

*Population and Reproductive Health
Oral History Project*

Sophia Smith Collection, Smith College
Northampton, MA

Sara Seims

Interviewed by
Rebecca Sharpless

September 17, 2004
Palo Alto, California

This interview was made possible with generous support
from the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation.

© Sophia Smith Collection 2006

Narrator

Sara Seims, Ph.D. (b. 1948) has been director of the population program at the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation since 2003. She was president of the Alan Guttmacher Institute from 1999 to 2003. Seims has also worked as associate director of population sciences at the Rockefeller Foundation, and in Management Sciences for Health, USAID Office of Population in Washington, D.C., and Dakar, Senegal.

Interviewer

Rebecca Sharpless directed the Institute for Oral History at Baylor University in Waco, Texas, from 1993 to 2006. She is the author of *Fertile Ground, Narrow Choices: Women on Texas Cotton Farms, 1900–1940* (University of North Carolina Press, 1999). She is also co-editor, with Thomas L. Charlton and Lois E. Myers, of *Handbook of Oral History* (AltaMira Press, 2006). In 2006 she joined the department of history at Texas Christian University in Fort Worth, Texas.

Restrictions

None

Format

Three 60-minute audiocassettes.

Transcript

Transcribed, audited and edited at Baylor University. Transcript has been reviewed and approved by Sara Seims.

Bibliography and Footnote Citation Forms

Audio Recording

Bibliography: Seims, Sara. Interview by Rebecca Sharpless. Audio recording, September 17, 2004. Population and Reproductive Health Oral History Project, Sophia Smith Collection. **Footnote:** Sara Seims, interview by Rebecca Sharpless, audio recording, September 17, 2004, Population and Reproductive Health Oral History Project, Sophia Smith Collection, tape 1.

Transcript

Bibliography: Seims, Sara. Interview by Rebecca Sharpless. Transcript of audio recording, September 17, 2004. Population and Reproductive Health Oral History Project, Sophia Smith Collection. **Footnote:** Sara Seims, interview by Rebecca Sharpless, transcript of audio recording, September 17, 2004, Population and Reproductive Health Oral History Project, Sophia Smith Collection, p. 23.

*Population and Reproductive Health
Oral History Project*

Sara Seims

Interviewed by Rebecca Sharpless
September 17, 2004
Palo Alto, California

Sharpless Today is September 17, 2004. My name is Rebecca Sharpless and this is the first oral history interview with Dr. Sara Seims. The interview is taking place in Dr. Seims's office at the Hewlett Foundation in Palo Alto, California. Or is it Menlo Park? Okay. The interview is being sponsored, actually, by the Hewlett Foundation. It's a part of the Population Pioneers Project. So a late fly in from Oakland last night, and I'm so glad you're here this morning.

Seims Oh, happy to be here.

Sharpless And what I want to do this morning is start very generally. Just tell me a little bit about yourself and growing up.

Seims Okay. I grew up in a very working-class family in London, and I came to the U.S. just when I was one month past my eighteenth birthday. And I came on a tourist visa, and I had absolutely no intention whatsoever of going to college. I came just to have fun, because in those days, young girls of my social class didn't go to college. And if there's one question Americans ask eighteen year-olds, it's, Where are you going to go to college? And enough people asked me that question that, after bumming around for a few months, I thought, Well, maybe I should find out what this is all about. So I was staying with relatives, who, luckily for me—my aunt and uncle lived in

Greenwich Village. I had these hip relatives. And I asked them where the nearest college was, which was NYU. And I didn't tell anybody, and I just went to the college, found something, an office called dean of admissions, and with the ignorance of the young knocked on the door. There was the dean, who invited me in. He was very nice to me. Told me I could get in with my qualifications. I had no money. I came to this country with seventy dollars to last me six months. And he offered me a job as his secretary. And in those days I came in under the tail end—this was the late sixties—I came in under the tail end of the old racist immigration laws which favored people from the UK. So it was very easy for me to get a green card. All I had to do was get a job. So I ended up working as his secretary and going to—you got three courses you could take free. And then I got an education opportunity grant, which is something that was available to poor kids in those days, so no longer available. And that's how I came to be in this country. So it was a very exciting journey.

Sharpless That's truly remarkable. So you were working full-time at NYU and taking one course?

Seims I was working full-time at NYU and taking three courses.

Sharpless Oh, okay. Wow.

Seims And then after—

Sharpless And you still lived with your aunt and uncle for a while?

Seims I lived with them for a while, bless their hearts. And then I got married very young. I got married just shortly after my twentieth birthday. And my husband, who unfortunately became my ex-husband somewhere along the

line, he got a job in New Jersey, so I left NYU and went full-time at Rutgers. And that's where I saw a notice on the student notice board that a visiting professor from Columbia named Harriet Presser—they needed a volunteer to pick her up at the New Brunswick train station and drive her to class, so I volunteered. And I met Harriet. And I said, "Well, what do you teach?" And she said, "Demography." And I was a junior in college then, and I said, "Well, what's that?" And she said, "Well, take my course and find out." So the next semester—so I picked up Harriet frequently over that year. But the next semester I took her course and really liked it. It was a basic demographics course. And so Harriet became my mentor and she—I don't know if you know her name, she's more a sociologist that has specialized in workforce issues. But in those days she was very much a demographer, a sociologist demographer. And she's still working; she was a very young professor at the time. And she took me under her wing. And she also had come from a working-class background and had got married very young. And she was the one in my senior year who told me I should go to graduate school, which is something I had also not considered. She was the one who suggested I apply to Penn [University of Pennsylvania]. And so it was all like, I guess, many other people you have interviewed, quite serendipitous how we got into this odd field. So that's how I ended up as a demographer.

Sharpless

How interesting. When you met Professor Presser, what were you thinking you would major in?

Seims

I really had no idea, because I certainly hadn't grown up thinking of myself as an academic, but I knew I would be settling in the U.S. And I knew

enough that you needed a bachelor's degree. It just was essential to be able to do anything. So I hadn't really given it much thought. I was a young girl, newly married, still quite flighty, I have to say. And I didn't really have much of a future on the horizon. The reason I liked demography is it pushed my quantitative skills about as far as they would go. And I did recognize that reasoning skills and quantitative skills were very important attributes to develop for the workplace and for life in general. It seemed to me, it was a very good mix of the analytical, but associated with the real human condition. And it was a human condition that resonated with me very basically, because I grew up in the UK in a poor family, where unintended pregnancies and illegal abortions were a fact of life. Everybody I knew had one, including my mother and my older sister. These were done in a clandestine fashion. The British authorities in those days turned a blind eye; nobody was arrested. But it was still a traumatic experience. There was no sex education in my class. I went to an all-girls school. Many got pregnant. There was no ability to get contraception. And I had grown up with a very personal knowledge of how women and reproduction and women's options in life were very much intermixed. Even as an undergraduate, even studying population pyramids and the fertility and mortality of migration, what appealed to me—also the human-condition aspect appealed to me—is that I could relate it to a personal life experience. And so my connection to demography was always very much a personal one, very much the voices of women that I grew up with, trying to basically control their reproductive futures.

Sharpless Interesting. So when you were finishing up there at Rutgers and Professor Presser was talking to you about graduate school, was the demography you were interested in especially in reproduction?

Seims Well, I didn't know. Now the man I married, Tim Seims, who also worked for AID [U.S. Agency for International Development] for a while. He had lived a lot in developing countries and one of the things—once I met him, we started to go to developing countries together.

Sharpless Even when you were an undergraduate?

Seims Yes, because I was married as an undergraduate. I was a junior when I married. And in the Christmas of our junior year we went to Haiti. And through friends we had heard of this Baptist mission hospital in the north of Haiti. And I'm talking now about 1970. I mean, it really was a long time ago. And they were in a town called Limbé, in a hospital called le Bon Samaritan. And we went there and we lived there for a few weeks. And it really changed my life. Of course, the first time any of us go to a poor, developing country—I was bombarded with all those images of the enormous suffering and hardship of the people, coupled with enormous resilience and optimism of people. That's a dichotomy that strikes me to this day, whenever I'm in those very, very resource-poor countries. But this was a Southern Baptist mission hospital. They offered family planning. And I saw these streams of women go in. It wouldn't surprise me, though I don't want anyone to take this too seriously, but it wouldn't surprise me if they also offered abortion. They were so aware of the health impact of unsafe abortion in that rural Haitian town all those years ago. And they were vehement family planners in

those days. And so by the time I met Harriet, I was already in tune. And so demography for me was a way—I became very interested in developing countries. And it became a way for me that, in some rigorous fashion and analytical fashion, I could address a lot of things at the same time.

Sharpless What motivated a couple of ideal young twenty-somethings to go spend their Christmas break in Haiti?

Seims Well, Tim Seims just loved developing countries. He just loved other cultures. You know, he'd grown up in another culture, but it was very—it wasn't a developing country culture. And it just was very exotic; it was just really an exotic experience. So we did lots of travel together. So then I applied to Penn and the day I got my acceptance letter, Tim found out that he was being—he worked for Schering Corporation at the time and he found out he was being transferred to Hong Kong. And that really posed a problem for us. What did I do? Did I give up my hopes of graduate school and go to Hong Kong, which sounded very exciting, or what should I do? And it was really Harriet who advised me to get my master's first, not tell Penn because they wouldn't admit me if they knew I was just thinking of doing that because they don't admit people who do that.

Sharpless Right, they want the Ph.D.

Seims Ph.D. But go into the Ph.D program, get a master's. And she knew somebody who had taught at a place called Hong Kong Baptist College. It's now called Hong Kong Baptist University. In those days it didn't have university status. So she got me names to talk to. So the master's program at Penn was only a one-year program. So in fact I did that one year; got my

master's degree.

Sharpless And Tim was in Hong Kong while you were there?

