



**U.S. Department of State
Media Toolkit
February 2023**

“Meet the Diplomats of Color Representing the United States Around the World”

This series of interviews can be used in newsletters or publications by media outlets, universities, local stakeholders, and others to spread the word about opportunities to serve as the next generation of U.S. Diplomats.

Mignon Houston
Diplomat in Residence





CELEBRATING BLACK LEADERS IN DIPLOMACY

Representing the United States as a U.S. diplomat has been a dream come true. However, as someone from a small town, I was initially skeptical about my ability to succeed as a Foreign Service Officer. Now 16 years later, after serving in U.S. Missions in Mexico, Cameroon, the Philippines, and South Africa, as well as Washington, DC and Miami, Florida, I am grateful I remained persistent and did not allow my doubt to prevent me from taking that first step towards becoming a U.S. Foreign Service Officer.

This February, U.S. Diplomats are sharing their stories to inspire and encourage candidates from diverse geographic, educational, and cultural backgrounds to consider bringing their talents to the U.S. Department of State.

As America's leading foreign policy agency, we offer a wide range of careers and student internships and fellowships in fields ranging from political science, engineering, information technology, cyber security, economics, management, law enforcement, communications, health, and much more!

The stories in this Media Toolkit are here for you to repost, share, print and enjoy. They underscore the U.S. Department of State's commitment to building a workforce that is as diverse as our nation, and prove that dreams of global careers can actually come true.

Mignon Houston,
Diplomat in Residence for Florida, Puerto Rico, and the U.S. Virgin Islands



U.S. DEPARTMENT of STATE
• CAREERS REPRESENTING AMERICA •



Featured Diplomats



Darion Akins
Management Officer

Q: Where have you served?

DARION: Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia; Mumbai, India; Kabul, Afghanistan; Sydney, Australia; Jakarta, Indonesia; Hamburg, Germany; and Washington D.C. (twice).

Q: What was your journey to STATE?

DARION: My journey began thousands of miles from home in Zambia, where I was serving as a Peace Corps Volunteer. There I met a U.S. embassy official, who concluded that I would make a good diplomat. He encouraged me to join the Foreign Service, but having zero inkling about such a career, I demurred. During one of life's crossroad-moments five years later while working in Japan, the seed he planted finally germinated. I took the examination, and the rest is history.

Q: What do you do in your job?

DARION: I endeavor to either prevent or resolve problems that might hinder the smooth operations of an overseas embassy or consulate. As a Management Officer, one begins his or her career supervising a unit, such as finance, human resources, real estate, or general services and progresses to managing the supervisors of all these units -- plus information technology. The goal is to ensure that an embassy or consulate is properly staffed and financially resourced so that policy priorities are successfully implemented.

Q: Can you share a career highlight?

DARION: After several speaking engagements, I discovered that Australian university students viewed China as a rising power; one that would inevitably eclipse the United States as Australia's principle foreign partner. To counter this developing narrative, I led an interagency effort to establish the consulate's first student internship program whereby these Australian student interns worked alongside Australian and American staff. This firsthand experience allowed the students to understand the importance of the bilateral relationship. Eleven years later, the program is still operating.



*"According to adage, the only impossible journey is the one you never begin." So, begin your journey today by unfurling your proverbial wings and soaring with us at the Department of State." **Darion Akins***

Featured Diplomats



Levia Davis

Information Management Officer

Q: Where have you served?

LEVIA: Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates; Guatemala City, Guatemala; and Freetown, Sierra Leone.

Q: What was your journey to STATE?

LEVIA: I am a proud Florida native and graduated from Florida Agricultural and Mechanical University (FAMU). I studied computer information systems with a minor in business administration. I had a couple of IT-based internships and also taught English in Japan through the Japan Exchange and Teaching (JET) Program. While in Japan, a friend encouraged me to consider the U.S. Foreign Service. I submitted several applications on USAJOBS.gov, including an application for Information Management Specialist (IMS). I then reached out to the Diplomat in Residence in Florida. From there, I took the assessment, passed, and the rest is history.

Q: What do you do in your job?

