

Mattie Sharpless:

Setting Goals for a World-Class Agricultural Career

There have been a lot of firsts in Mattie Sharpless' career in USDA's Foreign Agricultural Service (FAS)—for instance, first and only woman or minority to serve in the senior foreign service and first woman or minority to serve as an FAS assistant administrator. But to Mattie, "first" does not mean much unless it also means "best."

"I don't think my rank has made any difference to me," she says. "I've always viewed myself as a person. The fact that I'm the first to have done this may make a difference to others, but I never looked at myself that way. I have always set goals at a level I think I can attain in both my professional and my personal life. When I approach one goal, I set another one."

Teaching Was Her First Goal

Mattie's first goal was not a career in agriculture. Born and raised in a rural farming region of North Carolina, she set out to teach business education. However, after graduating from North Carolina College at Durham, NC, in 1965, she found that the job market was glutted with teachers. Faced with few job prospects, she was recruited by USDA to come to Washington, DC.

"About 13 of us classmates landed here in Washington, mostly in clerical and administrative jobs, despite the fact that we all had 4-year degrees and all were teachers," Mattie said. "Later, some of my colleagues switched into teaching in Washington. I had just gotten fingerprinted when I was offered a teaching position in North Carolina. But I thought that once I had been fingerprinted, I was here forever."

*by Sally Klusaritz, Public Affairs Specialist,
Foreign Agricultural Service, USDA,
Washington, DC*

FAS Job Leads to Second Goal

Mattie's next goal was to work in a foreign country, so she researched USDA agencies and discovered FAS. FAS represents U.S. agricultural interests overseas, reports on agricultural production and trade in foreign countries, promotes exports of U.S. farm products, and works to improve world trading conditions. FAS operates worldwide, with personnel located in U.S. embassies and consulates in about 80 countries.

"After just a few months in FAS, I was asked to go to Geneva, Switzerland, to work with the U.S. delegation for the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade multilateral trade negotiations," she recalls. "A year later, I was asked, 'Since you're doing such a great job, why don't you go to Paris to work in our office at the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development?' I had no interest in staying in Europe because I was lonely and missed my family. But I told myself, 'It's just for 2 years, and you can live anywhere for 2 years.' So I took advantage of the opportunity and moved to Paris."

More Education for the Next Level

After 4 1/2 years in Paris, Sharpless set her next goal—moving from the clerical and administrative side of FAS to the professional side. She decided to go to graduate school in the United States.

"FAS wanted me to go to school in the Washington area and work part time, with FAS paying my way," she says, "but I decided to pay my own way so I could have the flexibility to decide what I wanted to do after I received my degree. So I put my belongings in storage, paid my own way, lived on campus at North Carolina Central University in



"Setting goals is the way to climb the career ladder," says Mattie Sharpless, assistant administrator in USDA's Foreign Agricultural Service.

Durham, and got my master's degree in business administration, minoring in economics. Then I came back to FAS and went into trade policy work. Since then I've been gradually climbing the career ladder."

Appointment to Brussels

Mattie's next goal was to be appointed assistant agricultural attaché at a foreign post, her first appointment as a foreign service officer. After graduate school and 4 years in Washington, DC, she achieved that goal when she

was named assistant agricultural attaché at the U.S. Mission to the European Community in Brussels, Belgium.

“That was a very challenging job because it was an opportunity to learn about European agricultural policy as well as keep abreast of U.S. policies,” Sharpless recalls.

In 1979 she returned to FAS headquarters and for 4 years headed up the group that dealt with Western European agricultural affairs. Then she was sent to Bern, Switzerland, for 3 years.

“That was my first ‘head of office’ post, where I supervised two foreign-national employees,” Mattie says. “It’s a challenge when you’re on your own and don’t have anyone to turn to for guidance. It’s also a challenge to be responsible for market development activities that can help create new export opportunities for U.S. producers.”

Agricultural Counselor Role Overseas

In 1986 she transferred from Bern to Rome, Italy, where she supervised a staff of nine for 3 years. As the head of a large staff at an important post, she conducted a wide array of activities.

“As the agricultural counselor, you are the personal representative of the Secretary of Agriculture,” she says. “You report directly to the Ambassador and, through the Ambassador, to the Secretary of Agriculture. You must keep abreast of all U.S. agricultural policies and programs. You also are expected to know your host country’s policies and whether they adhere to international trade rules and regulations. You monitor the country’s policies and practices to make sure there are no trade barriers that would impede U.S. agricultural exports. At the same time, our primary goal is to expand the sale of U.S. agri-

cultural products, so you carry out market development activities that are most appropriate to that market.”

Heading FAS Overseas Staff

After 3 years in Italy, Mattie returned to Washington, DC, to serve as deputy assistant administrator for international trade policy. After 1 year in that position, in 1989, she was appointed to her current post as assistant administrator for foreign agricultural affairs.

In this demanding position, Mattie is responsible for managing about 270 people at more than 80 embassies and consulates around the world. The staff reports on about 110 countries.

Mattie is also the chairperson of the FAS recruitment committee. In that role, she travels to college campuses around the country to explain the goals and missions of the agency.

“We recruit good, qualified people for FAS,” she says. “We explain the different types of careers in the Agency in both the civil service and the Foreign Service. Many potential employees come to FAS because they’ve heard about it, either from Peace Corps or other foreign agencies,” she explains. “They come to the agency with a keen interest in joining the Foreign Service. Many young people today think there’s more glamour in the Foreign Service than there is. When I first joined the agency and started traveling abroad, security problems, such as terrorism, weren’t so prominent. Today, there is a lot of day-to-day stress in living in foreign countries.”

She adds that “life overseas is interesting because you have an opportunity to live in foreign countries, to learn foreign languages and different cultures, and to travel. But at the same

time, it can be lonely, especially for a single person. It takes a strong person to be in the Foreign Service, because it’s very stressful to literally pack up every 2 to 4 years and move from one country to another.”

Career Opportunities at USDA

Despite some of the drawbacks of life overseas, Sharpless is positive about advising young people on careers at FAS and USDA: “USDA has many agencies with different goals and missions. There are so many types of jobs that you can have in USDA.”

At FAS, for example, “you can work with producers and trade associations, negotiate agreements with foreign countries under credit guarantee or food aid programs, or help U.S. trade associations develop programs to sell U.S. agricultural products. The trade policy area keeps you going from world capital to world capital to try to resolve bilateral and multilateral trade problems. You can be a diplomat right here in Washington, DC.”

Time To Set the Next Goal

“I’m a person who does a lot of soul searching,” says Mattie. “Before I make a personal or career move, I look at all sides of an issue and analyze the pros and cons of my decision. People tell me I’m too organized, but I just have a way of looking long term to see what the next step should be. It’s about time for me to begin thinking about going overseas again, so I have to decide what my next goal should be and set out to achieve it.”