Seims He was in Hong Kong. But an academic year goes by pretty quickly, and he came to visit once. You know, it was harder then than it is now because there weren't the cheap air fares then, as you may know. That is really an element of life. It has become much, much cheaper. But, so I went out there at Christmas and he came once, so we kind of—we didn't like it, but we managed. But I did arrive at Hong Kong, you know, a year or so later with a master's degree and a job for two hundred dollars a month teaching at Hong Kong Baptist College. And I taught Introduction to Demography and something called Asian Population Problems. And I had brilliant students, many of whom were older than I was at the time. And the Baptist college was a Southern Baptist college affiliated with Baylor, as a matter of fact.

Sharpless That is correct, yes.

Seims Very progressive. I don't know what it's like now, whether it's become more conservative over the years. But I'm Jewish, and everyone knew it. There was absolutely no pressure on me. There was only one person who tried to convert me to a Jew for Jesus. But everyone else was very respectful. They allowed me to bring in speakers from the Hong Kong Family Planning Association to talk to my students because it really wasn't directly related to what I was teaching them. But they would ask me about birth control because there was such an air of forbidden fruit about the whole thing in Hong Kong in those days. And it was a very—this is now the early seventies, a very vibrant society. The cultural revolution was still going on in China in

those days. Hong Kong was very poor then. There were squatters huts everywhere. And it was, in fact, a wonderful time to be there. And I had a child there; my one and only child was born there. And after three years, we decided we should come back, and I wanted to get my Ph.D. At that point, I had done some research on illegal immigration from China to Hong Kong. And I wanted to go back to Penn and finish, so my husband got a job in Philadelphia. And I had had an NIH [National Institutes of Health] fellowship my first year. When I reapplied to Penn, I got nothing but real discouragement from them, and words were said to me like I made my choice; I had decided on motherhood. And I had lost my fellowship, and that was a choice I had made by dropping out after my master's degree. The fact that I had been working in the field and done research didn't make any difference. And there was real, in a way, disapproval that I had a kid, got married. But fortunately, one of the professors there—am I speaking too much on this?

Sharpless

No, you're great.

Seims

This guy called Phil Sagi had heard—I'd had him for one course when I was getting my master's. And he had grant money from IPPF [International Planned Parenthood Federation] to analyze thousands of surveys from Sri Lanka, in Sinhalese, of fertility desires. And the money was enough to pay my tuition and give me two thousand dollars a year. And he asked me if I would be willing to be his research assistant and, of course, I jumped at the chance. And I had a little baby at that point. And I found a Sri Lankan student who was majoring in communication. And these were all open-

ended questions in Sinhalese.

Sharpless Hand-written?

Seims Hand-written. Thousands of them. And I—somehow or other we scraped up the money to pay this wonderful guy and his wife to go through them. And we pre-coded; we got a pre-code. And these were the days when nobody had their own computer, of course, and the computer cards—. But we did the whole thing, and it was really interesting. And that became my master's thesis. And then Phil Sagi got another IPPF survey on Barbados, which was really looking at, again, reasons for the fertility decline, and he asked if I would, you know, take charge of analyzing that. And that became my doctoral dissertation. So it all worked out in the end. In fact, I recommend to women who are thinking of having children to actually do it when they're in graduate school if they are in, if it seems right to them, because it's much easier to have a kid when you have a looser schedule. Being a graduate student and writing a thesis, you have a pretty loose schedule. So I feel that part worked out well. I was twenty-five when I had my child. So by the time I had finished my doctorate and was looking for a job, he was already kind of civilized, semi-civilized, anyway.

Sharpless Old enough.

Seims Old enough.

Sharpless What were the findings of the Sri Lankan and Barbados surveys?

Seims Well, the Sri Lankan survey—this is probably data—I was analyzing it in 1975, so I think the data was probably 1973 data. Sri Lanka was already undergoing its drastic decline in fertility. And a particular survey was on the

acceptability of a condom called Preethi, which was named after the granddaughter of the prime minister at the time. (Sharpless laughs) And it showed incredible change in fertility desire by cohort, real acceptance of condoms, whereas everything else—and a country where education of women was really making a difference. And that became very clear. With the Barbados data, the actual survey was really more the KAP, Knowledge, Attitudes, and Practice, but what I used it for my dissertation was the data of Barbados, the economic data, not related to the survey, but other data, were very, very good. And at Penn, the orientation of the demography program—it was not so much sociology demography as economic demography. And some really first-rate economists in the economics department were very interested in demography, and those were the two departments that were closest together. So my dissertation actually was relating business cycles in Barbados with fertility cycles. And that was its orientation.

Sharpless And your findings?

Seims Well, my findings were that fertility did respond to economic cycles in ways that would not—but Barbados is also a low fertility society, but there was a generation disconnect that could also be related to economic cyclical differences.

Sharpless How interesting. So PhD in hand, what are you thinking that you'll do?

Seims Well, we moved around a lot at that time, mostly because of my then-husband's job.

Sharpless Was he still in pharmaceuticals, right?

Seims Right, he was no longer working for Schering at that time, and I was

actually—well, we moved from Philly to Boston, the Boston area. And I actually wrote my dissertation based in Boston while commuting to Philadelphia, which was, you know, difficult. But I finished it. And I wanted to work at AID. And this was now—I guess, by now we’re talking about 1977. And I could see my dissertation coming to an end. And I came down to Washington and I met with Joe Speidel, who is becoming a dear friend. But the first time I met him he was this big, important guy. And I was trying to impress him. And I read up on all this management literature. The big thing at that time was management by objectives. So I started to talk to Joe, this graduate student, about management by objectives, hoping it would kind of impress him. And he looked at me and he said, “Well, my slogan is, ‘Keep it simple, stupid.’” And I thought, Oh, God. (laughter)

Seims So I said, “Oh, God, I’m making a terrible impression here.” And I met Sarah Clark. I don’t know if you’ve met with Sarah. She’s now my counterpart at Packard.

Sharpless Right.

Seims Many people. Rei Ravenholt, at that time, I had to meet for the first time. And I also met a person called Jim Bracket, who passed away a few years ago, and he was in charge of the demography department. This becomes quite an interesting story which I’ll endeavor to keep short. So Jim was kind enough to say he would like to hire me. And he also said he would try to get my husband a job at the family planning services division. Now Carter was president then and he had put a hiring freeze on all federal hiring. And it became very clear to me I was in this limbo and nobody knew when it would

break. So I had to get a job because we desperately needed the money. So I looked in New York and I went to Columbia University to talk to Harriet, and there were no jobs there. And I noticed on the notice board at Columbia that there was this announcement that Allan Rosenfield was giving a talk. And, of course, I never met Allan then, but I'd heard of him. So I had heard that there was a job at a group called AVSC [Association for Voluntary Surgical Contraception]. In those days it was called AVS [Association for Voluntary Sterilization]. Now it's called EngenderHealth. And the original founders were in charge at that time, two people: Ira Lubell and Marilyn Schima, I think her name was. I think—I've blocked it out. She has since passed away, I believe, but I think he's still alive. And I confessed this to Allan, but I told him—I said to him that he had recommended that I come talk to them, which was not true. He'd never met me. So I went to talk with Marilyn Schima, who was looking for a coordinator in the evaluation at AVS, and I said that Rosenfield—I suggested I talk to her. And I got the job. And, of course, I was dreading that I would be found out and publicly humiliated, but it never happened. And I went to work there, and it was the most dysfunctional workplace I had ever been in. The two original founders were absolute tyrants. And there were about five of us hired on the same day; three people were fired immediately thereafter. And the working environment was so poor that, shortly after I left—this is an aside—the workforce unionized and went out on strike. And when AID visited, the founders were fired and new leadership was brought in and it all had a happy ending. But after a few months there, I decided, you know, life is too short,

and I got a job at AGI [Alan Guttmacher Institute] as a senior research associate. And Jeannie [Rosoff] hired me, and I worked with Jacqui Darroch. And I spent a very happy fifteen months or so there, but it was all domestic. And I did the first fifty state profiles on the abortion need in the U.S., covering the years, I guess, 1978 at that point. And I really got to know AGI and respect it, but my heart was really international. And during the time I was with AGI, the AID jobs came through. Not just for me, but also my husband. So my first two jobs were very short-lived. Six months at AVS, later EngenderHealth, and fifteen months at AGI. And then I left to go become what was called a cognizant technical officer at AID.

Sharpness A cognoscente?

Seims Technical officer. C-T-O.

Sharpless Cognoscente of what? (laughter)

Seims Who knows? CTO at AID, working for this guy Jim Bracket. At that point—this is really where the story really gets kind of interesting, Rei Ravenholt was on his way out. The powers that be were—on his way out. He was still there, but he was no longer head of the office of population. Joe Speidel, I think, was acting head.

Sharpless That sounds right.

Seims And I was reporting to Jim Bracket. And I felt tremendous loyalty to Jim because he not only hired me but he also got my husband a job. Jim was a devout Ravenholt loyalist, devout. So he didn't like Joe Speidel. You know, there was a real schism in that office. The litmus test was essentially if you were with Ravenholt, you believed that the way to lower—that lowering high

fertility was the dominant paradigm and the way to do that was just flood the world with contraception. If you were of the opinion that things were a little more complicated than that, then you were suspect. So I came in and discovered that one thorn in Ravenholt's side, and therefore in Jim Bracket's side, was, believe it or not, the international program with the census bureau, the U.S. Census Bureau, because they had the temerity to publish data that indicated that life was a little more complicated. However, for political reasons and other reasons, AID gave money to international programs of the Census Bureau under Jim Bracket's demography program. And Jim didn't like them one bit. And tell me when we need to stop.

Sharpless No, okay. I'm fine. Another couple of minutes.

Seims An RFP [Request for Proposal] had been issued, and this is now 1980. Carter was on the way out; Reagan was on the way in. And an RFP was about to be issued by Jim Bracket's department, which was, essentially, the software development for the 1990 round of censuses, international censuses. And Jim put me, a junior person who knew nothing, to be chair of the RFP committee.

Sharpless To review proposals.