LEVIA: I manage all information, communication, and systems at U.S. missions. This includes providing system and network administration. In addition, I manage radio and satellite communications, telephones (digital/analog/cellular), and diplomatic mail. As an IMS, I help create a vision for the IT section at U.S. missions abroad. The best part of the job is working with local staff. The local staff at overseas missions are the most capable and knowledgeable experts in their fields!

Q: Can you share a career highlight?

LEVIA: During my tour in Guatemala, I helped facilitate Vice President Kamala Harris' first international trip. This ranged from working with the White House, to collaborating with her staff. It was hard work, but very rewarding. Secondly, something that's very important to me, is the work I do with the Diversity, Equity, Inclusion and Accessibility (DEIA) Council here at the U.S. Embassy in Freetown. Our goal is to organize programs and recommend policy to promote diversity and equitable treatment of all employees.



"You don't have to be an expert on everything, but you should be resourceful and know who to reach out to when necessary." Levia Davis

Featured Diplomats



Ann Tsewole

Medical Provider

Q: Where have you served?

ANN: Lilongwe, Malawi; Kinshasa, Democratic Republic of the Congo; Yaoundé, Cameroon; Colombo, Sri Lanka; Manama, Bahrain; Washington, DC (Temporary Duty Assignment); Islamabad, Pakistan; and Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso (next posting).

Q: What was your journey to STATE?

ANN: I found out about the U.S. Department of State by accident! Prior to joining, I had over half a decade of work experience in clinical settings as a Family Nurse Practitioner. I also worked as a biomedical Research Assistant at Harvard Medical School and at Massachusetts General Hospital's Dermatology Department where research team members and I successfully grew hair on nude mice in our quest to combat human baldness. During the last year of serving my commitment to the National Health Service Corps Scholarship Program, my husband and I contemplated our next career move. As he flipped through one of my Nurse Practitioner journals, he found an announcement to join the U.S. Department of State. I applied for what is now called the Medical Provider Officer position and started in less than a year!

Q: What do you do in your job?

ANN: I employ medical diplomacy by providing primary healthcare to U.S. diplomats and their families overseas. I manage all aspects of customer-focused healthcare via Embassy Health Unit operations including treating urgent and chronic medical conditions, providing community health education, and facilitating post's emergency preparedness. I obtain knowledge of each post's local medical capabilities in order to liaise and expedite optimal medical support to our diplomats around the world.

Q: Can you share a career highlight?

ANN: I helped to prevent the Secretary of State from being exposed to COVID at a time when the death tolls were mounting and there were no vaccines or available treatment options. While working at the Bureau of Medical Service's 24-hour COVID task force in Washington, DC, I responded to one of the Secretary's staffers who complained of feeling ill less than 24-hours prior to a scheduled critical trip with the Secretary. Without delay, I assessed and swabbed the staffer, who unfortunately tested positive. With limited time before the flight, I worked swiftly after-hours to test another key staffer. Luckily, the back-up tested negative and was cleared to travel on this important trip less than 8 hours before departure.



"Joining the Foreign Service is more than a job. It is a wonderful and life changing decision, it is a lifestyle." Ann Tsewole

Featured Diplomats



Gaïna Dávila
Public Affairs Officer

Q: Where have you served?

GAINA: Yangon, Myanmar; Dhaka, Bangladesh; Bridgetown, Barbados; Washington, DC; and Conakry, Guinea.

Q: What was your journey to STATE?

GAINA: While studying international relations at American University, I met another Haitian-American who was a Thomas R. Pickering Fellow through the U.S. Department of State. She connected me to a cohort of Pickering Fellows at Tufts University. They encouraged me to apply. Once accepted as a Fellow, I interned at the U.S. Embassy in Yangon, Myanmar and the Bureau of South and Central Asian Affairs (SCA). It was this strong community and the Pickering Fellowship that prepared me to move across the globe to South Asia for my first assignment.

Q: What do you do in your job?

GAINA: I communicate and educate foreign publics on U.S. policy, while strengthening our relationships and cultural ties on the ground. I engage directly with foreign media, civil society, host governments, and cultural and educational institutions. Functionally, I facilitate cultural programs, identify foreign students to study on U.S. exchange programs, and serve as a press spokesperson for U.S. missions abroad.

