

Retiree Spotlight: Interview with Bruce Byers



Born in Texas and raised in a U.S. Air Force family, Byers did high school in Albuquerque, college in Munich and graduate school in College Park, Md. While at USIA, he served in Tehran, Mumbai, Vienna, Kabul, Bonn, Warsaw, Manila and D.C. From 1995 to 1996, served as AFSA's USIA vice president. He retired in 2000 and

worked as a WAE. In 2009, he retired fully and focused on writing. Byers married his Munich sweetheart while attending university there. The couple have three children and live in Northern Virginia.

AFSA: What got you into writing and culture? As an Air Force family, we moved around a lot. I read adventure and science fiction books and wrote about what I read. My teen years in Albuquerque were very involved in Scouts. Unsettled in high school, my French teacher saw something in me and got me to join the French club, which opened my eyes to different cultures. She also challenged me to read serious books; Homer's *Odyssey* was a favorite due to our frequent moves and adjusting to new locales. A young FSO at a career day opened my eyes to a diplomatic career. After graduation, I moved to London and traveled Europe to find a college program that would accept me. UMD had a 2-year program in Munich; I started there in fall 1961. In 1963, I transferred to the Ludwig Maximilian University to study history, Latin and German. In 1965, UMD connections got me to College Park Md for graduate school.

AFSA: What influenced your career choice? At UMD, Prof. Gordon Prange, Gen. Douglas MacArthur's chief historian in Japan and author of *Tora! Tora! Tora!*, was my adviser; he urged me to use my knowledge of Germany and its history. I wrote a thesis on the German Communist Party, spending long hours in the Library of Congress doing research. In 1966 I took the Foreign Service exam but didn't pass; I figured I'd been out of the U.S. too long. But I loved research and landed a job as an intern at NASA. From 1967 to 1970, I researched and wrote a history of the final reconnaissance program prior to the Apollo lunar landings, which NASA published:

Destination Moon: A History of the Lunar Orbiter Program. In 1971, I passed the FS exam. NASA also offered me a job that I had to accept by June 30. By fortunate accident I met USIA's deputy director during a conference at UMD. I explained my job dilemma to him, and my "sign on" date at USIA was moved up to June 21, resolving the dilemma.

AFSA: Did you keep writing? My writing had been technical, based on historical research; but on my first assignment to Tehran, I wrote descriptive letters to my parents, all of which have been saved. In Mumbai, I wrote about a multiethnic, multilingual country as vast and culturally diverse as Europe. I also wrote a dystopian novel featuring my alter ego; depicting a future America where government exerts its influence through electronic media via "tuning," presaging today's social media and electronic monitoring. In 1979, I was press attaché in Kabul when Amb. "Spike" Dubs was killed. I served in Warsaw from 1990 to 1993, a fascinating time. In the mid-90s I served as USIA AFSA vice president, and after a last overseas posting to Manila, I retired from State in 2000. Freed from government work, I wrote short stories about what I had experienced in foreign cultures. From 2001 to 2008, I did WAE work supporting IVP visitors programming and critiquing historic cables. I retired, retired in late 2009.

AFSA: Retired, retired? Now I focus on writing and gardening. In 2013, I returned to Albuquerque for my French teacher's induction into the Silver Horizons Senior Hall of Fame for her decades of work in education. It was our first meeting in 52 years. Now in her 80s, she was still helping Hispanic and Native American students prepare for college. I thanked her for the profound role she played in guiding my own life's trajectory. The visit inspired me to write about my cross-country adventure on a bus to Montreal and the voyage to Europe with 640 other students in 1960. The result is my novel, *The Extraordinary Journey of Harry Forth*. I chose to self-publish my book and I signed a contract with Author House. This gave me control of the entire process: I paid for their publishing services—to date about \$3,500. Sales are not guaranteed, but royalties can be up to four times the traditional six percent most publishers offer. I welcome readers to visit me at www.harryforthsadventure.com or email me at bkbing11@earthlink.net to address writing and authoring issues. I look forward to participating in AFSA's second annual Book Market on November 19, where I will discuss my novel, research and writing experiences.