



Ep. 13: Mary Beth Leonard (CAS'84), US Ambassador to the African Union

Host: Jeff Murphy (Questrom'06), BU Alumni Relations

Becoming an effective storyteller at home and abroad has served Ambassador Mary Beth Leonard (CAS'84) well throughout her distinguished career in foreign service. Having held diplomatic positions in Cameroon, Namibia, Togo, South Africa, Mali and more, Ambassador Leonard has transformed her BU experience into a career dedicated to building a more peaceful and prosperous Africa. She was appointed as the US Ambassador to the African Union in 2016 by President Barack Obama and in her conversation on Proud to BU, Ambassador Leonard shares a behind-the-scenes look at her journey navigating the complexities of international diplomatic relations.

Podcast Transcript:

- Jeff Murphy: I'm Jeff Murphy from Boston University Alumni Relations and I'm your host for an interview series showcasing the career paths of our most interesting and accomplished alumni. Welcome to the Proud to BU podcast.
- Mary Beth Leonard: My guest today is US ambassador to the African Union, Mary Beth Leonard. Upon receiving her degree in economics from the College of Arts and Sciences in 1984. Ambassador Leonard went on to earn master's degrees from both Johns Hopkins and the US Naval War College. Throughout her distinguished career in public service, Ambassador Leonard has served an economic and diplomatic posts in Cameroon, Namibia, South Africa, and Mali just to name a few. While on a recent trip to Djibouti, she took time out of a very busy schedule to join me on the podcast to explore her extraordinary career and reflect on her journey beyond BU. Ambassador Mary Beth Leonard, thank you so much for making time in your schedule to be on the Proud to BU podcast. I'm really excited to speak with you today.
- Mary Beth Leonard: I am very glad to be here. Thanks for the invitation.
- Jeff Murphy: If I'm understanding correctly, you are in Djibouti today, are you able to tell us a little bit about what your trip to Djibouti is all about?
- Mary Beth Leonard: Yes, absolutely. I'm here for an East Africa security conference and so it's basically the bilateral ambassadors from East Africa and me and my role as ambassador to the EU getting together with some of our counterparts from the State Department in Washington and officers here at the military command to talk about the direction of Africa policy.
- Jeff Murphy: Well, I certainly want to spend some time talking about all the amazing work that you've been doing over the years in Africa, but in order to get us started, I kind of want to, you know, um, search your origin story. Did you grow up dreaming of Foreign Service and helping other nations as an ambassador or how did that play out for you?
- Mary Beth Leonard: Um, I wouldn't, I wouldn't say grew up dreaming of that. In high school I was pretty good at French and I remember having you know, conversations with myself about what I might possibly do with that. I can remember sitting in the break room at high school at some point

with one of my friends looking at the foreign service exam, the State Department recruiting brochure about the content of the foreign service exam. And he and I were reading the sample questions, it's like, oh, we could so pass this test. And actually I think when I was in high school that was far from true. But luckily it turned out to be true several years later. Um, and so I was, I was very pleased to launch a diplomatic career.

Jeff Murphy: And one of the reasons I was excited to chat with you is I know you are originally from Worcester. I grew up just outside of Worcester so I've got some central Mass pride that I'm guessing you have as well. Were your parents sort of globally minded or did you, were you, raised in a family to sort of think about that, or is it really just kind of that experience you had in high school and your passion for languages?

Mary Beth Leonard: No, I wouldn't say that we are globally-minded family. I think it may be that I was the first person in my family to have a US passport. When I went as a high school musician on a trip to Ireland with a bunch of high school musicians from around the town. I am the granddaughter of one of my four grandparents, was a direct immigrant from Italy. And I think growing up it was, there was sort of this idea that one had left behind a former incarnation to have a new start here. And so the emphasis was very much on the United States.

Jeff Murphy: So, in high school you already had a passion for French. How did you end up at BU? What were some of the other things on the table and how did you end up on Comm Ave?

Mary Beth Leonard: I would say probably the biggest factor that got me to Comm Ave is that I got a really great financial aid offer from the BU. I was sort of looking, there's a, there are wide variety of universities in my hometown in Worcester as you're aware. And you know, my father's kind of default, who was a very practical man was, "Oh, there are all these good colleges here. Why would you need to go away?" And then, you know, it wasn't so far away, it was only an hour down the road. But there was a really lovely offer and I was anxious for the opportunity to flee my home for the big city. And so to BU I came.

