

From the Classroom to the Field: My Journey as a Foreign Service Child

My classmates faced the front of the room, right hands placed over their hearts. I looked around, certain that someone else would be as confused as I was, but everyone's eyes were fixed on the American flag. It was the morning of my first day of fifth grade, and I had just moved to the United States after eight years of living overseas. As my classmates recited the Pledge of Allegiance, I mouthed the unfamiliar words, hoping no one would look my way. I promised myself I would memorize the pledge later that day so that I would no longer stand out.

On paper, my life as a third-culture kid seemed glamorous. I experienced new cultures in Central Asia, the Middle East, and the Caribbean, but, in reality, I resented my family's lifestyle. I envied other kids who grew up in one place while I was forced to leave behind my school, home, and friendships every few years. Eventually, I became used to adapting to new environments and the upheaval that accompanied moving. But this time was different; I felt like a stranger in the country that was supposed to be my home. I worried I would never belong anywhere.

Then, last year, my perspective suddenly changed. We had again moved overseas, and I was in my junior year of high school in Bangkok, Thailand. Our school service group traveled to a rural community in Cambodia. We interviewed villagers with the aid of a Khmer translator, and I was deeply moved by the story of a woman named Lorn. She had spent her childhood hungry because her parents, who earned less than \$4 a day selling rice noodles, could rarely afford to feed their family of 12. Lorn hoped her children would not experience the hardships she had endured. As she told us this, she broke down and struggled to continue speaking.

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February 6, 2016

Lorn's story resonated with me. Even though I had lived in developing countries for most of my life, I had considered poverty a statistic; now, I saw firsthand how it affected real individuals. My parents' careers at the US Agency for International Development suddenly shifted from a conversation at the dinner table to something tangible that touches the lives of people like Lorn. I, like my parents, believed that Lorn's children deserved a better future. It dawned on me that the struggles I had faced adapting to new cultures were worthwhile because they had allowed my parents to devote their lives to helping the poor.

This experience not only put my past into perspective, it also gave me a new outlook on my future. That real world exposure allowed me to see the connection between developing my academic interest in biology and supporting people in the developing world through environmental science. Although I once could not recite the Pledge of Allegiance, I now know that helping others is what it truly means to be American, and I am proud to be a child of the Foreign Service.