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# The Mine Action Information Center and The State Department's Humanitarian Demining Fellowship: Molding the Future of the Landmine Community

James Madison University (JMU) is host to the State Department's Mine Action Information Center (MAIC). The MAIC has given many students the opportunity, whether through local employment or the State Department's Humanitarian Demining Fellowship, to learn and experience mine action. Today, many of JMU's former students are players in the global landmine community.

by David Hartley, MAIC

Kurt Chesko recognized that employment in the mine action community would be an opportunity in a global, multi-faceted humanitarian industry. He knew that working in the landmine community would provide valuable socio-political experience that could be applied to many non-landmine related jobs. Kurt did not anticipate, however, that his fellowship with the U.S. State Department

would eventually lead him to war-torn Afghanistan as a deminer.

Kurt, 23, holds a degree in both International Affairs and French from James Madison University (JMU). Before graduating in December of 2000, he applied for the State Department's Frasure-Kreuzel-Drew Humanitarian Demining Fellowship program through JMU's MAIC. In January 2001, the State Department assigned Chesko to work in New York on a multi-media CD-ROM

entitled "Landmines: Clearing the Way." The CD-ROM highlighted all aspects of mine action and mine awareness and was produced by Huntington Associates with funds from the U.S. Department of State, the U.S. Department of Defense and the Rockefeller Foundation.

As a State Department Fellow, Kurt worked as the production assistant on this project. This experience, which included profiling 39 mine-affected countries and collecting first-hand information from deminers throughout the world, gave him a thorough and comprehensive understanding of mine action. He used this experience to gain a position at HALO USA, the American arm of the British charity HALO Trust. His primary tasks are to raise the organization's profile and investigate new sources of funding.

Chesko's job as Program Coordinator of HALO USA ultimately afforded him the opportunity to remove landmines in Afghanistan. All of HALO Trust's employees are given the chance to do field work, and he took full advantage. Taking a UN flight into Kabul, Kurt spent about a month training and demining, as well as experiencing the full spectrum of Afghanistan's devastation. The work deeply affected him, and in the future he plans on pursuing a permanent field position with HALO Trust.

Both the JMU fellowship with the State Department and the MAIC's publication, the *Journal of Mine Action*, have given JMU graduates the opportunity to pursue long term employment in the global field of landmine awareness and clear-



JMU alumnus Kurt Chesko at work in Afghanistan. c/o Kurt Chesko

ance. Erin Snider, another State Department fellow from JMU, has moved on to handle many administrative and information related tasks for the New York-based Adopt-a-Minefield. She deals with both the U.S. State Department and the United Nations, and is Adopt-a-Minefield's representative on the Steering Committee on the U.S. Campaign to Ban Landmines.

During her fellowship from 1999 to 2000, Snider was exposed to virtually "every component of mine action" from "mine clearance to research and development." This experience, in addition to her knowledge of Middle Eastern affairs as an undergraduate, made Erin a commodity. She was hired for an extended stay with the State Department and quickly got a job with Adopt-a-Minefield.

Erin's primary job is to oversee Adopt-a-Minefield's operations in Afghanistan, Bosnia, Croatia, Cambodia, Mozambique and Vietnam. She ensures that funds are being used properly and that operations are conducted in a timely manner. "Adopt-a-Minefield's main purpose is to mobilize grass roots communities" and allow individuals to raise money to clear landmines.

Recently, a women's church group

**"I learned that the landmine community is, above all else, determined and resilient. These are things that can be carried over into any job or career." –Keith Feigenbaum**

from the United States donated \$20,000 to clear a Bosnian minefield. After the minefield was cleared, information, maps and photographs were relayed to the church group. Therefore, the women who worked hard raising money were able to see exactly how their money was used, and who benefited from it. Thirty thousand square meters of land was returned to a community, to the great satisfaction of the church group and Erin Snider. Adopt-a-Minefield's charitable methods are inherently rewarding, Snider believes, because "you get to see the full impact of your work."

Snider's fellowship with the MAIC

exposed her to a bevy of landmine related issues and introduced her to the unique challenges of mine action and mine awareness. In Washington, D.C., Erin was immediately given significant responsibilities, as well as "a great chance to prove [herself]" and "realize [her] potential." The fellowship's unique combination of freedom, responsibility and support pushed Erin to grow in many ways. The challenges she faced and bested gave her confidence and know-how. While ruminating on the MAIC fellowship and her subsequent success with Adopt-a-Minefield, Erin concluded, "I don't think I could have done this unless I had had that opportunity."

Like Kurt Chesko, Snider has since seized the opportunity to witness mine action first hand. She has traveled to both Afghanistan and Djibouti on policy assessment visits and is planning future trips. These experiences were "surreal" because they gave substance and tangibility to Erin's administrative efforts<sup>1</sup>. Kurt's visit to Afghanistan furnished him with both an appreciation for demining fieldwork and a perspective on the devastation landmines and UXO can cause.