Jeff Murphy: And so I definitely want to talk about your experience as an undergrad. Where did you live on campus?

Mary Beth Leonard: My first year, stereotypically, I was in Warren Towers, I think on the 14th floor. And I think it was the A tower. Sophomore year I was in 'la Maison Francaise' on Bay State Road. Junior year I studied abroad, before BU had their own study abroad programs actually, on the international student exchange program in Grenoble, France. And then senior year I was living in Chestnut Hill as an au pair with some BU faculty.

Jeff Murphy: Oh wow, that's fascinating. So obviously you got really involved in the French house as a sophomore. Were there other student organizations, language-based or not, that you got involved with or played a role in, you know, where were you hanging out like as a student, where were you spending your time?

Mary Beth Leonard: Yeah, I mean the Masion Francaise, I think had a tendency to hang out with the international house and the other language-themed houses. So that sort of put me on a path to hang around with a lot of international students. You know, Bay State Road sophomore year was a pretty magical place to be. I still have fond memories of, my room actually looked out on the intersection where the president's office is onto Bay State Road and you know, the first snowfall of the season and everybody running outside and having a snowball fight at 2:00 AM. Though, it was a fun time.



- Jeff Murphy: Obviously you've got this passion for French, but if I'm reading our records correctly, you actually ended up majoring in Economics. How did you decide to do Economics with a French minor?
- Mary Beth Leonard: Well, see, I actually had room to do a double major in French and in Economics. My original interest in economics was that I felt like I should have something to accompany a foreign language skill, that there should be another core skill that went with it. I realized I would have time to do a double major, but it would've required taking two more courses out of a selection of, I don't know, 15th, 16th and 17th century French, and really I kind of just wanted to talk so I stuck with the French minor. And it was through studying economics that I realized that I found most interesting in that sphere development economics. So, my little brain was like, "Well, you like development economics and you speak French, so maybe you ought to look at Africa." And that's basically the first choice that led to the series of choices of how I got into this line of work.
- Jeff Murphy: So even as an undergrad at BU, you already had an interest in Africa or did that come later?
- Jeff Murphy: Yeah, so basically I, about the time I came back from studying abroad in France, where obviously, you know, I met a lot of African students as well. I began to put those two dots together and so I took in the fall semester I took... I don't remember which was which. But anyway, I took one course in African History since 1865 and then another course on the Economic Development of Africa. Even back in the dark ages of the early 1980s, BU had a pretty impressive Africa-focused faculty. And so I began to get into some of the meat of it and decide that I was really fascinated by the continent.
- Jeff Murphy: And looking back, were there other classes or specific faculty members that still stand out to you as having a real impact on you when you were at BU?
- Mary Beth Leonard: Yeah, for not having been a French major, I very much appreciated the leadership in the French department. It was a very welcoming and congenial crowd. And then of course, you know the family that I was staying with, the mom was, in my senior year, the mom was the director of the Study Abroad office, that was my work study job. And the Dad was the dean of CLA. So I got to be exposed to a lot of people and the conversations in their home about a broader world.
- Jeff Murphy: So I know you graduated '84 and then, if I have your history right, you ended up going to Johns Hopkins after that. How did you make that decision to continue your education?
- Mary Beth Leonard: So when I first got out of college, I got a job with the defense department as an analyst so I was living in the DC area. And one of the nice things about federal government employment is that they had, I assume they still do, but at that point they had very good tuition benefits. And so I was able to begin part time study at Hopkins at that point. As I was looking at graduate school, I was looking at the international relations programs in the DC area. And what distinguishes the Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies program is that it has sort of equal weight on the need to have economic competence as well as a regional specialty or a functional specialty. So since I had so prized economics and my education, I was particularly attracted to that program. So I began part time, it's a good thing that you work full time and go to school part time when you're young because it was a really exhausting schedule. And then I was fortunate enough to get a fellowship to go finish up my second year, the second half of the curriculum, full time. And then I graduated from SAIS in '88.



Jeff Murphy: And so right after graduation you're back with the State Department, right?

Mary Beth Leonard: Yes. I had incurred an obligation to the federal government in general, although not to any agency in particular. So I was able to transfer that obligation and basically, you know, graduated whatever day it is in May or June that you graduate and began in the Foreign Service on June 13th. So it's 1988. So it worked out very well.

