KJR: Blog Post Writing Sample

Originally written and published July, 2020.

On June 12th, 2020, The Global Research Institute (GRI) virtually welcomed Keabra OpongBrown to a virtual Coffee & Chat with current William & Mary (W&M) students. More information on this event can be found [insert link to Coffee & Chat Article]. This past week, GRI was fortunate enough to talk to Keabra again and learn more about her W&M experience and how it shaped her work today in the United States (U.S.) Foreign Service (FS).

Born into a military family in Spokane, Washington, Keabra grew up outside of Washington, D.C., in Woodbridge, Virginia. She graduated from the College in 2016 with a degree in government and a minor in Hispanic studies. During her time as a student, Keabra was involved with Tribe Athletics as a cheerleader, a recruiter for the football team, and as a Spanish and Italian tutor for student-athletes. She also worked extensively with FYE as an Orientation Aide and a Peer Diversity Facilitator. Although she was not involved with GRI during her time at W&M, she took part in various activities that reflect the core values of the Institute, such as cultural immersion. Keabra did this through living in the Language Houses, which she describes as the most important part of her W&M experience.

Previously situated in the Randolph Complex, the Language Houses are a special interest housing arrangement offered through the Department of Modern Languages and Literature. Each house consists of W&M students and International Fellows who are native speakers of a foreign language. They are designed to create a language-learning environment through cohabitation and foster increased language study and cultural awareness. There are houses for Arabic, Chinese, Japanese, French, German, Spanish, Italian, and Russian.

Keabra lived in both the Spanish and Italian houses, additionally serving as a TA for both languages. When thinking back to her time at W&M, her involvement in the language learning community is what brings her the most joy. “There is a really special way that you bond with people in the language houses. The relationships I made with people were so strong and meaningful... It allowed me to comfortably make mistakes and learn Spanish in an informal context, which directly impacted the fluidity and comfort I had when speaking Spanish in professional settings.”

Due to the current pandemic, the status of the W&M language houses is unknown. The International Fellows who cohabitate with W&M students in the Language Houses are unable to travel to the U.S. due to restrictions on work visas.

Keabra currently uses the language skills she acquired in the Randolph Complex in her job in the Foreign Service; she began the application process four months after Commencement.

The application process to become a Foreign Service Officer (FSO) takes several months. Applicants must take a general knowledge test and submit six personal narratives where candidates bring their resumes to life and discuss experiences relevant to the job. The next step is to attend an oral assessment, which includes an example case management assignment, similar to memos that students write in undergraduate classes, and a structured interview with two

seasoned FSOs. Finally, applicants go through a clearance process, orientation at the Foreign Service Institute, and then receive an assignment.

Keabra went into detail about the core values and expectations that the FS holds its officers to. “The core values and expectations of the FS are the 13 Dimensions, which are the criteria by which FSOs are hired. Personally, compassion is not one of the 13 Dimensions, but I find that so much of the work of an FSO, regardless of the cone you are in, is being compassionate. It requires a lot of compassion to be able to properly help out an American citizen in need, it takes a lot of compassion to be able to safely identify that a visa applicant could be a potential victim of child trafficking. Consular work especially can be draining, but I try to always think, 'If this was my mother/sister/father, how would I want them to be treated, what kind of FSO would I want them to be able to interact with?' Lastly, I would say trusting your intuition; if something feels off or feels wrong, or if you have a hunch that something could be done better, trust it. There have been many times in this job where my intuition, supported by training I received at FSI, has made a massive difference in adjudications and has allowed me to better uphold the law.”

Being a U.S. Diplomat had always been something Keabra knew about but became a concrete goal of hers during her time in undergrad. During her summers between academic years, she worked at the Library of Congress, translating text from Portuguese to English. She also worked at the Embassy of Spain in Washington, D.C., wanting to gain valuable firsthand experience in the diplomatic world. “I knew I wanted to be in the Foreign Service, so I wanted experiences that would give me a better understanding of what the work would entail,” Keabra says. She got both of these internships through the incredible connections W&M has in the DC area.

For students interested in pursuing careers in the FS or at the Department of State in general, she recommends they put themselves in situations that are similar to what a diplomat would do. Activities such as giving tours to prospective students and their families or working as an Orientation Aide are both opportunities to be the face of a program (Admissions/FYE) that represents a greater organization (W&M). Furthermore, these experiences provide lessons in composure under fire in real time. Knowing how to redirect a conversation after being presented with an unexpected comment from a guest speaker or a “gotcha question” from a concerned parent develops skills that are crucial to the work of a diplomat.

Keabra had limited non-academic experiences prior to joining the FS and credits her career to knowing what she wanted and going after it. She joked during the interview, “If you look at my agenda from senior year [of college], it had Foreign Service written all in it.” Keabra specifically mentioned the weight that measured self-confidence has in the process. “If you don't think you can do it, why should [they] think you can do it? Have the confidence to do whatever it is you want to do. If you don't think you can do something, how are you going to convince an interviewer otherwise?”

Keabra is currently posted at U.S. Consulate General Ciudad Juárez in Mexico. She is in her first tour as a consular officer. In her free time, she enjoys playing the violin, cooking, and exercising.