

FS CLIPS: Sharing Our Stories of Foreign Service Life
A Project of the Una Chapman Cox Foundation

JENNY KOCHER

Interviewed by: Bonnie Miller

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INTERVIEW

Q: Today is April 21, 2022. I'm Bonnie Miller, and I am interviewing Jenny Kocher. So, Jenny, tell me where you're from, how long you've been an Eligible Family Member [EFM] in the Foreign Service and the posts where you've served.

KOCHER: I am originally from Colombia, from the capital, Bogotá. I have been following my husband for 11 years. Our first post was in Beijing, China. Our second post was Peru. Then we went back to China - Guangzhou. We were posted in DC, and we are scheduled to depart this summer to Kuwait.

Q: Wow, very diverse. Many continents, many posts, many languages. Besides Spanish, what other languages do you speak? Do you speak any of the languages from the posts where you've been?

KOCHER: Yes. Besides English and Spanish, I speak Chinese, and I speak Hindi.

Q: Fantastic. I'm sure that has helped you. What were the greatest challenges of marrying a U.S. Foreign Service Officer or getting married and then him joining the Foreign Service?

KOCHER: I think one of the biggest challenges is leaving your family and friends behind, starting a new career, and then dropping your career many times to start a new career. Nowadays, 11 years later, the challenges are the children, traveling with the children, and making sure that they are happy and involved in the process of us moving. Making sure that they are going to have a one hundred percent good experience where we are going, a new environment for them.

Q: So, you mentioned career and children. Can you tell us a little about your career and then also about your children?

KOCHER: I have a Bachelor's in Hospitality with an emphasis on hotel business. When I met my husband, I was working in a nonprofit. In the Foreign Service life, I have to adapt. So, I took the ConGen [Consular General] class, and I became a Consular Associate in 2011. After that training, I worked in three different posts. I have been a volunteer with some organizations, and I continue to do my hospitality on the side as a volunteer. At post and also in DC, I look for organizations that I can volunteer with. Now I'm going to be back working with the State Department, this time as a EPAP GSO (Expanded Professional Associates Program) in Kuwait.

Q: How old are your children?

KOCHER: My children are twelve and eight. Our oldest son joined the Foreign Service when he was fifteen months, and the little one has been in the service all his life.

Q: As a foreign-born spouse, how did you cope with or adapt to Foreign Service life?

KOCHER: For us foreign-born spouses, it is a little different than if you are just coming from the U.S. to another post. We have one advantage, and that is that we are already outside of our country, speaking another language. So, most of us move to the U.S. and have to learn English because that's the way we communicate with our husbands. So, we are adaptable. When we move overseas, we are willing to take the challenge and to adapt faster. We know that we're not always going to speak the language of the host country, so the majority of the times, we try to learn the host country's language or use one of the languages that we know to communicate, so we are flexible in that way. It is always a challenge for a foreign-born spouse because sometimes our career is left in our home country. We don't have experience where we're going, or our [professional] experience is not valid. So, a lot of the time, we have to first validate that our studies are compatible with U.S. standards, if we want to work for the government. In some cases, EFMs [Eligible Family Members] who are not native English speakers are being tested for their language skills in English. And we always have to translate our degree and make sure that even though we have experience, we have to get accredited to be able to use it in our embassies and consulates.

Q: Okay, so is there any challenge with not being born in America but representing America in U.S. embassies abroad?

KOCHER: I think there are few countries that accept dual nationality, but I believe for all of us foreign-born spouses when we are overseas, our hat is American, our blood is red and blue. We just adapt, and we are there to show how our kids grow up in America. So, we show our traditions that we do in our family or with our husband's family. These are not our traditions, but we have adopted those traditions too. Overseas at the international school, we always have to participate in the International Festival; we have to represent. And I think the job is harder for our kids, and me, because we have to represent and wear the hat for the U.S. in the school. But also, I cannot deny that my kids are also Third Culture Kids, so we have to embrace both. And we meet with representatives from our diplomatic mission from the U.S., but also, we have to be kind to locals, and to keep a good relationship. So, we are kind of a dual ambassador.

Q: Exactly, actually a triple because you're American, and you're Colombian. And then you're living in another country. So, what has been the experience for your children as Third Culture Kids?

KOCHER: First of all, my first language is Spanish, but when my kid was able to speak, he was in China. So, before Spanish, my kids were speaking Chinese. I think, adapting to not only the language, but also the traditions of the host country, the food, meeting new people etc. is very, very important in their life. Being able to experience things that a typical two- three- or four-year

-old usually won't experience, they have been exposed to a different color of skin, or a different culture, language and religion. Also, they learned the different ways that people touch you or not touch you in other countries. The kids at a young age have learned to adapt and to accept. I think that my kids are chameleons. If we are in a Chinese environment, they are going to sit like a Chinese person, and they are going to eat like they have to do. If we go back to Latin America, they're going to be back to being loud and speaking Spanish. And when they are in the U.S., they're going to be following all the sports and eat fast food. So, in that sense, it's been an enriching experience. But at the same time, they have to grow faster emotionally, because we are taking everything apart every two or three years when we tell them, "Pack your suitcases and go." So, for them, it's a process, and I always say that I brainwash my kids before we go abroad to a new place. Now we're going to Kuwait, so they are thinking Kuwait is the best place. They have been participating with us in the process of bidding as they get older. They give us feedback. "I prefer this school. I don't like the weather in this place. I don't think I want to learn French." We become a whole unit. Now that they're older and we are trying to keep them motivated for that break that is happening every two or three years, it is a big challenge.