Jeff Murphy: I think I read an article that you were quoted in just saying how challenging it is to be accepted to the foreign service. I wonder if you could tell, I know we have so many students and alumni that would be interested in that topic. What's it like to interview with the State Department and, and what advice do you have for people about who are interested in going through that process?

Mary Beth Leonard: Oh, I'm a good person to ask that question because I spent a year as the diplomat in residence for New England and have this conversation with all kinds of students. So basically getting into the foreign service is a multi-step process, which begins with a written exam. I cannot finish this interview without saying the words, www.careers.state.gov. It's a, that is the State Department website that has, for example, a practice exam consisting of old exam questions. There is an app that you can play with to answer old exam questions. I think that this is actually the State Department's gift to students everywhere because it is a fabulous vehicle, that website, for procrastination, and heaven knows every student needs that. So you begin with a written exam, if you make it through that, we ask you to write an essay explaining why you, how you embody the qualities that we search for and we can talk a little bit about what those are. And then if you make it past that hurdle, there is a half day or more oral assessment and then based on that you get on a register and X number of people are hired every year off of that register. So it's a lengthy process. It's a very competitive process that, as I used to say to people when I was recruiting, it's also a process for which you can look ahead and make life decisions that will help make you more competitive for what it is that we search for. And we very much encourage people to think about that.

Jeff Murphy: So your first full-time work following grad school, that's when you first moved to Africa, right?

Mary Beth Leonard: Yup, my first tour was in Yaounde, Cameroon, and talking about things coming full circle, the deputy chief of mission is the number two person in the embassy and my second year in Yaounde, the deputy chief of mission was Tibor Nagy who was just sworn in as Assistant Secretary for African Affairs a couple of months ago. So I had this fun conversation, email conversation, when he got nominated, it was like, "Tibor, I don't know about you, but circa 1990, I'm not sure that I was thinking 'Mary Beth and Tibor, Ambassador and Assistant Secretary', but isn't life wonderful?"

Jeff Murphy: And so can you walk us through sort of the next decade of your career. I know you spent time, I believe in Namibia and Togo as well?

Mary Beth Leonard: So your first two assignments in the foreign service are directed. The entry level division says where you will go. Every new foreign service officer spends at least part of their first two tours doing counselor work that's helping American citizens abroad, issuing or denying immigrant and non-immigrant visas. And Namibia was a really fun time to get there. I arrived only five or six months after independence, so there was the long process of extricating Namibia from internationally contested claim by South Africa to the ability to rule that country. So there was a great deal of energy and enthusiasm and it was a very fun time



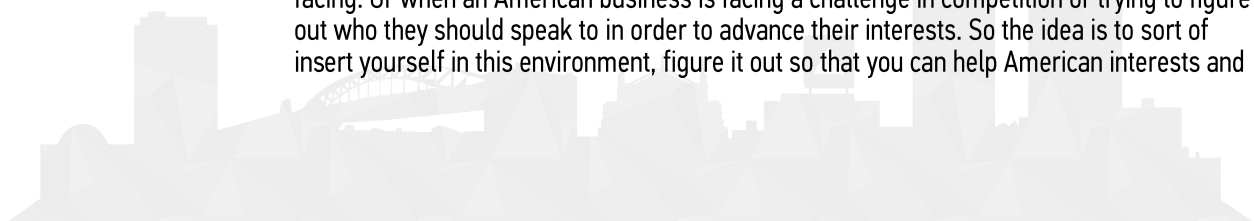
to be there. After that, I went back to the United States and worked in something called the Operational Center, which is a 24 hour-a-day briefing and alerting mechanism. So that's great fun. You sort of keep up on the news and when something happens in the world and if it's the middle of the night or even in the daytime, you let the people in the State Department who have a dog in that fight or have an interest in that issue, to let them know that something has occurred. And then I worked as a desk officer in the Office of Central African Affairs. At first I was responsible for Cameroon and Equatorial Guinea and then later, because I'm that old, I was desk officer for Zaire, It was still "Zaire". But desk officer is basically sort of the worker bee of bilateral relations, you know, you write the briefing memos, you write the press guidance. A foreign official is coming to the United States, who in the United States government should they meet? What sorts of topics will they be interested in talking about? It's a, it's a really fun job.