Seims To review proposals and write the RFP and set up the evaluation criteria. The rationale for that became clearer later. And I was bombarded. And, plus, I was the CTO for the Census Bureau agreement with the Office of Population to do a whole bunch of surveys. And, of course, I knew the people there. They were my people, you know, new demographic PhDs. You know, they're nice, totally apolitical demographers. And, of course,

they're like my people. And I couldn't understand why this most innocuous, somewhat boring group of people, were raising all these shackles with my boss, who I really wanted to like. So he put me in charge of this RFP and he told me the Census Bureau—some experts—there was a group of people who used to work at the Census Bureau who were friends of his who couldn't stand the Census Bureau because they were a terrible group. They had formed their own company, and they were going to bid on the RFP. I didn't know what he was telling me. I thought he was telling me information. The day before the proposals were due, Jim Bracket calls me into his office. And he introduces me to a guy and he says, This is Joe Somebody-or-other. He's head of this group, this nice group, and you're going to see their proposal. And, you know, dumb as I am, I didn't realize what he was telling me. So the RFP committee met. We all had—by a strange coincidence, we were all women and, in those days, that was really unusual because almost everyone was male, which has changed so completely. But I was chair and I got a few other people around. And I recall—I'm not sure about this, but Jim suggested the people. But because we were women and new, we were actually very meticulous in following procedures. So we got the RFPs, and we deliberated in secret as we were supposed to do and as we were told, and another group got the award, fair and square. And this all takes several weeks within AID.

Sharpless Let me go ahead and turn the tape.

Tape 1, side 1, ends; side 2 begins.

Seims I then left to go to Kenya to actually work on another AID-funded Census

Bureau project, which was to train the Kenyan census people on mapping. And I was there, and we paid for it, and I was going to be part of the faculty to teach that. So, again, you know, we're talking early now, like 1980s—still 1980s, when there was no E-mail. Communication was all by cable. And I get to Kenya, and no sooner am I in my hotel room than there's a phone call from the AID lawyer to tell me—you'll tell me if this is too much of a digression—

Sharpless

No, this is great.

Seims

—saying that Jim Bracket had—when he found out who had won, had gone over to the lawyer's office, demanded to receive all the RFPs and the RFP committee's deliberations, which we had written out because we were good little girls and we wanted to follow procedures. And he was given all this stuff. And Jim Bracket had refuted it, with his deputy who also hated the Census Bureau, and had come to the conclusion that the committee didn't know what they were talking about. And obviously none of them had had expertise in this, you know, which I had been telling Jim for like years, you know, months. But we felt very confident about this group. And I had come back then. So I came back and I remember my husband—of course, the marriage was a bit shaky by that time, too—who was also working for AID. Immediately, Ed was saying that it was just—that everyone knew what was going on. It was just really this whole storm around this damn procurement. So I got to the office and Jim Bracket decided to try and help me get a face-saving way out of this. So he was trying—he and his deputy, who happened to be in law school, came in, closed the door in my office, and tried to get

me to agree that the Census Bureau had told me bad things about this group, had given me bad information. So I could have a way to reconsider the verdict. This went on all day. And I didn't know what to do because I thought if I went to Joe Speidel, who I knew didn't like Jim—Jim certainly didn't like him—I was being disloyal to this guy who had hired me and found a job sorely needed for my husband. And I remember feeling really jet-lagged, but left my office after being with me for nearly six hours.

Sharpless

Were they sort of brow beating you?

Seims

Yeah. My door was closed and it was about six at night. And Tim Seims had called to try and find me, and most people had gone by that time. And the person who picked up the phone was a woman then called Pat Baldi, now called Patricia Walk. You may have heard her name. She was a political appointee from the Carter era, very much on the new AID side, deputy to Joe. And she came in to look for me. And she came into my office, and I was just in tears. And so I just told her what was happening. And she—of course, the top people never know anything. And she was shocked and she told Joe. And I was still on probation at AID at that point. You're on probation for your first six months. And I said, "I just can't work for you anymore because I stand by that decision." It turns out that Sarah Clark, who is now my counterpart at Packard, had gone through—had been hired originally by Jim Bracket. And something else had happened. But also, she had left under similar circumstances, and she was now chief of the policy division at the Office of Population. And she was the devil incarnate, according to Jim Bracket. And I was transferred over to Sarah's division.

And we were two women—Pat was the third—in an office that was primarily, you know, Ravenholt macho male, with few exceptions.

Sharpless But Sarah was division head?

Seims She was division head. She had been promoted.

Sharpless So she'd been put in over this guy.

Seims No, it was a different division, a different vision. So I went to work for Sarah, and that's how I got to know her. And we started to hear—people would tell us that Jim and his cohort were spreading terrible rumors about us, that we were sleeping around, that we drank. And people would tell us, and at first, we were ignoring it. At the same time, there was a protest on this RFP. And the AID lawyer said to me, "Do you think that Jim Bracket would be attacking this RFP committee as much if instead of it being more women than men on it—and would he be saying these things about sleeping around to somebody who was married at that time and getting drunk if you were male?" And I said, "No, I don't think that he would." And he said, "Well, you may have ground, for you and Sarah, for a sexual harassment suit." So I went—

Sharpless This is AID's lawyer?

Seims AID's lawyer telling me this. So I discussed it with my then-husband, who was extremely unsupportive—this was the last year of this marriage—saying, "Oh, it's not fair that women get protections that men don't get. You shouldn't go there." But Sarah and I—it was getting so bad that we knew, at some point, that people would start thinking there's no smoke without fire. And then our careers, which were very vulnerable—we were in our early

thirties at that point—would be just over before they began. So we went to the department at AID that dealt with these kinds of things, and they put an investigator onto it. And so there was our sexual harassment suit preceding at the same time as the protest to the RFP. And the RFP award was upheld. AID very rarely overturns these things, so the other group got it. And just as a postscript, Joe Speidel kept that project with Jim Bracket and he just destroyed it. So he should have taken it away, but he didn't. And then the sexual harassment suit was continuing. And after about a year, the person, who was very good, who was in charge, said—concluded that it didn't fit the legal definition, at least in those days, of sexual harassment, but there had been such a gender—that word wasn't used then—discrimination. And Jim Bracket had to sign an agreement that he would cease all his ad hominem remarks about us, which he signed. In the meantime, my marriage had broken up and I had joined the foreign service. And there was a rule—AID had never fired anybody, so there was a reorganization. And the demography department was reorganized out of existence, and Jim was given some kind of job on the sidelines. Jim Bracket's wife had a very powerful job in Latin America, in the Latin American division. She'd made it clear to everyone that neither Sarah nor I could ever step foot in the Latin American mission as long as she was there. So we—both of us had this predilection for sub-Saharan Africa, anyway. We both spoke French, anyway. And so both of us found our careers now. And AID was suddenly becoming the epicenter of development even way back then. So both of us found our careers going to sub-Saharan Africa, whether we liked it or not. So after three years I left the

Office of Population and went into—and stayed with AID, but became the population officer in Senegal. My marriage had ended at that point. And as a postscript to the Jim Bracket story, he turned around and sued Sarah Clark, myself, Joe Speidel, and Peter McPherson, who was then the administrator for AID, in our private capacity for five hundred thousand dollars for infringing on his First and Fifth Amendment rights. And that, luckily, was thrown out of court, but I was subpoenaed. And when you're in the foreign service, you're served a subpoena, but your ambassador has to give it to you. So the first time I met my ambassador was when he was serving me this subpoena. But it was all fair. It caused a lot drama.

Sharpless How were you sleeping and eating?

Seims Oh, it actually—you kind of—it was very stressful. But after a while, when you're attacked, and I guess this is how politicians survive, you have to learn how to deal with it because it's like a constant in your life and you just have to deal with it. And Senegal, for me, was a chance to be born again, to start again, in that sense.

Sharpless How did you decide to go into foreign service?

Seims Well, it was something I had always wanted to do. And it's actually much easier to do when you're not in a couple, because finding matching assignments is very difficult. My ex-husband then had been a foreign service officer; he was hired by foreign service. And when we separated, he was in Egypt. Plus, it's hard. He had no objection to the—Josh stayed with me, my son—you know, taking him to Africa. When I first joined AID, in addition to doing the RFP, I also became the demography division's Africa person

because none of the men wanted to go to Africa. They still liked Asia work with its big population control programs. And because I spoke some French, I was sent to do work in the Franc-foreign countries. So even before the RFP was issued, I had made a couple of trips to Mali and to other countries, and I met this wonderful guy called Mike White. Mike was in AID and he had been one of the great Peace Corps doctors. And I met him on a couple of trips I made. And I just loved Mike. He was an inspirational guy. He was one of these terrible managers that everybody loves because all he cared about was people. And he was head of the health office in Senegal. And when I told him—I communicated with him that I was thinking of joining the foreign service and where did he advise I go. And he said he would create a job for me to come to Senegal. And he thought that that would be a place for me as a single woman with a son, that schools were good, that there was a supportive environment there for women.

Sharpless

How old was Josh?

Seims

Josh at that time was seven, and I was in my mid-thirties by that time. So I went to Senegal. And I guess Josh was a bit older then; he was nine, eight or nine. And according to the terms of my separation agreement, Josh would stay with me until seventh and eighth grade, when he would live with his father, and then after that he would decide, which was stupid; I don't recommend that to anybody. It's too much of a burden to put on a kid. But that was the terms of our agreement. And so Josh and I went to Senegal. And it was difficult at first, as a single parent having to work in French—living in a French-speaking country was very different from what I was

expecting it to be. But the Senegalese were wonderful people, and Mike—you could not ask for a better boss than Mike. And so I negotiated the first population, it was called Family Health Project with the Senegalese. Their contraceptive prevalence at the time was literally about half a percent, and it was—TFRs [Total Fertility Rates] were about seven. So it was really starting from scratch, and yet the government and the people knew that women's health was much better served and the health of their families if the pregnancies were wanted and spaced. And, indeed, traditionally Senegalese had spaced their children because there was a two-year period of breast-feeding. But they began young and ended late, and so they ended up with these huge families. And women wanted contraception. Abortion rates were very high. The midwives even told me about infanticide. I mean, it was your classic situation.

Sharpless What was the economy like in Senegal at this point?