Q: Can you share a career highlight?

GAINA: I am really proud of the work I did in Guinea. When I arrived, the Guinean presidential election tested the strength of the country's democratic and security institutions all while threatening stability in West Africa. A few months later, there was a second Ebola outbreak and then a coup d'état. Through all of that, I built a strong and active team, relatively early in my career. Together, we were able to navigate our relationship with Guineans throughout the turbulent political period—I received multiple awards for my work in Guinea. Being Haitian-American, I understood the pride Guineans have in their own history, even when the reality seems extremely difficult. This cultural understanding supported my work.



"You should work to build strong lateral relationships with your peers and colleagues, and look to see how you can give back as you move forward. Most importantly, never take counsel of your fears or naysayers." **Gaïna Davila**

Featured Diplomats



J. Nathan Bland

Economic Officer

Q: Where have you served?

J. NATHAN: Shenyang, China; Vatican, Italy; Washington, DC; Belmopan, Belize; Mexico City, Mexico, and New Orleans, Louisiana.

Q: What was your journey to STATE?

J. NATHAN: Both of my parents served in the U.S. Army. So, the idea of U.S. government service and living in foreign countries came quite natural to me. I spent most of my youth between northwest and southwest Louisiana, but my parents encouraged me to see the world. I studied abroad in London and Hong Kong, and also taught English in the far northwest region of China in Xinjiang. While studying, I happened to see an advertisement in a magazine that read, “Be the Face of America to the World.” I had just finished being the “Face of America” in Xinjiang, so I thought, I’d like to continue on a more official and professional level!

Q: What do you do in your job?

J. NATHAN: As an Economic Officer overseas, I report on economic-related issues (including energy, environment, science technology and health) highlighting major developments, events, AND why it matters to the United States. I meet with a wide range of contacts including government officials, NGO leaders, academics, business people, and others to get a deep understanding of the issues I cover in the host country. I also support visits from U.S. government officials who visit the country to engage on issues related to my portfolios.

Q: Can you share a career highlight?

J. NATHAN: A few years ago, the Bureau of East Asian and Pacific Affairs asked me to serve on a temporary assignment in the Solomon Islands. As the sole U.S. diplomat, I single-handedly worked with Solomon Islands government officials to expand our engagement with the South Pacific island nation. I remember looking at my location one evening on Google maps, and zooming out to see that I was literally in the middle of the gigantic Pacific Ocean! These are the adventures that a U.S. Department of State career can give you.



“Be persistent and do not be discouraged. It may take a lot of time, energy, and effort, but this career is worth it.” J. Nathan Bland

Featured Diplomats



Candice Helton

Senior Communications Advisor for the Secretary's Office of Global Women

Q: What was your journey to STATE and where you have served?

CANDICE: I began my career as a Pathways intern in the Office of Recruitment and Outreach at the U.S. Department of State, a position I applied to on USAjobs.gov. After graduating from Winston-Salem State University with my BA in Mass Communications, I converted to the Civil Service as a Public Affairs Specialist in the Bureau of Conflict and Stabilization Operations (CSO). I served in CSO for almost 5 years and transitioned to the Bureau of Global Public Affairs (GPA) for 2.5 years. I currently serve as the Senior Communications Advisor for the Secretary's Office of Global Women's Issues (S/GWI).

Q: What do you do in your job?

CANDICE: I lead the strategic communications efforts that support U.S. foreign policy to promote the social, political, and economic advancement of women and girls in all their diversity around the world. I help organize and facilitate large-scale engagements with U.S. and foreign dignitaries as well as draft documents that influence U.S. programming around women's issues globally.

Q: Can you share a career highlight?

CANDICE: My greatest highlight of my career was spearheading the U.S. Department of State's Historically Black College and University Foreign Policy Conference. For three years in a row, I helped bring thousands of HBCU students and faculty together to hear remarks from the U.S. Secretary of State, the U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations, as well as members of the U.S. Foreign Service and Civil Service. The forums inspired a new generation of American diplomats, and I am fortunate to have had the opportunity to help lead it.



