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Alumni Profile

Cultivating culture

Kate Wiehagen Leonard moves to a new country every two to three years. She can speak three languages. She meets presidents and heads of state. She has friends working in embassies around the world. And it's all part of her job.

Leonard, BA, BA '97, is a Foreign Service officer for the U.S. Department of State. In August 2008, she arranged a visit to MU through the Career Center and the Fellowships Office to share her experiences with students — especially those interested in employment overseas or with the State Department.



Kate Wiehagen Leonard is one of about 6,500 government employees who travel the world as Foreign Service officers for the U.S. Department of State.

“I have always been drawn to public service,” she says. “And I’m very proud to be in this job. It’s a fairly un-American lifestyle for someone who works for the U.S. government. I’ve been in small towns where I was the only American, and to be the only representative of my country is a tremendous responsibility.”




Foreign Service officers work in U.S. embassies and consulates around the world, as well as in Washington, D.C. Leonard completed her first two-year assignment in Guatemala City, and has volunteered to serve her next tour in Baghdad, Iraq.

“Really, American diplomats are generalists,” Leonard says. “We’re called upon to do whatever needs to be done, and it’s great. I can be an ‘undeclared major’ forever.”

Responsibilities for a Foreign Service officer typically include reviewing visa applications, issuing visas, assisting Americans overseas, developing cultural awareness programs, and analyzing and reporting on policy issues such as HIV/AIDS, human rights and fair trade.

“It’s always an adventure,” Leonard says, “but the personal life is tough. You really make a commitment to being away from your family and friends back at home.” In addition, “I serve the people of the United States,” she says. “It’s not my job to agree or disagree with the president’s policies. I am there to do what needs to be done. It can be very challenging, but that’s why I love it.” — *Sarah Garber*

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