Seims It was lousy then and terrible now. I mean, the good thing about Senegal then is now; it was a democracy. It's more a democracy now than it was then, but even then, students could protest without being run down. You know, it was a terribly corrupt place, still is, but it was better than the surrounding countries. They had a real cadre of trained, devoted Senegalese professionals with whom I could work. So, I had a wonderful time there. And Mike stayed for about eighteen months, and then he had to transfer to his next assignment, which was Haiti, surprisingly enough. I think it was Haiti. The sad story about Mike was, after Haiti, he went to Egypt and he was diagnosed with a brain tumor and died many years ago. He and I kept in

touch. He was just a wonderful man. He was replaced by Mary Ann Micka, who was known throughout AID as this ogre, this woman. She'd been in the Sudan, a medical doctor. And everyone said, Oh, I felt so sorry for you, going from Mike to Mary Ann. It was terrible, and I was scared stiff. And it turned out that Mary Ann was a pussycat. She was another wonderful boss. Spoke her mind. She's a rough diamond. Mike was very sensitive, very culturally sensitive. His French was totally fluent. Mary Ann didn't have fluent French. She was very much on the side of the Senegalese, but her rough edges, really rough edges—and she actually had to leave Senegal, because after I left a new mission director came in. Mary Ann had no respect for—and in front of the Senegalese, I think, she called him an idiot or something like that, because he was an idiot. And she was p-n-g'ed [persona non grata] out of Senegal. She was this wonderful woman and we're friends to this day.

So I was actually very happy in Senegal, learning a lot, just learning a lot about what the integration of family planning services meant on the ground, learning the difficulties that women had in accessing services, because they would—clinics were always having stock-outs. The midwife was never there when she should have been there. You know, the whole system was just—some of the basic nuts and bolts systems of accountability were just lacking, even with good will. They worked okay in Dakar. They worked okay in some of the other urban areas. But for rural women, there were very few choices. And I would go meet these women. And I would say, why did you want to use family planning? And almost all of them said because they were tired.

And I remember one woman pointing to her worn-out sandals, and she said to me in French, “I feel like these shoes.” And I went to one clinic, a private clinic in the city run by this great woman who also ran the clandestine abortion services. And I loved this woman; we became friends, too. And she took me around her clinic and she took me into an office where a young Senegalese man was having a vasectomy. And I couldn’t get this image of this young Muslim male having a vasectomy at a time when nobody had vasectomies. And I looked around and I said, “Tell me why was this man having a vasectomy because I’ve been told it’s totally, culturally inappropriate.” And she said that he was thirty-seven; he had four wives and twenty-two children and more on the way. And she said, you know, she gets a few cases like that every month. And it was a clandestine vasectomy. And she aborted all the babies of the affluent urban Senegalese, and she kept dossiers on all of them. And every time the police decided to crack down, which meant she had to give them a bribe, she would hold up these dossiers, and she would say, “If you don’t get out of my office, I’m going to go to *Le Soleil*,” which was the newspaper, “and they’re going to print all the names of the ministers and their mistresses and their daughters and their wives who come to me, so you just leave me alone.” And they left her alone. And she actually—I sent some women to her who had come to me, who were absolutely desperate for a safe abortion. So I learned, in a way, simple but very important things. I learned how counterproductive it is when our only interest in the health system is controlling fertility. So I would visit these rural maternity clinics that were crumbling. And the only money I had was to

refurbish one room for family planning. And the only medical personnel who had a nice clean uniform and equipment and electricity working was the family planning. I don't know how counterproductive that would be, how it would very clearly transmit the message that the only thing we care about you, your health, is that you don't have so many babies. That is not a good message for the U.S. government to be giving to the developing world. And so with my mission director, Mary Micka, my new boss's blessing, we allowed some of the money to be used to refurbish the rest of these little maternities at a very modest cost. And we strengthened the rest of the maternity. And that helped the family planning program. Integrating it into health was a win-win situation, and I learned that with my own eyes. And I also learned that the devil is in the details, that you can flood something with money but if the basic nuts and bolts are not there it will be wasted as we see to this day is happening to the Global Fund. That is a lesson that still has not been absorbed.

So, anyway, I was in Senegal and it was getting to the time when my son had to go live with his father, who by that time was transferred back to D.C., had remarried, and Josh and his new step-mother did not get on. And I was very unhappy about sending him there when I was in Senegal, so I contacted—Joe was then, by that time, out of AID. And Steve Sinding was head of AID, and Duff Gillespie was his deputy. So I said to them after speaking with Mary Ann, “For the next two years I want an assignment in D.C. so I can be near my son.” “Oh, no! When you came into the foreign service, you became worldwide available, and you've got another eighteen

months to do in Senegal for your two tours to be up and we can't transfer you." And I said, "I'm a single mother. My son is ten or eleven; it's a very vulnerable age. He's having anxiety, separation anxiety—" I'm certainly having separation anxiety because I was not confident about the home he would be put in—"just transfer me back for two years and then I'll go back. You know, I want another foreign service assignment." "No, no! We can't do it." So I go, "Okay, I'm not a slave." And I remember this was late 1985, and I paid my own way back over Thanksgiving week. And if there's one week that it's terrible to find a job, it's Thanksgiving week. But through various people I knew, I got some interviews. And my first choice was to be in Washington. There was nothing available in Washington. And then it was New York. And then it was Boston. I wanted to be as physically close—and the only real interview I got was with Management Sciences for Health [MSH] in Boston, where they were looking for a deputy of a big AID-funded project. So I went there at my own expense and met with a woman, Catherine Crone Coburn, who was director of the project. And she and I really hit it off and she not only offered me the job, subject to the approvals, but she was willing to wait, end of that school year, several months, so Josh could finish out that school year. And I had not met Ron O'Connor who was president of MSH at the time. He was flying back from Haiti, and I remember meeting him that week. I went out to Kennedy airport to meet him.

Sharpless

So you had your interview, you met O'Connor, and then you got on the plane and you went back to Senegal.

Seims And I went back to Senegal, and I got offered the job. And I kept Mary Ann Micka, my immediate boss, in the loop. And she was, of course, angry as I was that AID wouldn't find me anything. So I informed Steve Sinding that I had this job. The next day I get offered a job in AID in Washington. And I had already accepted the MSH job. And they had been nice enough to wait seven months for me to take this job. And I thought, You know, I've been at AID now over six years. It's probably time for me to leave, because if you stay any one place too long, particularly at an early stage of your career, you can't move. So with a lot of reluctance, I left AID and moved to Boston to work with MSH. And I was with MSH for seven years. And I liked working with them very much because, by that time, I knew you had to address systems or all the money in the world would do very little.

Sharpless Now, let me ask you a couple of questions before we leave Senegal. You've alluded to things that you've learned. What do you think the most important things you learned in Senegal were?

Seims Well, one of the most important things I learned is you had to—if you cared about women's reproductive health, you had to recognize that women didn't exist in a vacuum. They existed in a culture. They had families. You also had to care about the health of their children. You had to care about the health of their husbands, because 80 percent of the women in the villages we saw had gonorrhoea. So even if you only cared about reproduction—and HIV was an issue then, though nowhere near the issue it is now. But we all knew about AIDS. In fact I funded the first survey in Senegal at the time, in about 1985, which became the baseline survey. And the virologist who got the

grant—he and I kept in touch all these years. And it's just one of the real benefits of being in one field all your life. You keep in touch with people and you have these wonderful people, this part of your life, personal as well as professional. And so I learned that women's reproductive health could not be separated from the health—larger issues of health, or male health, or children's health. And that going—only painting the family planning clinic and only putting electricity in that one room didn't do anybody any good. And it didn't do the family planning program any good. It gave it a bad reputation. I also learned that, even though it was never intended that way, the Helms Amendment to the Foreign Assistant Act, which banned aid money going for abortion, actually was very helpful, because there is such fear of genocide, racial genocide. That fear still exists.

Sharpless

On the part of the Africans that the white people are going to come and—

Seims

Yeah, and I think it's not just Africa, actually. I think now it's probably much more of a fear now than it was then because the world was a safer place then. And Americans had higher prestige then than they do now. And we were not so distrusted in the world. But when I was confronted with if all you care about is, you know, controlling fertility, I would say, "Well, it's not true. There's no method. It's not approved for American women and we don't fund abortion." That actually allowed me to do much more on family planning. Now, the thing I should mention to you—I had to enforce the first gag rule. I was there.

Sharpless

Let me ask you about the Mexico City policy.

Seims

And I had just finished negotiating this family planning program with the

government.

Sharpless Let me change tapes before we do that and then after we finish with that we can take a break.

Tape 1 ends; tape 2, side 1, begins.

Sharpless This is the second tape of the first interview with Sara Seims on September seventeenth. Okay, first gag rule.

Seims I had no idea what was going on in Mexico City. I mean, I knew that there was a population conference. We knew that Reagan and the administration were very hostile to family planning. But when you're in the mission, you're somewhat protected from that; you just do your job. And I had a twenty million-dollar—by that program, I had just gotten approved by AID. So I was as happy as can be. And then I get this strange, long cable from the state department essentially saying—it was a gag rule, but it was written in legalese. I didn't understand a word of it. I went to my boss and mission director and we kind of got the gist. So I remember going over to my Senegalese government counterparts and trying to translate this thing into French for them, which I barely understood myself. And they were very confused, as I was. And they said, But you just approved this big twenty million-dollar program that has a huge family planning component. It wasn't just family planning. Are you saying your government doesn't want us to do this? And I'm saying, "No, I don't think that's what it is saying." Then there were some clarifying cables. Well, it turns out that abortion was illegal in Senegal, anyway. But we were allowing the midwives to use our money to help women coming to them with incomplete abortions, which was still

allowed in the gag rule, but it was very unclear in those early days. And I remember midwives in my office in tears saying, What should we do? We can't turn these women away. We're going to lose everything. And I said, "No, no, no, you won't. Just keep doing them." And then there was some clarification. But I would characterize it as total confusion, total confusion. The other thing that was being pushed at the same time was natural family planning. And they came together; for me, they came at the same time. So I searched Senegal high and low for a doctor or somebody capable of informing women about natural family planning methods but would do so in a way that also tell women about other forms of contraception and do the referrals. And I finally found this wonderful Togolese doctor who we gave a grant to and he worked actually out of the family planning programs office with the midwives from that program. And so I kind of got the Reagan administration off my back by doing that. But I just saw first-hand the utter confusion that was caused by that gag rule. And I think the women were turned away, and I think women died as a result of that gag rule, the first one. And so—but because abortion was illegal in Senegal, in fact, no Senegalese entity lost its money in that way.