"Take advantage of every position and opportunity in your professional journey. In each of my roles at the Department, I gained invaluable experience. As I have grown in my profession, I now have a better appreciation for how those opportunities shaped my perspectives." **Candice Helton**

Featured Diplomats



Cheveda Fergerson

Office Management Specialist

Q: Where have you served?

CHEVEDA: Shanghai, China; Warsaw, Poland; Berlin, Germany; Washington, DC; Islamabad, Pakistan; and Bern, Switzerland.

Q: What was your journey to STATE?

CHEVEDA: My journey was a little unusual. While teaching English in Japan, a Diplomat at the U.S. Embassy in Tokyo approached me about considering the U.S. Foreign Service. I signed-up for the exam, but when I did not pass, I returned to my hometown of South Carolina to consider my next steps. After researching opportunities with the U.S. government, I discovered I had a number of valuable skills for the Office Management Specialist (OMS) position. Fast forward a year later, after passing the OMS exams, I began orientation as an OMS Specialist!

Q: What do you do in your job?

CHEVEDA: I am responsible for office and administrative tasks. Overall, I use my organizational, time management, and project management skills to advance U.S. missions through a process I call, “pushing people and pushing paper!” I serve as the administrative liaison to foreign governments and agencies and lead various projects. For example, I will be the control officer for an Ambassador at the World Economic Forum later this month.

Q: Can you share a career highlight?

CHEVEDA: In the Fall of 2016, I traveled and supported logistics for Secretary of State John Kerry in Kigali, Rwanda for the Montreal Protocol while serving on the Secretariat Staff. I also visited the Kigali Genocide Memorial, which was a powerful experience. Another highlight occurred during my third month on the job in China, when I had the great pleasure of meeting President Obama while visiting with Secretary Clinton. These experiences set the bar pretty high for my career in diplomacy!



“I would recommend seeking a mentor to help plot your next steps in applying to U.S. government positions. U.S. government resumes are slightly different and it can be beneficial to seek guidance and support.” Cheveda Fergerson

Featured Diplomats



Shersil Prentice
Management Officer

Q: What was your journey to STATE?

SHERSIL: I spent the first 14 years of my life in the British Virgin Islands, and then my family moved to St. Thomas in the U.S. Virgin Islands. While studying at the University of Miami, I researched numerous study-abroad opportunities. I became a Gilman Scholar in Prague, Czech Republic and a Fulbright teaching assistant in Malaysia - both U.S. Department of State programs. While in Malaysia, a U.S. diplomat encouraged me to consider the U.S. Foreign Service. However, I was already committed to the Teach for America program. After teaching for two years, I returned to the Virgin Islands to work with the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) in the aftermath of Hurricanes Irma and Maria. Here, a colleague again brought up the U.S. Foreign Service and that's when I knew. I pursued the Charles B. Rangel Graduate Fellowship and graduated with my Master's from Duke University. I am now on track to begin my first assignment as a Management Officer in Lomé, Togo.

Q: Can you share what you do as a Charles B. Rangel Fellow?

SHERSIL: As a Rangel Fellow, I received financial assistance and mentorship from the U.S. Department of State, which provided a first-hand glimpse of what to expect as a U.S. Foreign Service Officer. As a Fellow, I joined a cohort with diverse experiences, from being a first-generation immigrant to taking care of families at home. Together, we utilized our academic and professional resources as a network to support each other through graduate school and now professionally.

Q: Can you share a professional highlight?

SHERSIL: I was drawn to the Management Track due to my foundation working in emergency management response with FEMA in the Virgin Islands. While engaging with local communities, governments, and stakeholders, I could offer a familiar accent, face, and culture. I also supported people with disabilities and those with access and functional needs, which has greatly influenced my interest in Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Accessibility. I loved working in the Virgin Islands, it remains one of my professional highlights.



"Identify your goals, do your research on career and student opportunities, and work backwards to achieve those goals based on the options available. But through it all, never lose sight of your why."

Shersil Prentice

Thank you for viewing our Media Toolkit!

We hope these shared experiences contribute to your efforts to celebrate the contributions of Black Americans this month as well as inspire the next generation of foreign policy leaders.

To request additional media interviews based on the Media Toolkit, please contact Diplomat in Residence Mignon Houston at DIRFlorida@state.gov

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