Allan Mustard -- Ambassador to Turkmenistan

The following is a re-posting of an article published by the ACES Office of International Programs about Illinois alumnus Allan Mustard, who is now the Ambassador to Turkmenistan. The original posting of this article can be found by following this link.

Allan Mustard’s professional goal wasn’t to become a U.S. ambassador. But after about a dozen career moves, Mustard is now serving in his first year as Ambassador to Turkmenistan—a country a little larger than California that shares borders with Iran and Afghanistan. He describes his career path not as one with a calculated strategy, but more as a series of encouraging nudges and a stream of opportunities that led to an unexpected outcome.

Illinois Alumnus Allan Mustard being sworn in as Ambassador to Turkmenistan

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“I really didn’t have anything in mind, except that I wanted to do something internationally,” Mustard says. “I studied Russian and German because those were the only foreign languages offered at the community college where I started out. Had they offered Haitian Creole, I might have ended up on a sandy beach in the Caribbean.”

Mustard, raised on a dairy farm near Brady, Washington, completed bachelor’s degrees at the University of Washington in Slavic languages and literature and political science.

That combination opened the door to his first overseas job, as a guide and as an interpreter for the U.S. International Communications Agency at an American exhibit in the Soviet Union in the late ’70s.

The training took place on the University of Illinois campus.

Then came the first nudge.

“When I got to Moscow, I met Jim Brow, a USDA agricultural attaché,” Mustard says. “He said to me, ‘Gosh, you’re pretty smart, you speak good Russian, and you grew up on a farm. All you’re missing is a master’s degree in agricultural economics. If you get that, you can come work for us.’ So I did.”

Mustard received another nudge while at Illinois working on his master’s. He was encouraged to take the Foreign Service exam—a test so difficult that only about 1 in 100 people pass it. But Mustard was one of them. As a result of his test score, he accepted an invitation to Chicago for an oral assessment.

The road appeared to be a dead end when the State Department lost his paperwork, so Mustard took a job with USDA. After a month, the State Department called: they’d found the missing papers. They wanted him to take an entry-level course, beginning almost immediately.

“I said I already had a job that would lead to an overseas career as an agricultural attaché. They asked, ‘Why would you want to do that?’ I explained that the only advantage of coming to State is that I’d be eligible for an ambassadorship, and that would never happen for me. So I stayed with agriculture, specifically because I didn’t think that I’d ever have a shot at an ambassadorship.”
Over the next couple of decades, Mustard held positions in Istanbul, Vienna, and Mexico City, along with being posted twice each to Washington, DC, and Moscow.

It wasn’t until 2009 that Mustard entertained the ambassadorship possibility.

“Some of my State colleagues said, ‘You really should apply for this,’” Mustard recalls. “It doesn’t cost anything and it only takes 45 minutes to fill out the paperwork.’ So I did—and here I am.”

Without hesitation, Mustard names his Illinois ag econ degree as a key career building block.

“I took courses in analysis and marketing from faculty like Hal Everett and Phil Garcia. I studied development under Earl Kellogg and policy with Bob Spitz and Steve Schmidt. Foreign Agricultural Service officers tend to specialize in market development or are oriented toward food aid countries, but I did a bit of everything, and U of I gave me a full array of tools.”

Using technology was one of those tools. Mustard’s comfort with computer programming at Illinois led to his being “pigeonholed as the data systems geek” at the Foreign Agricultural Service (FAS).

“Rather than reject the title, I embraced it and split the difference; I did my analytical job, but I also did a fair amount of programming and tutoring.”

Years later, when he was a senior foreign service officer in Washington, DC, computer expertise came in handy again, garnering him a position as head of FAS data systems. Each career move presented new opportunities to put into practice what he learned about agricultural economics at Illinois.

Mustard points to one opportunity following the Balkans War of the 1990s as particularly meaningful. He was agricultural counselor in the U.S. Embassy in Vienna, Austria, covering seven countries in Central Europe, including Bosnia. Bosnia’s population of about 4.5 million included 2 million war refugees. Many were widows with children, receiving public assistance because their husbands were victims in the war’s ethnic cleansing. Mustard was tasked with leading a food aid effort to Bosnian refugees. According to Mustard, there is a right way and a wrong way to provide food aid to a country.

“We would not just deliver the food that was needed, but we would structure it around a program that would help get at least some Bosnians out of poverty.”

Mustard collaborated with 10 private charities and non-governmental organizations (NGOs).

“My goal was to lift a certain number of villages out of poverty and restart their economies,” Mustard says. He strived to divide assistance between the aid organizations’ traditional programs and credit programs for the municipalities. The intent was to inject money into the village economies at multiple points—to farmers, to consumers, and to those who sell inputs to farmers—in order to get the economies moving again.

“A year later, it was astounding that we had brought to life 50 moribund municipalities,” Mustard says. “War widows who had been living off of handouts were working again at their private businesses and supporting their families. Meeting those widows was probably the most emotional experience of my life. They were so grateful. And I had done so little—provided some policy direction for the NGOs. The organizations did the heavy lifting—but without guidance, I’m not sure the aid would have had as deep an impact.”

Mustard again mentions his study of economics and development at Illinois with Earl Kellogg.

“I was reaching back to my graduate studies to come up with the constructs of how to provide relief and then figure out some way to apply them practically in order to revive the villages’ economy. It all worked.”

Today Mustard faces new challenges as Ambassador to Turkmenistan—which he describes as “one of the most closed societies in the world.”

He believes the U.S. embassy can help open a window for Turkmen citizens by offering English language instruction.

“We have a library of English books at the embassy,” he says. “The classes are always full, and we have a waiting list of 300. These efforts can have an outsized impact because we’re reaching the people who want to learn English and are self-selecting to become leaders.”

So, how does one become an ambassador? To students interested in international careers, Mustard recommends starting with agriculture.

“That is the only sector of the economy that runs a trade surplus. Being an agricultural officer for the FAS is about as good as it gets.” All you need to do, he says, is look at where the growth potential for agriculture lies—and, of course, learn another language or two.

“With 96 percent of the world’s population outside the United States, that’s where the growth is—particularly in Asia,” he says.

“If I were to do this all over again, I would probably have studied Chinese rather than Russian, and Spanish instead of German. But that said, I think you can study any foreign language and put it to good use. Think about a career with FAS, and take a shot.”

What’s his next career move?

“Right now I’m focused on being successful at this one,” he says.

Sources:

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