Jeff Murphy: So I'm curious to, as you reflect back on those first few tours, what are the things that you did, are they project based or otherwise, that you're really proud of, that stand out in your career. And then also, were there hard lessons that you learned along the way that really helped shape the rest of your career?

Mary Beth Leonard: Yeah, I mean, I think when you join the foreign service it's an interesting transition. I mean, it's a very different lifestyle and that's why we stress some of the personal qualities that we do in the recruiting process. We have something that you would find on www.careers.state.gov called the 13 dimensions, which are the personal qualities that we believe would prep you for success in the diplomatic service. I used to joke that I always felt like kind of a cult leader talking about 13 dimensions, but it's things like oral and written communication skills, objectivity, good judgment, adaptability, did I already say objective? Go look at the website, You can see the other seven. But basically it's 13 qualities that taken together, describe someone who you can take and put someplace where they don't belong and figure it out and do sensible things and take up your role. So that's a bit of a leap when you first get there, because then you are being thrown into a place where you don't belong and you need to figure it out. I think the process gets easier the longer you're in the foreign service because while you're moving from culture to culture and from job to job, in so far as you move from one overseas place to another, you're still in the construct of a US embassy and US embassies work the same way all over the world. So there's a chunk of your life that's kind of plug and play in terms of who works in an embassy, what different types of positions are populated and then there's the individual portfolio of what is our relationship with this particular country and how do we advance US interests? How do we protect American citizens, promote American business, engage in the relationship of the United States with this particular country?

Jeff Murphy: One of the questions I wanted to ask you that's maybe not so much related to, well I guess it is related to your career, but are there challenges that the foreign service faces in Africa that maybe other people working in foreign service in other continents or countries don't run into? Are there unique challenges as somebody working in Africa?

Mary Beth Leonard: I would say that probably in Africa we have more hardship posts than in other parts of the world. So, you know, the ability to learn how to organize yourself, to exist in that environment. I think that every place in the world is interesting. You know, you get there and it's your functional life to learn how to, I don't know, kind of wire this country, to understand how it works so that when an American citizen gets in trouble, you know where to refer them to something or you know, where they are and what circumstances they might be facing. Or when an American business is facing a challenge in competition or trying to figure out who they should speak to in order to advance their interests. So the idea is to sort of insert yourself in this environment, figure it out so that you can help American interests and



also the conduct of foreign policy, the sharing and receiving of information between two countries. I think for me, if you asked me a minute ago about something that I was proudest about, when I was ambassador in Mali, we had one of my most cherished successes, which was in succeeding in organizing the extradition of a Malian national who had murdered a US government employee in Niger about 10 years earlier. And basically he had been in jail in Mali and escaped and then he'd been in jail in Niger on charges related to crimes against some Saudi nationals, and during the unrest in the Sahel that attended that period of about 2012/2013, there was a big prison break in Niger and he ended up back in Mali and in custody of the Malians as they, along with the French, did security operations in the north of Mali. Mali is a country that typically does not extradite its citizens. It doesn't have that provision in its law. And sort of working the relationships that I had with the Justice Minister and with the government, we worked really hard over a four month period and succeeded in a first ever in Africa, or maybe even first ever internationally, use of an international treaty on the status of protected persons because the guy who had been murdered in Niger was a diplomat and got him extradited to justice in the United States where he pays trial in New York. So it was something that I took very personally. I mean, it was someone from the defense attache's office who was killed and a marine security guard was injured, they had been out for dinner in Niamey and in a carjacking ended up being killed by the would-be carjacker. And so, you know, I knew who in my embassy were the equivalent personalities and I could just imagine how devastating it would be to have your staff go out to do something as human as enjoy a meal together and come to that kind of end. So, I was really, really grateful that we were able to pull that off a team effort with FBI and with DOD and with law enforcement and in the United States and the embassy.

