Field Advisers program with key personnel placed in over 66 countries so we could help countries evaluate their HIV response. I was promoted to director of M&E and my new role placed me at the helm of a critical new project—the Global AIDS Reporting System and Global Database. When finished, it would be the largest collection of AIDS data the world had ever seen. Our system would form the basis of the UN Secretary General Global Reports on AIDS and became the essential place to go for the latest AIDS facts and figures.

When major management changes inevitably occurred, it was time to build a new future for myself somewhere else. I learned of a vacancy at UN headquarters in New York. The Secretary General, Mr. Ban Ki-moon needed a new director for the Inspection and Evaluation Division to evaluate the efficiency and effectiveness of 33 UN Secretariat agencies, including Peacekeeping Operations. The role of the director was to keep him and member states informed on the highest level on how well agencies were meeting the needs of the people the UN seeks to serve.

A job like that would be a huge step up from my current responsibilities. It also meant that, for the first time in 30 years, I no longer would be working in health, at least not directly. I set aside my fears that I would miss public health, applied for the position and got it!

It required a major pivot. I again found myself needing to reinvent myself. This time, I felt stronger and more confident than ever, realizing that a fulfilling career would continue to involve transitions. My years at CDC and UNAIDS had served me well...but nothing could have prepared me for working in politics at the top of the UN. That's the topic of another story.

Driven by my enduring passion to make a difference, desire for adventure and foundational inspiration from public health, I packed up my belongings and leaped into my future in New York City.