As a deminer, Kurt worked long, backbreaking hours under a scorching

sun. In Kabul, Kurt spent a week receiving general training in medical and evacuation procedures. From there he deployed to Jabul Saraj, north of Kabul, where he trained as a deminer. His training consisted of landmine recognition, landmine removal and safety procedures, among other things. Chesko demined in Bagram, where he gained true respect for the meticulous and arduous nature of landmine/UXO removal. "Until you have been on your hands and knees clearing mines and UXO," Kurt realized, "you cannot appreciate the work that thousands of deminers are doing for months at a time in some of the harshest condi-

tions."<sup>2</sup> The average experienced deminer can clear about 30 square meters of ground in a long day. Being a rookie, of course, Kurt struggled to keep up.

JMU's MAIC has spawned a diverse group of alumni. Michael Monroe was not a State Department fellow—instead he worked at the MAIC in the publications department, for the *Journal of Mine Action*. A graduate from JMU's School of Media Arts and Design (SMAD) with concentrations in electronic journalism and media writing, Michael was an editorial assistant and the online editor for the Journal in the spring of 2001.

Monroe is now a freelance television writer/producer and recently started his own production company, Mikemon International, LLC. Although not exclusively involved with landmine-related issues, Michael is currently discussing with various TV executives the possibility of a landmine documentary. Linking media and mine action, "to create a better awareness for the general public... would be a great service to all."<sup>3</sup>

While working for the *Journal of Mine Action*, Michael gained valuable researching skills, as well as an understanding for global political issues. Very few jobs can offer undergraduates the oppor-

tunity to work independently on global issues and meet influential delegates and representatives from foreign countries, all from the comfort of small-town Harrisonburg, Virginia.

Keith Feigenbaum, the Journal's assistant editor from May 2000 to May 2001, also participated in JMU's demining fellowship at the State Department. Currently, Keith is an Arms Control Policy Analyst at Science Applications International Corporation (SAIC) in McLean, VA. He works in cooperation with the U.S. military, providing information services on various arms control treaties and accords. Although his job

does not directly deal with landmines, the "knowledge of landmines and the negative effects of their widespread and indiscriminate use... is a common theme in arms control."

During Keith's stint as assistant editor, he traveled to Tampa, Florida for a conference on military/non-governmental organization (NGO) cooperation. He met a diverse group of individuals with varying backgrounds and political views. Ultimately, Feigenbaum made connections and was "able to share... common ground with mine action professionals during future encounters." Moreover,

**"Demining gets in your blood. It's difficult to leave a field that is at the same time extremely rewarding and patently frustrating."**

**–Noah Klemm**

Keith "learned that the landmine community is, above all else, determined and resilient." The skills and experience gained through the MAIC "are things that can be carried over into any job or career."<sup>4</sup>

Kurt Chesko found JMU's MAIC/State Department fellowship equally helpful. His thorough knowledge of the U.S. State Department, HALO Trust's largest financial contributor, made Chesko a valuable asset to this British NGO. In addition to his fieldwork in Afghanistan, Kurt has lived in Sweden, France and all over the United States. He also graduated from the American School of The Hague, in the Netherlands. The landmine community is definitively global; it creates the opportunity for and demands worldwide networking and travel. Knowledge of different cultures and societies is essential for work in the landmine awareness and clearance community.

Often individuals enter the mine action community with limited knowledge or interest in landmine related issues. Kurt applied for the State Department fellowship because it "always leads to great opportunities." And though the fellowship does create individual oppor-

tunities, the issue of landmine awareness and removal has a unique way of getting under one's skin. In Afghanistan, Chesko saw for the first time "the progress that's being made." Not only did he realize the startling reality of landmine/UXO devastation, but Kurt also saw that in Afghanistan "it's not a hopeless situation, there's a lot of land that was once completely unusable that has now been planted and is thriving."<sup>5</sup> Such realizations only serve to strengthen one's resolve to remove landmines.

When Noah Klemm graduated from JMU with an International Affairs degree

in 1999, he simply needed part-time employment. He heard about the MAIC through a professor and decided it would be a great opportunity to travel and gain international experience. It was unlikely, however, that Noah planned on choosing a career in the landmine action field.

Noah worked for the MAIC from June 1999 to February 2000, assisting with the Slovenia Dog conference. In addition, he worked with the Civil/Military Team conducting a study of lessons-learned within the landmine removal community. This work led to the State Department's Frasure-Kreuzel-Drew Fellowship from February 2000 to June 2000. The knowledge Klemm gained about "the relationship between civilian and military demining organizations" as well as "the U.S. government's various demining programs" and "the information required to run them" made him a potential asset to employers.

Specifically, Noah used his expertise to gain employment with FGM Inc. in Dulles, Virginia. FGM Inc. is a technology company specializing in software and information systems development. Noah works on a variety of mine action projects, and is "the project lead of an effort to develop a mine action XML [extensible

markup language] definition to facilitate information sharing between the various information systems supporting the demining community." This task has put Noah in regular contact with the U.S. State Department, the Geneva International Center for Humanitarian Demining (GICHD), the United Nations Mine Action Service (UNMAS) and the MAIC. Noah is also leading a project to "develop a Decision Support System for the State Department's Office of Humanitarian Demining Programs."