Jeff Murphy:

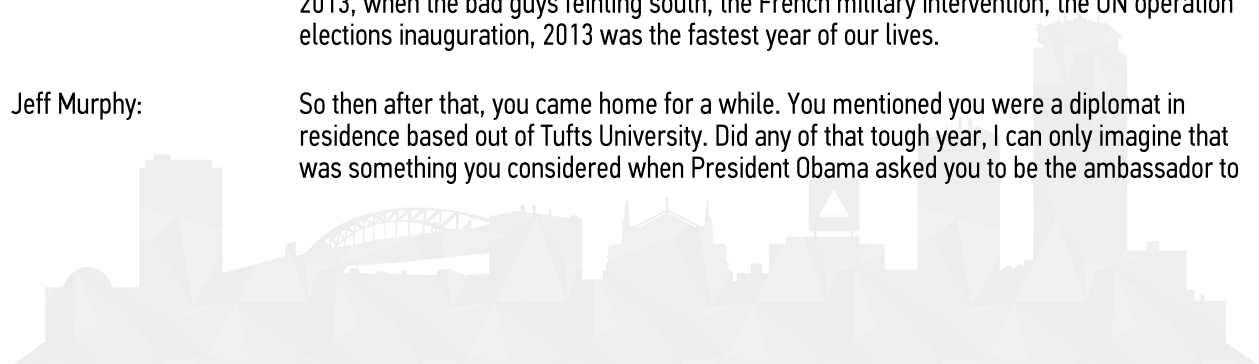
That's an incredible story, I have to say. I don't mean to boil it down to this, but I could see the movie playing out in my head as you're telling me this story. It's incredible. I wonder if you have a future as, you know, you must have a book in you at some point. We'll get, we'll get to that later. But if, I don't know if I've got my timeline correct, when you were also in Mali during a coup, is that right?

Mary Beth Leonard:

Yeah, I served in Mali twice from 2006 to 2009 as a Deputy Chief of Mission, the number two person, and then I was West Africa Director for two years, and then I was ambassador from 2011 to 2014 so I had a credible contender for the title of Sahel girl. But yeah, I arrived back in Mali in November of 2011 and in the early part of 2012, there was basically an army mutiny that was glommed onto our political purposes and turned into a coup. And it was a, it was a very, very difficult time. And we know there was a coup, there was a counter-coup attempt that happened from a military base very close to the embassy and bunch of us got trapped in the embassy for a couple of days and we had to sleep there a situation that the foreign service refers to as Embassy Suites. And then there was taking advantage of the chaos in the north of Mali. A foreign-based extremist teamed up with rebels to basically cause the fall of northern Mali to Muslim extremists. Which triggered, eventually they began to do a feint south towards Bamako that triggered a military intervention by the French, followed by a West Africa intervention and finally a UN operation to help bring Mali back to some semblance of, well-passed elections and attempts to systematically address the variety of security challenges that confronted it. So it was a very tough few years. In the diplomatic corps in Mali, we referred to 2012 as the longest year of our lives. We referred to 2013, when the bad guys feinting south, the French military intervention, the UN operation elections inauguration, 2013 was the fastest year of our lives.

Jeff Murphy:

So then after that, you came home for a while. You mentioned you were a diplomat in residence based out of Tufts University. Did any of that tough year, I can only imagine that was something you considered when President Obama asked you to be the ambassador to



the African Union. How was that a tough decision for you to make? Or was it something that you immediately said, "of course I'll do it"?

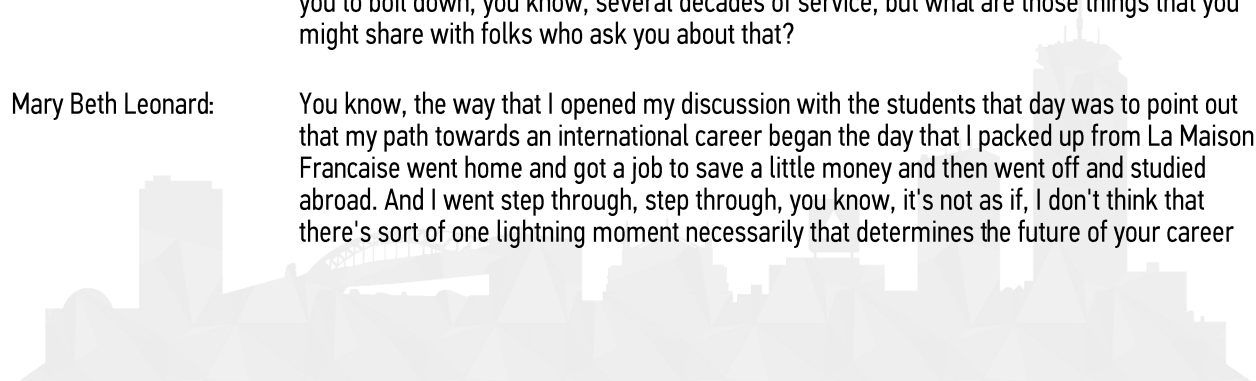
Mary Beth Leonard: Oh, I said, of course I'll do it. And, you know, look at my resume. So I mean, I started in the foreign service in 1988, I had two years in Cameroon two in Namibia, back in the United States for two and a half years working on Central African Affairs, then I was in Cape Town for four years. No, that's not true. I was in Lome for two years, and I was in Cape Town for four years. My one out of Africa tour was in Suriname, twice in Mali, so basically a couple of decades of experience working on Africa issues, and the idea that you could go from the BU student who used that educational opportunity to first learn about Africa and figure out that your language set fit that bill, to ending up being the person who directs the US relationship with the most important multilateral organization on the continent, well that was hard to pass up.