Sharpless Anything else about Senegal?

Seims No, except that, you know, I learned. I spent three and a half years there. I lived more there really than any other place I've been and it was just a wonderful experience, and I recommend it for any young person.

Sharpless And you designed that program from the ground, up?

Seims Yep.

Sharpless Did you get to choose, for example, what commodities could be supplied?

Seims Yes, yes. Well, I did. I mean, this was a collaborative process, a consultative process with your counterparts. And it was very much—you build on what went on before. And they had been training in IUDs [Intra-uterine Devices]. They had brought the Pill. In Africa, including Senegal, there was a phenomenon called clandestine contraceptive use where women have to use contraception secretly because of pressures from mothers-in-law and husbands. And so the injectable was very popular, remains popular. IUDs were popular because you didn't—contraceptives, the further they are removed by the act of coitus, the more effective they are. And particularly, women have very little autonomy, as in most of the world. And so we had that—it was something that really we tried to design with knowledge of the culture and, certainly, with input from the culture. I can tell you a funny story that historically might be interesting to people. But before I get there, we also had a sexually transmitted disease component and an infertility treatment component.

Sharpless Eighty percent gonorrhea in one village? Wow.

Seims In this one village, yes. We weren't able to do a nation-wide survey. Most infertility in Africa—infertility is high. Despite the high fertility, infertility is also high. Most of it is caused by sexually transmitted diseases. And we had a large—of course, I'm a demographer-at-large—Census Bureau and demographic training component, because that's the wonderful thing about being a funder is you can fund what you think is important, which is a reflection of your own experience. The funny story was the National Family

Planning Program was really big on very negative messages like “you will die if you have lots of children; your family will starve if you have lots of children.” And all their IEC materials were of that ilk. So we decided we wanted a more positive message. So I was discussing it with my Senegalese counterpart and we decided what would be good is—there was an *école des beaux-arts*, fine arts school, in town. But we would have the students design, you know, a poster for the program on family planning, because nobody used the term reproductive health then. And then there would be kind of a civil society committee that would choose. So we chose a judge, a female lawyer, like five representative civil society groups, to choose from the final posters. And the one they chose showed a woman with a kid on her back, one holding her hand, a big belly with a cross going all the way through it, saying, “Use family planning or else.” And that had been the one that was chosen. And so some people thought the baby was dead; some people thought it was Christian because it was a cross. I mean, the whole thing—they could not have chosen a worse thing. And that became the first time that I experienced, though not the last, that you can have a perfect process and have a really bad result. And so we were stuck with that. We were stuck with that for a couple of years before we could get rid of it.

Sharpless Anything—what else about Senegal?

Seims Well, I think that’s the gist.

Sharpless Well, why don’t we stretch our legs for a few minutes and we’ll come back to Boston. (pause in recording)

Sharpless I’ll make sure that everything looks good. Okay, so you moved to Boston

and started working and you were going to oversee a USAID grant?

Seims

I was hired as deputy director of a grant that was called—at that point, it was called Family Planning Management Training. And it was a five-year project. And I guess at the time I got on it, it was about the midway point of that grant. And my son was in Washington and I was in Boston. And so I was looking always, of course, for excuses to go to D.C., which came quite often because AID really does like to micromanage its grantees. By that time I guess Duff was head of the office of population. I learned a lot from working at MSH, Management Sciences for Health. I had never had a management course before, during, or since.

Sharpless

And it's a not-for-profit—

Seims

It's a not-for-profit, private NGO [non-governmental organization], the mission of which is to improve health, at that point, funded almost entirely by AID. More recently like everyone else, it's managed to diversify its funding a little bit. Ron O'Connor was one of the founders, along with Joel Lamstein. And then there was a parting of the ways before I got there and Joel went on to fund another hugely successful AID-collaborating agency called John Snow, JSI. But Ron was there, and he's a quirky character; I'm very fond of Ron. He says what he thinks and he's just—he is a doctor. But again one of these people dedicated to the health and well being of wonderful citizens. So I really did like him. I liked Catherine very much. And, you know, I settled in a two-family house with my sister, who happened to be living there, in Cambridge. Spent a couple of years. My son did come to join me for his high school years, but the first two years he was

with his father. And so I was able to spend a lot of those first two years in the field, developing. It was a project that provided technical assistance, in management of all kinds, to developing countries, either ministries of health or NGOs involved in family planning, primarily.

Sharpless

So where all did you go?

Seims

Well, again, I was an Africanist, so I went—I ended up mostly in Africa and South Asia, which is really where you should be, because that's where most of the action is. I never learned Spanish, so—lots of people went Spanish. And my job, because I was somewhat of a bit of a generalist—I didn't have a finance background or an IT [Information Technology] background—but really to go into the diagnostic. And that was a very—I'd heard that people know their situation and if you just ask a lot of questions, the right questions, and you listen, they often come up with their own diagnostic of what needs to be done—diagnosis of what needs to be done. And so that was a very wonderful time of learning for me. And so I would go in with a team often, or at least one other person, do the initial needs assessments, can figure out with the counterparts what was needed, and then it often was some specialized work in beefing up financial systems or in human resource management, IT. And then the project would pay for that expertise to be—essentially that's what it did. And I got some very good insights into systems and how they function and how they don't function. I became a little bit skilled in strategic planning at that point. That was not the buzz word then that it is now. Strategic planning process, you've probably been through it yourself, is essentially, if it's going to work, well—it's an opportunity for

people to really clarify what they want to achieve and what stands in their way and how they're going to get there and to get some kind of consensus and also some esprit de corps to be a very positive experience. So I became the person who helped with strategic planning.

Sharpless

You would be the facilitator.

Seims

Yeah, the facilitator. And I was very happy at MSH. My son came and he went to a wonderful high school, a quirky little high school in Boston. Got into Harvard. Just a little maternal bragging while I'm being taped. And then Steve Sinding out of the blue, who was then at Rockefeller—I had kept in touch with him and he invited me to apply for a job. He was head of the population program at Rockefeller. And he invited me to apply for that. So I applied, and this is very interesting: I got offered a job, but the offer wasn't for enough money. And I say this because women—any woman listening to this—we all have terrible problems negotiating for ourselves. And it wasn't Steve's fault. He was perfectly willing to—I wanted what I was making now, plus about 7 percent to compensate for the additional cost of being in New York City. And they weren't offering me that. And the head of the foundation, Peter Goldmark, who has since left, called me up personally to try and get me to take this job. So we were actually arguing about \$2,500 difference. But I felt that that was really an important thing to make a stand on. And I turned the job down, which was, you know, the most difficult thing I've ever done because I really liked and respected Steve. I was ready to make a move because my kid was in college. And I love New York City; didn't particularly like Boston and the colleges, too—people from Wellesley.

And I'd been at MSH about seven years. I thought it was good for me, and I turned the job down. And so a year went by and that job hadn't been filled.

Sharpless

For twenty-five hundred dollars.

Seims

And so I was contacted again and offered what I had wanted with an inflation adjustment in the first place. And that turned out to be a very good career move for me because it put me in a different environment. There's not much status involved in AID jobs, which is a real shame because AID projects do so much good; they're on the ground. But the people who work within the AID projects, they're largely excluded from the policy process, the decision making processes at the multilateral agencies and with government. And whereas private foundations with far less money and often less experience have a more privileged seat at the table. And so I went to work with Steve in this wonderful little division that included great people like Mahmoud Fathalla, Jane Hughes, and Cheikh Mbacke, and Steve. And Steve—for the first few years, it was the most wonderful job I had ever had. It was this tiny team. Steve was the best boss anybody could ever want. My colleagues were the best colleagues anyone could want. And when you work for a foundation you have immense freedoms because you're accountable to nobody but yourselves. And you're bored to some extent.

Sharpless

Well, what was the job you were hired to do?

Seims

It was to develop—Steve was head of the division. He had the job then that I had now here. And you're given an amount of money; it's not huge. And I think we had about seventeen million dollars to do everything.

Sharpless

Compared to what AID has, that's not huge.

Seims Yes, I had a budget maybe of about eight million. And I was—just developed whatever I wanted.

Sharpless (both talking) Go do it.

Seims But we developed a program that—this was pre-Cairo, a year before Cairo—on a policy with certain policy dialogue that would help me fulfill to a newer, broader agenda. I had long been committed to South-South collaboration, and that was another lesson that I learned in Senegal that I should say. I saw that the best way to feed innovation into a Senegalese system was to show Senegalese professions how something was working in another developing country, not necessarily even another African country, but another developing country, because people can see how things work, and then they can adapt it to their own situation or reject it. But normally they don't reject it out-hand. And it's worth more than six months of training just to go see and spend enough time to see how something works in another place. And so I was a real convert technically for South-South. But South-South also has enormous political savings. Governments love it in the developing world. And so I didn't have much money, but I had a seat at the table. And we met constantly with Nafis Sadik in the year leading to Cairo. And we could convene ministers to the big Bellagio facility in Italy that Rockefeller has to talk about the immerging Cairo agendas, stuff that you could never do at AID. I could never do—by the time I left MSH, I had by own program. Even as a director at MSH, because it was an NGO that didn't have money and worked primarily for AID, you never got in that arena. And here, suddenly, with much less money and even a less fancy title, I was in a

different arena because it was the Rockefeller faculty.

Sharpless What I hear you saying is that Rockefeller brought entrée.

Seims It did. And Steve brought entrée. So, we were able do enormous stuff, just enormously good work. And then the sky fell in. And I don't know if— you've met with Steve, right? So he—

Sharpless Actually, Deborah did the interviews with Steve.

