

## **Profile: Casey Joseph Roberts: Mission Driven Bureaucrats in US State Department Operations Medicine (Guardian)**

*“If I didn't feel like I was accomplishing anything here and I didn't feel like I was trusted, I probably wouldn't be long for this job. No one would.”*

Joseph, whom I met on the evacuation flight from Senegal to the US which opened Chapter 1, is a “guardian” for the Operational Medicine (OpMed) team within the US State Department. He has an easy smile and is the kind of person who can talk to anybody.

Joseph was a bit hesitant to have this conversation; getting permission from the State Department to interview him was a complex process, in no small part because of the importance attributed to the collective nature of the team’s achievements. As Joseph repeatedly stressed, “There's nothing I've done in COVID response that I did by myself. Nothing.”

What are the sources of his motivation? Where did his drive to help others start, we wonder? “I would say, my dad...my dad was always there to help whoever. We had little old ladies living around us, so we were always going over to help here and there with the neighbors. It's just something we've always done.” This commitment to help others has characterized every job Joseph has ever held. It's part of his identity.

Joseph joined the US Marines seven days after he graduated from high school in Zion, Illinois. The decision was a no-brainer. “It was just something I always was going to do, didn't even think twice about it.” After his enlistment in the Marine Corps he joined the US Army Special Forces (Green Berets) as a medic.

He has a Purple Heart (a medal awarded to those wounded or killed in US military service), as did his father and grandfather. It took time and reflection over the last decade for Joseph to realize that “traumatic brain injury, anxiety, PTSD, depression, all that stuff [that's] going on” is “not normal” and get treatment. Joseph explains, “in our world, it's just normal because, I don't know, feels like all my friends have been shot at one point or another, or had some horrible traumatic thing in combat. It's just, you know, I was 20 years old when the towers fell, so my whole adult life's been preparing for combat, going to combat.”

When he was able to work again, Joseph became a representative for the Special Operations Command Care Coalition, supporting anybody from Special Operations who was wounded and sent to San Antonio, where he was based. “I was your guy on the ground. You know, doing whatever I could to help you out, whatever you needed, whatever your family needed. You had the hospital and they're doing a great job treating patients, and we were just that extra guy on the side.”

The job involved coordinating the support for others wounded in the military. It came with “crazy long hours” and Joseph did it while he, too, was still a patient. But he remembers it as a time when he was able to help others; he was “accomplishing something.” For example, he'd work with “a guy who just lost both his legs yesterday [and] is arriving at the hospital today at midnight; I'd pick up his mom and dad at the airport and [take] them [to] the hospital in Texas, getting the family all settled in so they can see their kid who just had the most traumatic thing happen to him.” It was emotional and tough, but, “It felt good. It felt right.” Being able to help patients and their families motivated him immensely – and the feeling of purpose and connection to beneficiaries is what motivates Joseph to return to tough work environments over and over again.

Joseph complete his training in emergency management at the State Department in March 2020, just a few months before the pandemic erupted and the first evacuation flights took place. He knew when he took the job that at some point, “the world’s going to explode; it doesn’t matter how it explodes, be it an earthquake, a volcano, a terrorist attack...if it goes wrong, we’re there to try to help and figure out solutions.” Joseph’s unit steps up when duty calls; it’s one of the reasons why he sought out this job at the State Department in the first place.

His current role has been among the most “rewarding” because he is connected to the purpose of his actions; he sees exactly how his job helps citizens. When COVID hit, Joseph and his team worked around the clock to evacuate Americans from countries shutting their borders. Yet, his eyes light up when he talks about this time because they were “bringing American citizens home from places that don’t have the medical support for COVID. That was huge.” The “relief on their faces” when the plane took off, or eventually landed back on US soil, motivated him to keep going. “Everything I’ve done since COVID started, ... bringing the medical supplies, delivering all that, and it’s just like, I know this is going to where it needs to be.” As with so many bureaucrats, creating public value sustains and strengthens Joseph’s mission motivation in difficult work environments.

Joseph is also clear to acknowledge the central role played by the management practices of agency leaders. He feels fortunate; “in my career, I’ve had, for the most part, very good leadership.” At the height of the COVID response, Joseph’s current manager, Dr. Walters, was “there at the craziest hours; you’d walk in and [see him] writing on the whiteboard with everyone else.” Dr. Walters’ willingness to roll up his sleeves is not the only leadership quality that reinforces Joseph’s mission motivation.

Dr. Walters supports Joseph’s team, every step of the way. “You can reach out to him 24 hours a day, no matter what... I know I can call the boss. Would I ever call Doc Walters directly? No. I’m gonna go up through the levels. But I know I can call my top boss and I know he’ll pick up. And that’s awesome to know... it’s huge.” Dr. Walters manages his team by drawing hierarchy into the background and offering support and guidance.

Joseph’s team relies on a strong culture of trust between leadership, bureaucrats, and their peers. Joseph explains that “being able to trust your team players, your coach, your teammates” is important. “Especially in a time of need... You know the need is there and then you see one guy step up, one gal steps up, and then another one steps up, and then you step up, and everybody’s helping each other at two o’clock in the morning... You know, this is why I’m here.”

In Joseph’s view, a team needs to be managed in a way that allows autonomy and creates connection to impact. For mission driven people to do the often difficult work that is asked of them, they need to see the fruit of their labor. Mission Driven Bureaucrats need to feel empowered, trusted, and impactful. “If I didn’t feel like I was accomplishing anything here and I didn’t feel like I was trusted, I probably wouldn’t be long for this job. No one would.” Luckily, State OpMed is just such a place - “That’s the great part about our organization, we’re given the opportunity to make decisions.”

It seems as if Joseph’s innate optimism, his calmness in the face of risk and tragedy, and desire to serve, will keep him in places “where crisis is happening.” The supportive management and

trusting work environment he's found will keep Joseph, and his peers, at the State Department. And the citizens who benefit from their service are all the better for it.