Q: It is a challenge. But you get more flexible kids and more worldly children. So, you had mentioned working within the embassy. Can you tell us the different jobs that you did in the embassy?

KOCHER: Being an immigrant, I think that's why I was attracted to learn more of the laws from the other side of the window, so I became a Consular Associate. In Beijing, my job was to be the first person that the applicants come to. I was fingerprinting, working with American Citizen Services, providing guidance, answering calls, managing prison visits, visiting our American citizens in jail. That was in Beijing. Later in Peru, I was able to work more with passports and adjudicating reports of birth abroad for our American kids who are born overseas and collaborating with the Consular Section in outreach events. In Guangzhou, I was also working with the fraud prevention unit, trying to find out areas where there could be fraud, and again, working with American citizens and visiting them in jail. Doing full interviews at the windows because I speak the language, Chinese, so I could be help and support the IV (immigrant visa) and NIV (non-immigrant visa) section doing DNA tests. As a Consular Associate there are a variety of things that you can do. On the side, I was a volunteer for the CLO [Community Liaison Office]. And I think with that volunteering experience and with the GWIC (Guangzhou Women International Club) in the city of Guangzhou, by organizing nonprofit events and fundraising etc., it allowed me to interview for a few positions in Kuwait

Q: That's interesting that your volunteer work actually gave you the experience and the skills to apply for the job as the EPAP position in GSO. That worked out for you very well. For those EFMs that were born in the US, coming back to Washington is coming home. But for foreign-born partners, living in Washington, DC is another foreign post. How has that experience been for you?

KOCHER: Yes, unfortunately for us foreign-born spouses, Washington, DC is a hardship post, because there is an expectation that you know it all, and that you are in your home. But for us, it's harder than being overseas. We don't know the school system; we don't have family support here because our husband's family is miles away. Some of us have never worked in the U.S. or

are not even a U.S. citizen yet. So, finding a job and getting use to this experience is hard because potential employers and others do not necessarily understand that you're only going to be here for two years. Are new friends going to invest in your friendship? Are you going to be involved in PTA [Parent Teacher Association] here? No, people don't want to be involved in PTA or do not have time because they have to work. So, we tend to attach ourselves to other EFMs [Eligible Family Members] and foreign-born spouses, particularly, to make this experience better, to make new friends and connect with old ones. I think I have been doing that as part of the AAFSW's FBS [Associates of the American Foreign Service Worldwide Foreign-Born Spouses group]. Meeting other foreign-born spouses, sharing our culture, our food, and our experiences overseas has helped me to belong here.

Unfortunately, in DC, we don't have the status of diplomats, and we don't have events or things that we can attend as a community. So, we have to find these little clubs/groups where we can be more comfortable, also finding a new hobby, reinventing ourselves again. For us, DC becomes another post— like I said it's a hardship post.

Q: And so, you form your own support group, which it sounds like you've been very successful in doing.

KOCHER: Exactly, and it's funny because they always say, "Oh, I'm going to go there can you connect me with someone," so everybody tries to connect. "I meet you in Kuwait. I meet you in China. This is my friend, she's coming." So, everybody that is leaving connects with people that are coming in and trying to keep the network going and trying to grow my village a little bigger in DC.

Q: Is there any advice that you can give to other foreign-born spouses, people who are just entering the Foreign Service, or foreign-born spouses who are already in the service?

KOCHER: Yes, definitely to learn the language that your husband is getting for free. Try to get the language training because that will make your life easier at post. You'll be more competitive to find a job; you will be more comfortable. Also, by doing any volunteer job while overseas is always helpful to keep your resume updated.

Q: That is great advice. You don't want any gaps in your resume. What I'm hearing is that even volunteer work, if you're doing something very productive and meaningful, fills the gap and gives you the skills, and then you're on to the next post and perhaps you can use that.

KOCHER: Exactly.

Q: So, speaking for yourself or for other foreign-born spouses, are there any other questions that I should be asking you or any things that you would like to share?

KOCHER: I think you touched pretty much all the aspects. I liked the question about DC because it's very hard for us to be here. I believe that if you're a citizen or not, or how that process goes, and the clearance, has it been easy for you to get a clearance? I think that is a good question. For us, it takes forever to get a clearance. I'm from Colombia, so you can imagine how

it goes. I mean, it's tough; some people never get a clearance. Unfortunately, a few will never get a clearance because of their country of origin. It is not related to their skills, not who they are, nor who they become. I guess clearance is another interesting topic.

Q: And that's one that maybe those of us who were born in America haven't thought about. I always ask foreign-born spouses about how they became a U.S. citizen and how that process was. They usually say that if they're married to a Foreign Service Officer, it's easier [to get U.S. citizenship] if they're overseas. That's the feedback that I'm getting from the Partners in Diplomacy podcast series foreign-born spouses.

KOCHER: Yes, right.

Q: Jenny, this was very enlightening. You answered a lot of the questions and gave us a lot of food for thought. So, thank you so much for participating in this AAFSW project.

KOCHER: Thank you so much, Bonnie, and I want to see it, and I'm going to listen to the podcast.