Seims Oh. Peter Goldmark, who was the president of the Rockefeller Foundation when we came and I mentioned he was okay, he left. The year before he left, he hired as a vice president somebody called Lincoln Chen, who's—I don't know whether you interviewed him.

Sharpless No.

Seims I think Lincoln had an animus against Steve.

Sharpless What was Chen's background?

Seims He was a public health doctor. He'd been with the Ford Foundation for a number of years and then was at Harvard. And he affiliated himself very much with the feminists. I don't know if you were the one who met with Joan.

Sharpless Oh, yeah. I was, yes.

Seims He was a great friend of Joan's and Adrienne Germain's and they were all very suspicious of Steve because of the years he spent at AID. And Lincoln felt there was no reason to have a population program anymore. Birth rates were down. Our approach was too old-fashioned. But he—

Sharpless Was this before or after Cairo?

Seims This was after Cairo, after Cairo. [His actions made it clear to me that he]

wanted to clip Steve's wings; he wanted Steve to leave. But his power was limited as long as Peter Goldmark was there. But then a new president was hired. Lincoln was a candidate for the job but didn't get it.

Seims

Then a guy called Gordon Conway came, a Brit, a former vice chancellor of Sussex University. He's just left actually; he's just left Rockefeller. And Gordon was quite a well known agricultural economist, quite a renowned person. And because Lincoln had been an unsuccessful competitor for the job, the board immediately made it clear to Gordon that they wanted him to try and keep Lincoln. Gordon cared about agriculture. He, I think, came into the foundation with no strong feelings one way or the other about population. And I think he would have been fine, perfectly happy to let us go along, except that Lincoln had this vehement dislike of Steve.

Sharpless

Now, was it a personal dislike?

Seims

In my opinion, very personal. And he convinced Gordon Conway that Steve needed to go and the program needed to be disbanded, even though that was never said to us, of course, directly. And Gordon did no verification himself. The board wanted to support the new president so they didn't ask any difficult questions. And in public meetings, Gordon Conway was [highly discourteous] to Steve. It was the worst thing—I had never before and I hope I never will again see anything destroyed for those reasons. Most things last too long in our field. And here was a wonderful program that was doing really innovative work, helping women, helping families, helping developing country governments work better together, empowering them. And it was just—it was very clear that Steve could not stay. It was no good for him to

stay. And after about a year of this, he quit. And basically found a home at Columbia University where he could—where he actually ended up spending three years before he went on to this wonderful triumph, IPPF [International Planned Parenthood Federation].

And so Steve left, and even though nobody had the guts to say to us, Well, we think you should leave, too, it was not a place that we wanted to stay. And I'd been at Rockefeller, I guess, about six years then. And I was very unhappy at that time and very angry at what I was seeing. And luckily for me, the AGI job to be the president, job at AGI, became available. And I was asked to apply—you know, in those jobs you don't apply; the headhunter comes to you. And I guess people gave my name. It was not a slam dunk for me to get that job because AGI works primarily domestically and I worked primarily internationally, but I was very fortunate and was offered the job as president of AGI, which I took. And that was in late 1999. And it was AGI—Jeannie Rosoff, my predecessor, was the founder and was a wonderful woman. Left me a great organization. And I had the real honor of continuing the fine work that Jeannie had done with a great group of people.

Sharpless Before we go on to AGI, let me ask you about your time today. It's eleven o'clock. Do we have time to go back and talk about Rockefeller some more in detail?

Seims Yes.

Sharpless Because that was six, seven good years and some not so good years. But what kinds of programs were you happiest doing while you were at

Rockefeller?

Seims I was happiest with the establishment and we played a key role in that, in something that consistently stayed called Partners in Population and Development, which is an intergovernmental organization of now, I think, about twenty developing countries. Oh, but the secretariat in Dhaka, Bangladesh, whose job it is is to promote South-South collaboration and find funding for it—and that still exists. And we fund it here too. So I was proudest of that. And that took a very long time to get organized and gets its legal status done and get established.

Sharpless And would you go out in the field or did people come to you in New York?

Seims Well, the initial couple of years, my office was the interim secretariat of this entity until it got established in Bangladesh. But work in foundations or in any development agencies is not in your office. It's in the field and you have to travel there, because so much of the job of being a funder, if you want to do it well, it's not just writing a check. It's discussion, it's consultation, it's cajoling, it's persuading, it's negotiating. And this entity was starting from scratch. It didn't have bylaws, didn't have legal status, didn't have anything. And the way that got going was to get on a plane and you spend a lot of time talking and negotiating. To get countries to try and see things the same way was a very difficult job. So I'm proudest of that. We also supported—the portfolio I managed directly—I'm very committed to the use of reliable, timely, trustworthy evidence for policy and advocacy purposes. And I think Rockefeller funding was instrumental in strengthening advocacy capacities, both in this country, evidence-based advocacy capacity both in this country

and in other donor countries.

Sharpless When you say advocacy, what do you mean?

Seims I mean, in our case, the main goal of our program at Rockefeller at the time was the Cairo agenda and it was advocacy to the donor countries to stick to their commitments for Cairo. That's essentially what it was, but using evidence, not just saying women need your help, give it to women.

Sharpless Not using moral suasions, but—.

Seims It was that, too, but also showing the relationship between reproductive health and broader areas of health and the benefits of investing in education and some of the very—you know, virtuous cycle that gets launched as women's health improves. Their sons and daughters get educated, et cetera. So a lot of—we supported a lot of research on that broad subject, a lot of research on what stands in the way. Why do women in Africa have to have clandestine—use contraception clandestinely? A lot of work on domestic violence. A lot of the things that are all woven up together. We supported work to try to understand these a little more. And it was high quality work with the best researchers around. And so that was really fun. Now, other colleagues did other very good things. My colleague Cheikh Mbacke, who's still at Rockefeller as vice president—he was based in Nairobi and he supported a lot of experimental research and demographic surveillance in very resource poor areas of Africa. And my colleague Jane Hughes, who's now country director for Vietnam Pop Council, was supporting wonderful reproductive health research. And Mahmoud Fathalla, who's a very world-renowned Egyptian OB-GYN—we supported his work on reproductive

health and technology developments. So it was just a great program.

Sharpless To what extent did you shape the work through RFPs and how much of it just came in over the transom, as it was, when people would approach you with great ideas.

Seims We had no RFPs. I think with small amounts of money, it's wasting everybody's time. We researched the field ourselves. We had so little money, really. We knew where the expertise was and we went and we negotiated grants. That's how we did it. It's not the best way in the world, but I'm sure that there were very competent places that we never found out about, but mostly, we knew where it was for this kind of stuff.

Sharpless The coterie of you had enough experience in the field that you knew.

Seims And I had an external advisory group that was of—you have convenient power in a foundation, so I had all the many of the best names in demographic research and social science research guide me, and they, of course, advised me in where to go. And when you get to a certain level people can advise you with their broad hat on, not just their institutional hat on.

Sharpless How much was the spirit of Mr. Rockefeller still around?

Seims Very little. There was only one Rockefeller person on the board.

Sharpless It was a long time.

Seims Right. Not like here with the spirit of—William Hewlett's very much present.

Sharpless What about Cairo?

Seims We were very involved in Cairo. You know, Hewlett and Packard were not

funding very much at that time. And Gates was not funding. So Rockefeller was a very big deal, along with Ford. Ford did wonderful work during Cairo. I hope you spoke to them. I don't see anyone from Ford here. But they were instrumental. You should speak to, if you still are able to talk to people, with Carmen Barroso.

Sharpless That's a name I certainly have here, yes.

Seims Who was it? MacArthur, but she worked very closely with Ford, and she's now head of IPPF, western hemisphere region, based in New York City. I can give you her name afterwards and she can tell you about Ford and MacArthur's work and really making sure—

Tape 2, side 1, ends; side 2 begins.

Sharpless Sorry. When the tape ran out you were about to tell me about what Rockefeller was involved with in planning for Cairo.

Seims Yeah, because Ford and MacArthur had taken on the very important role of working with developing-country NGOs so their voices would be heard. We didn't have to do that. And, plus, we really didn't have the money to do that. So we worked very, very closely with governments. And with—both in the donor countries, the countries that gave money, and in developing countries through the partners, which was beginning to get the South-South partnership that was getting established and with UNFPA [United Nations Population Fund]. Steve had a very close relationship with Nafis Sadik and her staff. I developed that relationship. We gave them lots of money, kind of running-around money, to help them prepare for Cairo. We provided technical assistance in editing documents that UNFPA came up with. So we

worked very, very closely.

Sharpless Okay, running-around money to convene things.

Seims And also, you know, UNFPA can't prepare documents anyone can read, really. So we helped with that. We helped. We were there as this friend of UNFPA that could give them a \$100,000 here, and \$50,000 there, and \$200,000 there, at least, which is very useful money to have because they couldn't—you know, they're getting U.S. money then. It was under Bill Clinton. So that was where we worked, and we were very much philosophically in tune with the Cairo program.

Sharpless But you said that you developed the relationship with you and UNFPA.

Seims Yes, well, Steve had it, but because I was working for Steve, I myself became acquainted with Nafis Sadik, Jyoti Singh, and the others—Sterling Scruggs and others who worked with her. And so I thought personally, All of this journey is personal and professional. And I had this really privileged role in the evolution of Cairo both by the establishment of the South-South partnership, which was represented at the ministerial level to see how Cairo was evolving then, and also with the UNFPA. And it was a wonderful triumph for our field because it did—it's quite a radical document. It's not a panacea. It's not a work plan. It doesn't prioritize. But it is a good philosophical treatise on who we are and what we are. It's not perfect, but it really was so different from anything, any of the previous population conferences. And the fact that they were the voices from the South and even, to some extent, the grassroots South—it's the first time that had ever happened, and that has changed other UN processes, as well. And it was just

wonderful to be part of that.

Sharpless Did you go to the meeting?

Seims Oh, yeah.

Sharpless What was that like?