Klemm, 25, largely credits his work with the MAIC and the State Depart-

ment for his success at his present position. Not only was he given a headfirst introduction to global affairs and mine action, but Noah also received "great insight into the various political and organizational dynamics with the mine action community."<sup>6</sup> Like Keith Feigenbaum, he met important global players in the demining community and used these contacts extensively.

Stacy Smith, who worked as an Editorial Assistant at the Journal of Mine Action from October 2000 to May 2001, brought Noah's same fresh-faced perspective to her position. "Unfortunately, I cannot say that I knew a lot about landmines or the devastation they cause to communities and individuals in mine-affected countries before I started working at the MAIC," Stacy revealed in an interview. In fact, she "knew nothing." Smith's lack of knowledge, however, was soon transformed into expertise. Her eagerness to learn, combined with the Journal's informative and rigorous atmosphere, made Stacy an authority on a number of mine-related topics.

Also a SMAD graduate from JMU, Stacy Smith currently works for RONCO Consulting Corporation in Washington, D.C. RONCO is an international pro-

professional services firm that specializes in humanitarian demining assistance, procurement services, agribusiness and private sector development. In the last 21 years, RONCO has supplied varying levels of in-country management and support to 300 demining projects in more than 50 developing countries. As a Program Associate, Stacy's job is to "provide support to several of these country programs from the home office" and to draft "impact reports about the effect of RONCO's operations on local populations." She also edits and compiles monthly field reports from various country programs and updates content on RONCO's website.

Stacy's progression from Editorial Assistant to Program Associate was "a natural evolution of sorts." Like many of the MAIC's student employees, Stacy applied for and received the State Department's Humanitarian Demining fellowship. RONCO, a State Department contractor for worldwide demining efforts, subsequently offered Smith a job. The "basic understanding of mine action" she received at the MAIC, along with her rigorous State Department background, prepared Smith well for a job at RONCO. Moreover, "the fast-paced environment of the State Department" forced Stacy "to work efficiently, yet accurately, to complete projects and assignments."

The Frasure-Kreuzel-Drew Humanitarian Demining Fellowship immediately challenged Stacy, and "turned out to be a great experience...that prepared [her] for [her] present job."<sup>7</sup> During the first few months of the Fellowship, Smith drafted articles for the State Department's annual publication, *To Walk the Earth in Safety*. She also traveled to Southeast Asia to visit clearance sites in Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos and Thailand. Smith described the two-week journey as "an incredible experience that increased [her] knowledge of landmines, demining activities and the U.S. commitment to mine-affected countries." Much of Stacy's success in her present position can be attributed to knowledge and experience that she gained during the Fellowship. In addition, her experience at the Journal gave her both an understanding and a

thorough introduction to mine action.

The *Journal of Mine Action* and the MAIC's State Department Fellowship have introduced many to the rewards and frustrations of mine action. Very few of today's landmine/UXO experts entered the field with knowledge or experience. Most of the Journal's employees are simply looking for employment. There is a peculiar quality to mine action, however; the more one learns about the worldwide devastation and socio-economic impact of landmines and UXO, the greater one's concern. Furthermore, very few jobs can offer a college undergraduate the opportunity to assist, in some small way, in treating one of the world's most significant problems. Meeting foreign delegates, thoroughly exploring a global issue and traveling to worldwide conferences are perks not associated with pizza delivery or customer service.

Noah Klemm, who needed a part-time job when he graduated in 1999, found himself immediately drawn to mine action. Noah ultimately chose a career in the landmine community. "Demining gets in your blood," he remarked in an interview; "it's difficult to leave a field that is at the same time extremely rewarding and patently frustrating."<sup>8</sup>

Because Americans live in a country that is essentially unaffected by landmines or UXO, it is easy to ignore the global significance of the issue. Knowledge, however, inherently leads to concern. For this reason, Michael Monroe is working to give mine action "more media attention." Although Monroe chose to pursue work in television upon leaving the Journal, "the issue of landmines is very important to [him]," and he is prepared to help the cause in any way he can.<sup>9</sup> He feels his potential documentary would open many eyes to the distress of many forgotten, mine-ridden nations.

When Kurt Chesko traveled to Afghanistan, he saw first-hand the destruction indiscriminate landmine use can cause. "Nothing can prepare you for the devastation that Afghanistan has seen," Kurt reflected. Yet despite the decades of war and conflict, the Middle Eastern nation's citizens are "happy" and "hopeful." In northern Afghanistan on a follow-up mission for HALO, he visited a

tiny farming village consisting of some of the "poorest people in the world."<sup>10</sup> The village had recently been cleared by HALO deminers. There he shared tea and cookies with the villagers, between the rice paddies. By meeting these resilient, kind and generous people, Kurt realized the significance of his work.

Erin Snider was attracted to the State Department fellowship because "landmines are inherently an economic issue, a humanitarian issue, a political issue, everything." The idea that there is "one little component with such a devastating impact on all those different areas" is at once disturbing and interesting<sup>11</sup>. Those who enter the field of mine action always emerge with a changed worldview. Many go on to pursue a career in landmine awareness, removal or administration; all leave deeply concerned. ■

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