

THE UNIVERSITY OF (FILL IN THE BLANK)

As we all know, the Foreign Service life is rather non-traditional. Moving every two to three years is not a typical way to live. Though unique, recently it dawned on me that it is very similar to going to university. The main difference in the transient expat life is that instead of going to university once, we do it over and over again.

There are many similarities, both social and academic. Socially, just as when we went off to university and did not know a soul, the same is true for almost every post we go to. Certainly there will be a few people we have encountered at other embassies, but in general, as a rule, we arrive at a new post just as we did at university, not knowing anyone.

We also arrive without much of a clue. To be fair, many of us have done our homework. We have boned up on our new post, but as is the case with heading off to university, though we may have read about the place and what it has to offer, we still arrive not really knowing what's in store. It is only when our boots hit the ground that we are able to figure out how everything fits together.

As the years at post pass, just as they did at university, we move from being clueless, disconnected freshman into the ranks of upper classmen where we generally have the situation down pat and are woven into a tapestry of community and social life.

Being at post is very similar to being at university academically as well. Just as we had to select a major at university, something on which to focus our intellectual attention, many of us do something comparable at post. For Foreign Service Officers, their major is proscribed for them by their job. But for accompanying spouses, the choice is up to us. However, there are no professors, deans, or guidance counselors telling us what to do. It is all self-guided.

When we arrive at post, we start off taking electives, dabbling in this and that. But after a while, many of us begin to focus on different areas of

interest, and those subjects become our major. For example, most of us begin by learning the language (similar to taking a language course in college), visiting museums (an art or history course), maybe writing a little about the place to friends or in a blog (creative writing), exploring the markets and stores (sociology/cultural anthropology), and everything else associated with being at a new post.

When we enter our third year at post, the equivalent of senior year at university, we are tapped in socially, and many of us are forging through a major that interests and stimulates us. True, some of us, as was the case in college as well, continue a more general course of study, never actually committing to a major. But even so, senior year at post, just as in college, is when the real fun begins, and learning really takes off.

For example, here in Brussels, Robbin Zeff Warner is well on her way to graduating Magna Cum Laude in Chocolate. And Belgium is the perfect place for that as it has three of the world's largest chocolate manufacturers, and over 10,000 artisan chocolate shops dotted around the country. She spent her first couple of years exploring the totality of Brussels, and settled on learning all she could about making chocolates. And now she has moved on to offering courses teaching others how to take raw chocolate, temper it, and mold it into a variety of shapes.

"Finding out I loved working with chocolate was a process of discovery," says Robbin. "I'd been dabbling in this, sampling a little of that, until I took a professional chocolate making course at the Chocolate Academy at Callebaut and was officially hooked. Now when we go back to the states I am seriously considering doing this for a living."

Another member of the Brussels community, Peter Barbarich, has decided to major in Sculpture. When he first arrived, he spent a lot of time being a house-husband, as well as

exercising and getting in great shape. However, after a while he wanted something more. So, pursuing a life long passion, he signed up for a few art courses at the Rhok Academy of 3D Arts, and is now focusing on learning as much as he can about the art and science of sculpture.

"I've been working with stone, wood, metal, and found this amazing teacher," Peter exclaims. "In real life I am a scientist, but this, sculpture, is my true calling."

Whether we commit ourselves to a major, or continue to dabble in electives, every new post is akin to going to the University of Belgium, or Italy, or Turkey, or wherever it is we are located. And then once we complete that university, it's onto the next one.

What a wonderful opportunity this is. Spending one's life learning about new and different places and people, over and over again. Though rather non-traditional, I can think of no other way I would rather spend my time on this planet. So what's your major?

— by Douglas E Morris

SELF-DEFENSE CLASS

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aggressor and each woman displaying their newly acquired self defense skills. Thankfully Mark had extensive padding, otherwise he would have been a bundle of bruises.

These one-on-one sessions elicited the aforementioned screams, and thuds. Course participants not on the mat would gasp in surprise at the intensity of the action, and cheer and applaud loudly at the outcome. Which was usually Mark laid out on his back after being pummeled into submission.

Based on the reality of the world we live in, where in the majority of cases men are the aggressors and women potential victims, this Self-Defense Class is an absolute necessity. Be on the look out for the next class, or call the number below and request that another class be offered.

(USAG Victim Advocacy Program – 368 -9684 or 0472/901-068)

— by Douglas E Morris,