Seims It was very exciting. You know, there were some security concerns before. Of course, less than there would be now. But the Islamic militants were threatening it. And then they would worry that it would be taken over, there'd be shootings. We were really worried then. And there was some talk about maybe changing it, but the Egyptian government probably felt that we were safe, and in fact we were safe. But the security was really tough. And there were armed guards in all the hotels. There were armed guards in the buses to and from. There were machine guns everywhere. Very, very tight security. The rumor at the time was that the Egyptian government had subcontracted the security to the Israelis, but I don't know if there was any truth to that. But it was really well run. And security was everywhere. There were two big buildings far apart from one another. I mean far apart, by which I mean a ten-minute walk in the boiling, hot sun. An NGO building and a government building. And I spent my time kind of running back and forth to both. And Al Gore made the wonderful speech, and Tipper Gore made a wonderful speech. And Gro Brundtland, who was still prime minister of Norway at the time, made this wonderful speech about abortion and women's lives. And just—it was a high-water mark. And Tim Wirth, who headed our delegation—Steve was on the delegation. You know, we finally—it was our turn as a community to have our seat at the table. Jeannie

Rosoff was on the delegation. And the U.S.—you would be so proud of the U.S. government's position. We were the leader, the lead country, the progressive voice of Cairo, negotiating the need to change judicial systems so women did have inheritance rights, that girls could go to school, that adolescents could have access to information services. That really was a problem and was wrong. And these were—the U.S. government was taking the lead role. And that abortion was a reality. And it was just a really great time to just see this consensus emerging. There were plenty of anti-choice voices, and I often would go to their press briefings because they were astounding to me. But it was a wonderful time. Very, very busy. I remember being introduced to the head of the Iranian delegation. And I held out my hand, but, of course, he wouldn't take it because Muslims—they don't shake the hands of women. But they were with the Vatican. There was that non-holy alliance to keep women's rights down. But the U.S. was a progressive voice at the time.

Sharpless It was a time to feel good about being an American.

Seims It really was. It really was.

Sharpless So, when you came back from Cairo with this fabulous agenda of things to be done, how did you all set about to see that the agenda got realized?

Seims Well, the South-South partnership was officially brought to Cairo. And at the time there were ten countries, developing countries involved. And so I worked with those countries to figure out where to establish the secretariat and what they should do, what their bylaws should be. I spent probably half my time on that and half my time on the research and advocacy agenda. And

so I just devoted myself to that. But we have great hopes for the incoming president, who's female, former president of Penn.

Sharpless Okay, so were you able to get anything done at Rockefeller during the Sinding-Chen difficulty?

Seims Well, by that time, the program was in place. And they had money and you monitor it. But the grantees knew that there were troubles. And we ourselves couldn't, in good conscience, give them the impression that their funding was going to be secure for another ten years. And so there were some insecurities there. And, indeed, when I left to go to AGI, it was made very clear to me that my grants would be given one-year tie-offs and that would be the end of the program.

Sharpless That sounds painful.

Seims It was terrible. It was just terrible.

Sharpless But AGI opened up—

Seims Opened up for me, personally, a whole new arena: the domestic arena. Working—running an organization, which was the first time and the last time I've done it because I don't run an organization here. But being head of an organization is a unique role. There's no other—you're the head. You have no peers. You suddenly have to manage your own board. You have to do things you've never done before. And you're the person everyone else looks to. So it was a very, very, very different job, a very difficult job. One made much easier for me because I inherited a very strong organization that was very mission-focused. I had a very good team. And the work of AGI, the quality of work over the years, has just been extraordinarily high. So, in a

way, all I had to do was not mess up. But you know, it's hard. I give myself credit for not messing up, with all due respect to myself. And I'm very—I felt very privileged to be part of the domestic reproductive health and reproductive rights community. AGI is a special affiliate of Planned Parenthood. And I had the pleasure of getting to know Gloria Feldt, who's head of Planned Parenthood. She's a wonderful woman; has done so much for us all and her colleagues, who are just so dedicated. But it's a world where you get death threats. And AGI's office is on Wall Street. So we were very much affected by 9/11; took place two blocks away from us. And AGI had always worked internationally. With me coming, the international work increased with me. And in terms of what I feel proudest of doing as a president—and I say this as a woman because I think we are not raised to take leadership positions—I feel that I did my best. And I think, to some extent, I succeeded in making everybody feel a part of something at all levels. On the substandard way, what I'm most proud of with working with the AGI team is adding a behavioral component. It's clear: to really improve reproductive health and rights, we have to have many more insights than we have now to behaviors, reproductive health behaviors, health-seeking behaviors, and the psycho-social mix, cultural mix, that underlines them, which as demographers we were trained to not even consider those factors. And you do have to have rigor and evidence that reaches a certain level of significance. But we've gone about as far as we can go in this country, and almost elsewhere, without really understanding what drives reproductive behaviors. And I've had a sense of accomplishment that with colleagues

from AGI, the Institute added work in that area. There's going to be—for many, this is a vast and complicated subject that needs far more than AGI involved. But I did manage to shift an institute in that direction, and I'm very, very proud of that. And Gates Foundation has made a tremendous difference to our field because it's got so much money. And I know that they're revising their strategy. God knows what they're going to be doing in the future. But Gates gave us, AGI, a huge grant by AGI standards to work in four sub-Saharan African countries with adolescents to understand adolescent health-seeking behavior. Because it is unsafe sex that causes much of HIV in Africa and other STDs and unwanted pregnancy and abortion and a lot of sexual violence. And if you could understand those behavioral drivers of unsafe sex, you can help a lot.

Sharpless

So what's the mechanism? How do you—okay, you get the money from Gates—

Seims

Well, that's a very good question because here's a small organization based in New York with a little office in D.C. You can't do anything without your developing-country partners. So the first thing you have to do is figure out who you're developing-country partners are going to be. And when you apply for the grant—AGI's a soft money organization, so you can't actually do the work until you have the money. So when you write your proposal you're doing it with a lot of unknowns, but you have some idea. So there were countries proposed in the AGI grant. Most of the four countries proposed in the grant—actually three out of the four became the project countries. And you go to those countries. And you contact them before and

you say, Look, we're applying for this. What do you think of the idea? They will answer, You have been involved in the proposal process? And then you just have to say, Well, okay. Submit it—hold on there because everything takes a long time. It takes a long time to get research money. And that's exactly what happened. It took about eighteen months to get the grant for the Gates money. We were turned down the first time, but we reapplied and then we got the money. So another lesson: don't take no for an answer. Ask questions if you're a board member; don't take no for an answer if you're applying for money. And we got the grant, despite the fact that the first time we were turned down. Gates told us not even to bother to reapply, but we did and we still got it. And so then you go visit the countries. And you meet with your counterparts. And they have a perspective, you have a perspective. You go to all the countries. You want the whole to be greater than the sum of the parts, so you make your initial visits and your initial negotiations. And you look at the whole institutions, as well as the individuals. And this is what we did, and we brought everybody together, both in New York and then later in Nairobi. And you together negotiate and design the research protocols, which initially were two stages in qualitative research, so you can figure out what it is you're talking about and if the nation-wide surveys of youth are large enough to give insights onto some groups of youth, which is—with all the money spent on HIV, it's largely missing. And that's where the Institute is now. And then they're in the analysis phase. But the hardest part is agreeing on what the questions are that you want answers to, and that is in the negotiating process with your counterparts.

Sharpless Well, in a case like that, where does the original idea come from? Let's go to Gates and ask for money to answer this—

Seims In this case, it came from AGI.

Sharpless But I mean, where from AGI?

Seims Well—

Sharpless Or, I guess, a bigger question is how does an organization like AGI decide what big projects it's going to tackle?

Seims Well, that is the job of a president. The job of a president is to put in place an environment in which ideas can get vetted and judged. It doesn't have to be—that person doesn't have to be the one to come up with all the ideas themselves. In this particular case, because of my experience at Rockefeller, I came into the Institute already very interested in having AGI shift more into behavioral research. But I was working with colleagues who were already there, who already agreed. It was simply a matter of you get your best people around a table and you think out loud. And some of the best work is with your flip chart. Put things on. You have a brainstorming session. Then you have enough of an idea. Then you meet with your people at Gates and you say, How does this sound? And then, in our case, if it sounds good, Yes, write a proposal. You wrote a proposal. A year later it was turned down. And initially they said don't bother to resubmit it. But you kind of politick a little bit and you get them to agree you can resubmit it and then you get it. And, you know, you have to be very persistent in fund-raising. In a way, it's a very creative process. It's not as dreadful as it sounds because it's where you're judged by your ideas and how fast you can think on your feet. And

AGI—one of the things AGI is known for is not only the quality of its research, but the quality of its products and its journal. And so a large part of what you sell when you meet with a donor, when you're head of AGI, is not just the research, but what will be done with it and how it will be disseminated and how it will get in the hands of both program managers and advocates. So that's all a very long-term process, accomplished mostly by schmoozing people and talking. And everything we do almost, in any job or any meeting in any culture, requires face-to-face time.

Sharpless

Which is time-consuming.

Seims

It's time-consuming. It is, but it's what you do. And when you start off in an organization in our field, your job is often very, very technical. You implement on what others give you to do. But a good organization is one that takes those people who are actually your frontline implementers who often know much more than you do about whether a project is working or not. And you make sure that, as a manager or leader of an organization, you know enough about what they are doing that a) you can help and support them, but also as—they're the ones who see the data first, who get the first ideas that you just—Bill Hewlett coined the phrase “management by walking around.” And that's what you have to do. So you're in the kitchen and the researcher who's working on this Gates project in Malawi is there. Doesn't report to you directly and you say, How's it going? And then you learn how it's going. And they're happy because they like people—everyone likes people to take an interest in their work. You may even be able to help them. They're telling you something that maybe they just thought of. And so being

in a managerial position—what’s creative about managerial positions, which I know was not your question—but it gives you an opportunity to make the whole greater than the sum of the parts. And I think the most effective way to do that is to walk around and ask questions and have a cup of tea in somebody’s office, in their office rather than your office.

Sharpless

Yeah, absolutely. Anything else about funding for AGI?