Jeff Murphy: So you obviously have dedicated your career to helping build a, as I think you've put it, I saw a video that you had put up on Facebook, a peaceful and prosperous Africa. If you, as the ambassador to the African Union, could wave your magic wand and make some things happen for the African Union, what would those changes be? What would you want to see?

Jeff Murphy: Well, first of all if you're going to talk about what the African Union does in one sentence, you would say that they exist to amalgamate and disseminate best practices. Whether it's on peace and security, or agricultural development, or health or whatever. And so if that's their one sentence job description, my one sentence job description is to help make them be better at doing that. So we support a lot of those efforts, you know, try to share best practices, support their efforts in those various areas. I think that's its actually a really exciting time in particular on the economic front for Africa. The continent is about to, or is on a path to, ratify a continental free trade agreement with the very specific goal of better economic, regional integration, so that Africa can trade more with itself, become a more compelling presence on the world trade stage. At the same time, the United States just invoked two very important tools for helping Africa in that way. One is the Build Act, which is something that has created a financial development corporation or will October 1st of 2019, which doubles the budget that the United States has to do political risk insurance, adds the ability to take equity stakes in investments. And so targeting lower income and lower middle income countries, i.e. a lot of Africa emerging markets targeting them to make themselves more attractive for US businesses to help them come in and grow and integrate regionally. So I think it's a very, and the second thing is an authority for the Millennium Challenge Corporation, which does sort of on average, like \$395 million projects in infrastructure sorts of things. So we have two really new important tools to help Africa in its efforts to build infrastructure, integrate economically, regionally. So I think it's an exciting time on the, on the trade investment and economic front for the United States and for Africa.

Jeff Murphy: I think I mentioned earlier, I know you were back on campus just a year ago or so, at the Parry School for Global Studies, meeting with some students and faculty, reflecting on your decades of experience in Africa. What kind of advice do you have to share with, you know, students who are curious about careers in foreign service? And I realize that's sort of asking you to boil down, you know, several decades of service, but what are those things that you might share with folks who ask you about that?

Mary Beth Leonard: You know, the way that I opened my discussion with the students that day was to point out that my path towards an international career began the day that I packed up from La Maison Francaise went home and got a job to save a little money and then went off and studied abroad. And I went step through, step through, you know, it's not as if, I don't think that there's sort of one lightning moment necessarily that determines the future of your career



but I think that there are a lot of individual decisions that make you competitive for the foreign service and basically is accessible to, as you can see, a BU student, who this many years later is here. I think that if you, I used to tell people when I was recruiting that, think about what would give you, what would make you more competitive in those 13 dimensions? And it's not necessarily study abroad. It could be, and it's not even necessarily international service. Sure, the Peace Corps would give you a lot of great experience along those lines. But so would Americorps, think about if your goal and striving for the foreign service is to demonstrate that we can put you someplace where you don't belong and you can figure it out, well then think about things that you could do in your life, like going to teach in a place that's not where you're from or you know, being an RA in your university where you have a diverse set of students who are living there and exercise those skills, exercise those skills of adaptability and objectivity and good governance and good judgment so that you can be competitive for this career. I also told those students, and I used to say this on a regular basis when I was recruiting, is that I had fun in the foreign service almost every single day for going on pretty soon, 31 years. So it's a deeply rewarding career to serve your government. It's a way of seeing countries overseas that you'd never do as a tourist or even as a long-term resident of a country and I've felt really privileged all these years.

