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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 Chooko 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 sociopolitical experience that could be applied to 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 Future-Kessel-Drew Humanitarian Demining Fellowship program through JMU’s MAIC. In January 2001, the State Department assigned Chooko 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 70 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 task is to raise the organization’s profile and investigate new sources of funding.

Chooko’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-

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"Defusing gets in your blood. It's difficult to learn a career path as a landmine clearing rewarding and patently frustrating." - Noah Klemm

Keith "learned that the landmine community is, above all else, determined and resilient. These are things that can be carried over into any job one does." - Keith Fox

Snider's fellowship with the MAIC from the United States donated $20,000 to clear a Bolivian minefield. After the minefield was cleared, information, maps and photographs were relayed to the church group. Therefore, the women who worked on the project were able to see exactly how their money was used, and who benefited from it. Thirty thousand square meters of land was returned to Bolivian peasants with 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 challenges and it introduced her to the human 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 researching 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, Kurt's visit to Afghanistan furnished him with both an appreciation for demining fieldwork and a perspective on the vastness of mine action. Admiration for the MAIC's work and fruitful interactions with the organization's representatives and UXO can cause. As a deminer, Kurt worked long, back-breaking hours under a scorching sun. In Kabul, Kurt spent a week receiving general training in medical and excavation procedures. From there, he worked with Kabul Police to clear minefields in various parts of the city. After a year, Kurt passed the "proof of concept" test and was able to return to Afghanistan, this time as a deminer. He was sent to different areas of the country, including Kandahar, Herat, and Zabul. His work with the MAIC strengthened his resolve to make a career in UXO, and he was determined to return to Afghanistan to continue his work.

Currently, Keith holds a career in UXO, gaining valuable experience. He has worked for the MAIC from June 1999 to February 2000, assisting with the Slovenia Dog conference. In addition, he worked with the Civil/Military Task Force conducting a study of lessons learned within the mine removal community. This work led to the State Department's Fatigue-Kneuvel-Drew Fellowship from February 2000 to June 2004. The knowledge Keith 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.

Snider's fellowships with the MAIC do 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 controls."

During Keith's stint as assistant editor, he traveled to Tampa, Florida for a conference on military/non-governmental organization (NGO) collaboration. 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, Snider's fellowship with the MAIC does not imply direct work with landmines, the "knowledge of landmines and the negative effects of their widespread and indiscriminate use...is a common theme in arms controls."

In Afghanistan, Chesko saw for the first time "the progress that's been 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 will completely unstable that has now been planted and is stirring." Such realizations only serve to strengthen one's resolve to remove landmines.

When Noah Klemm graduated from JMU with an International Affairs degree, he "learned that the landmine community is, above all else, determined and resilient. These are things that can be carried over into any job one does." - Keith Fox

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AfricO: It's Big!

by Dennis Barlow, Director, MAIC

The great opera commentator, John Cullough was once asked to describe the monumental Wagnerites' Ring Cycle using only one word. After predicting the question for a moment he responded by characterising it as, "long." At this, his obvious answer seemed more flippant than serious, but a little thought leads one to conclude that Cullough was on to something. Many words could describe the Ring: monumental, bountiful, fantastic, convoluted, stirring, mythological, but each limits the scope or makes a judgment which may not be ultimately true. The truth is that someone who wants to tackle the Ring must be prepared to undergo quite a long journey—an investment in both time and emotion—to discover the many treasures, which may reward the patient and skilled listener.

The Challenge of African "Bigness"

The challenge, as Africa itself, may be described as simply "Big." We might be daunted by the fact that the landmine threat there could be described as complex, multi-dimensional, problematic, or difficult. On the other hand, we might be tempted to see the promise of a dream fulfilled and describe the situation as hopeful, coordinated, focused, or promising. But we would be well cautioned to approach the challenge of landmine remediation in Africa, much as the Wagnerites do with patience and diligence—and the clear recognition that the landmine problem in Africa is a multi-faceted puzzle which can, only with the most energetic and dedicated of outlooks, yield dramatic and inspiring results.

So in dealing with Africa, let us first accept that it is BIG and diverse. There are long distances to and from landmine-affected areas; there are vast and dramatic topographical environments ranging from desert to tropical forest, from lush and verdant fields to barren alkali plains. Threatened people live in monasteries in tribes, and are nomadic or sedentary, often displaced or in refugee status. Almost every conceivable kind of landmine has been planted in Africa over the past sixty years. African countries represent varying kinds of political outlooks and political experiences, just as they are home to peoples of different races and cultures and often conflicting, philosophical, tribal outlooks, and religions. The size and scope of the pace and the people that are Africa do not lend themselves to a "one-size-fits-all" landmine remediation scheme. Therefore, several approaches are needed to maximise the certain fine success in planning and conducting mine action campaigns in Africa.

Synchronize Your Watches—and Your Plans

The first observation is that since Africa is too big and too diverse to treat uniformly, no one organization or mine action methodology will work everywhere. The key to comprehensive, coordinated, and synchronised campaign planning is the coordination of complementary efforts made possible by the best possible integration, cooperation, and communication of involved organizations. This recognition and its implied interaction with other different groups' activities extend beyond mine action to other families of humanitarian action.

Very often mine action projects can be accomplished best in conjunction with activities such as civil action projects, feeding programs, public health missions, agriculture and land rehabilitation, or post-conflict support. Any organization hoping to maximize or insure the lasting effects of its mine action mission would be well advised to link its activities to other relief or humanitarian efforts.

Light One Candle

A second consideration is to attempt to win small and achievable victories. I am reminded of the profound slogan, which advises us to "Think globally, act locally." Any one organization's attempt to try to unilaterally take the lead in trying to solve Africa's landmine problems will be as frustrating as it is undesirable, and has every likelihood of becoming counterproductive. The trick is to find an approach which is feasible, logical, and often influencing, philosophically, tribally and religiously. The size and scope of the pace and the people that are Africa do not lend themselves to a "one-size-fits-all" landmine remediation scheme. Therefore, several approaches are needed to maximise the certain fine success in planning and conducting mine action campaigns in Africa.

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