Jeff Murphy: You had highlighted some of the exciting things that are happening in the African Union, but what about you personally with your career when you think about the next decade ahead? I made a joke about you writing a book. I certainly think that you could write a really interesting one, but what's coming up for you? Can you, can you share that with us?

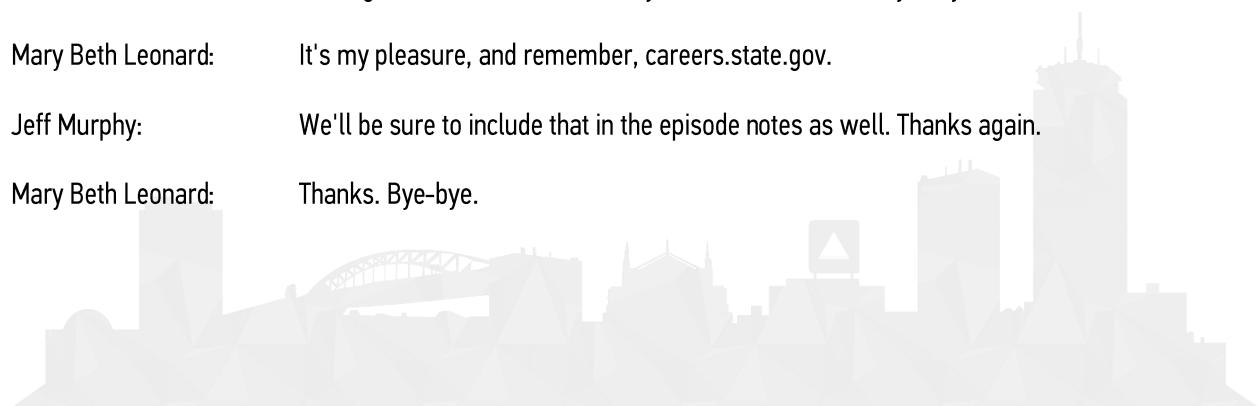
Mary Beth Leonard: Well, first of all, I don't know about writing a book, but you know, one of the things that foreign service officers do is effectively tell stories. We tell stories to our foreign audience about what the United States thinks about X, Y, and Z. And then we explain what it is that that country thinks to the audience of the United States government back home that happens to have an interest in that. So I think that we're kind of natural writers and storytellers. The foreign service is a little bit like the US military in the sense that you have to keep being promoted or eventually you leave, you know? I'm in the senior foreign service and there are four ranks of senior foreign service. I'm at the second one. That particular promotion would expire in 2022 if I am not again promoted, which, you know, when you're getting kind of nosebleed levels, that's not necessarily all that likely to happen. And I've already been doing this for 31 years, so at this point I'm very happy in being the ambassador to the African Union and I would contemplate doing one more tour overseas. But that's up to sort of be assignment gods and it's too early in the piece to see which way that will go. But I'm looking towards the end of my service, probably within a single digit number of years. And then, you know, hopefully I'll be, well I know that I will retire to my home in Worcester, Massachusetts and hopefully get to interact with the more BU students about what sort of path that they could find.

Jeff Murphy: Well, Madam Ambassador, it's really an honor for me to be able to hear your story and share with our alumni. It's been a real treat talking with you today. Thank you so much for carving time out of what I can only assume is an incredibly busy schedule.

Mary Beth Leonard: It's my pleasure, and remember, careers.state.gov.

Jeff Murphy: We'll be sure to include that in the episode notes as well. Thanks again.

Mary Beth Leonard: Thanks. Bye-bye.



Jeff Murphy:

My thanks again to Ambassador Leonard for joining me on Proud BU. As a BU alum myself, I'm thankful for the work that she's doing around the world. Her career path is hard for me to wrap my head around, but it's always great to hear our guests talk about how the time they spent at BU inspired them to make a difference. Thanks again for listening to the Proud to BU Podcast. If you like what we're doing, please be sure to subscribe, rate, and review Proud to BU wherever you download your episodes. I'm Jeff Murphy and no matter where your path takes you, be proud to BU. The proud to BU Podcast is produced by Boston University Alumni Relations. Our theme is from Jump and APM music. To learn more about Proud to BU, visit bu.edu/alumni/podcast.