Seims

It was—AGI was a really easy place to raise money for, because, first of all, it’s a well established NGO. And it has a good—it’s a niche organization. It was lean and mean; it wasn’t huge. Well, sure we submitted proposals that didn’t get funded, ever. And individuals that we approached for contributions didn’t give it. You have your disappointments. But there was a huge—that was, by far, the exception. And in way I feel I’ve always spent my whole life fund-raising, because, even in AID, you’re protecting the budget of your program. At Rockefeller, you’re fighting for the budget for your program. At MSH you’re certainly fund-raising because you’re working for AID. But I think what people don’t realize is when you’re working for a funder, within the funder, the institution of the funder, you as an individual are fighting [for money for your program]. Like right now we’re doing the budgets for ’05, and I’m fighting like mad raising, making sure this program gets as much money as it possibly can. And the fund—to play that role at Rockefeller in the last two years was terrible, because obviously the tide had turned and people wanted us to leave. So to go from there to AGI was suddenly—I was talking to funders that loved AGI. I felt it was actually easier to raise money for AGI than it had been to raise money for my own

program when I was at Rockefeller, even though I was a funder.

Sharpless Because you were fighting internally for that money.

Seims Internally, that's right. Right.

Sharpless Interesting. That's very interesting. Who was most helpful to AGI besides Gates?

Seims Well, AGI was founded in 1968, and there were funders who had been funding the Institute since then like Ford. Rockefeller used to fund AGI, but the real faithful funders were Mellon, Ford, and Rockefeller. They were the ones who essentially established the institution, and then Rockefeller over the years stopped funding. And other funders took their place and some individuals, not many. In AGI bylaws, no more than 20 percent of money could come from government, which was a very good idea. In the early days of AGI, in the early eighties, under the Reagan administration, AID money that AGI got—and I don't know if you know about this, but AGI produces two peer reviewed journals. One's domestic and one's international. The international journal, *International Family Planning Perspectives*, is primarily AID-funded, and the Reagan administration cut off money for it because it had published an article on abortion in Tunisia, where abortion's legal, written, ironically, by Liz Maguire, who was working for AID at the time. And the ACLU took the Institute's case and sued the federal government and won. And so AID had to reinstate the funding. But that meant—the AGI board at the time then said we should never allow government funding to be more than 20 percent of the total. A very wise decision, because I believe AGI in many ways, as a small organization, had more clout than the large CAs do,

because it was not dependent; it could survive easily without government funding. Not easily, I should say, but it could survive. Whereas, they could not. So, the AGI domestic work was also very important to me. I did a lot of travel domestically to places I had never been before: Texas, (laughs) Omaha, rural areas of Nebraska, rural areas of Georgia, not just Atlanta. I did a lot of travel to the more conservative parts of the country. And just saw how reproductive health and reproductive rights manifested in those environments. And I found it a very inspiring situation. I met as much as I could with anti-choice state legislators. Most of them wouldn't meet with me, but occasionally they would. I didn't convince them; they didn't convince me. But we spoke and I tried to get a little more perspective on their points of view. And it was just a fascinating time. A very difficult job, very stressful, because when you're head of an organization, you are the one that other people rely on to bring in the money to pay their rent. And you are the one that has to fire people, which is horrible. I don't know if you've ever had to fire anybody.

Sharpless

Other than a student worker, no.

Seims

In the course of my life, I've probably had to fire about ten people, but it is the worse thing that you do. And each time, in a way, it only gets more difficult. I'm hoping at this point in my life I never have to fire anyone again. But as head of an organization, I had to fire initially three or four people, some of whom had been there a long time. So you have that stress, you know. The staff—some of the staff feel you're bad for doing that. Some of the staff support you. Decisions you make about what health insurance to

get could be the wrong decision which would put the organization in the red. You know, the staff working—AGI has a forty-two-person board. You have to manage this group of forty-two people.

Sharpless I want to ask some more about that, but let me ask: it's the end of our second tape, do you want to take a break now or go on?

Seims I think we should finish.

Sharpless All right, then let me change my tape.

Tape 2 ends; tape 3, side 1, begins.

Sharpless That looks better. All right, this is the third tape with Sara Seims on September the seventeenth. Okay, when I interrupted you, you had just mentioned about the forty-two-person board at AGI.

Seims Yeah, NGOs have boards and the AGI board, unlike the Rockefeller board, was very engaged and knew what was going on and was very helpful to me. But the head of any organization—the board hires you and fires you. And so you have to take your board very seriously and spend a lot of time with them, understanding them and having them understand you. So as the head of an organization I suddenly had to do that, which I had never done before. But I was only at AGI three years when I got contacted by this foundation. And I'd always loved the Hewlett Foundation. Joe Speidel had just done a magnificent job. I really respected the foundation's commitment to general support. I had gotten Hewlett money when I was at MSH. That was before Joe. The foundation's very well respected. And I met Paul Brest and initially I was like the reluctant virgin. I told him I was not interested in the job because I really think heads of organizations should stay for at least five

years. And by that time I had been at AGI a little over three. But he's the best recruiter I have ever known; he's a former dean of Stanford law school. And I guess one of the things deans do is they hire people. And he kind of persuaded me to come. And as you can see I still have issues I'm dealing with on that. Because I left AGI after only three and a half years there. And one of the worst days of my working life was telling the staff I was leaving and looking into this sea of reproachful faces. But like everything else, no one's indispensable. I'd been replaced by another one of your interviewees, Sharon Camp, who's doing a wonderful job.

Sharpless

And it came at the perfect time as she was leaving.

Seims

As she was leaving. So everything works out at the end. But I'm not proud of the fact that I left when I did. I didn't—when you come in as a new leader you make a lot of changes. And you really should be around to correct the mistakes that you made, and I didn't. I wasn't there long enough. So that's me, it's not the field. But I just raised that. I've been here almost a year now, and this is a wonderful place to be. The family—there are four family members on the board, as well as other non-family members. The foundation environment could not be better for population and reproductive health. It is an extremely supportive environment. I can't—I have nothing critical to say about this place so far. I'd like more money for my program but that goes without saying. The family, and the board, has a deep and abiding commitment to women's reproductive health and rights, a profound understanding of some of the back row issues of development. And the Hewlett Foundation has term limits. That's why Joe is no longer

here. Nobody wanted Joe to leave, including me. I wish, in fact, he had stayed a few more years and then I would have come. So we come with a six-year contract. And I do think that it is a good idea. It's a very controversial thing. But it's tough on the individual, but I think very good on the philanthropy. So I spent my first few months with my small team consulting broadly with the stakeholders and our community grantees, other thinkers here in Africa, in Asia. Didn't go to Latin America because we don't do much there. And as a result of those deliberations and our own thinking, we proposed a strategy to the board which they approved in July. Would you like me to run you through that?

Sharpless

Absolutely.

Seims

We had to look and see how the world had changed since Joe Speidel put the last strategy in. And we saw a world that was much more difficult because Joe put his strategy in post-Cairo euphoria, when we had the pro-choice administration. And Joe's program was terrific. But we look at the next few years. We have an America diminished in the world, suddenly extremely inimical to women's rights and reproductive health and rights. Because total fertility rates have gone down, there's a sense that this is yesterday's problem. We can wash our hands and go home. And then we have new development cooperation frameworks, like the millennium development goals that do not have a specific goal for reproductive health and rights. And Cairo's ten years old; nobody really cares that much about it anymore, except for us.

So we did this kind of *diagnostique* and came up with a slightly revised

mission statement, which is good reproductive health outcomes for all, which is our big mission statement. And we decided we would contribute to achieving that with three strategies, around which we would make grants. This is all going to go on our Web site this month. But the first strategy is improving access to good quality reproductive health care, and that will focus on two things: getting existing technologies, really good ones that exist but are not used, getting them out there where they could be used. And that would include some of the abortion technologies: medication abortion and MVA, some of the new surgical abortions, emergency contraception, and the levonorgestrel-producing IUDs, which could also help with anemia, et cetera. And the second area is building on this interface between HIV/AIDS and family planning. As you may have heard in your interviews, a woman in a high HIV/AIDS country wanting to use family planning will have to navigate two systems, largely because of the donors. They are implemented as separate systems, which is crazy because unsafe sex causes much of the problems in both areas. So we're going to build on that. And as part of that we are very keen on female condoms, which is the only existing method women control that will provide protection. But they're too expensive, so they're not used. So we want to try and find ways to get them cheaper so women can be trained to use them in the high HIV/AIDS countries where women are at risk. But also we are going to kick this off by giving a grant to WHO [World Health Organization] with colleagues from Packard. So WHO could hold an international consultation on the reproductive health needs on HIV-positive women. And that puts it on the map with WHO. Even though

the United States doesn't respect WHO, it is tremendously influential overseas. So we're still figuring out exactly what we will do because it's a very new strategy. The second area is good policies and sufficient resources, and we've decided that we need to focus on three areas to address that. The first is—because the millennium development goals are going to be with us for the life of this five-year strategy and many years beyond that, they are oriented toward poverty alleviation. That's the whole purpose of millennium development goals. Policy alleviation and economic growth. So we're going to support research that will examine the relationship between the status of reproductive health and poverty at the household level and economic growth at the macro level. And that's going to be a major research effort that we are now in the process of doing the background work for. But we want to launch it next year. Another component will be another pot of money to do, in a way, opportunistic support. We don't do, we support opportunistic research that will help us understand where we are in the demographic transition. So, for example, many large developing countries that had experienced declines in total fertility, those declines had leveled off, but way above replacement fertility. They include such countries as Bangladesh, Egypt, Philippines, Indonesia. And we think that it's largely due to, not only a cutback in family planning funding, but also the status of women and girls. When some preference exists, you either keep having children until you have a son or you abort female fetuses as they do in China and India. And so we want to understand that a little bit more. In some high fertility countries, abortion rates have been going up lately. We don't really understand why.

And so this is a pot of money to try to understand what's going on. And then the third component under that is we are the only major foundation that still supports PhD training in demography. And we're going to continue that but we're going to change it drastically to strengthen the capacity of a small number of African universities to do PhD training.

Sharpless

As opposed to sending their folks over here for training.

Seims

Yes, right. And we've got to continue to support a small number of northern universities that have a long-standing commitment to African scholarship. But that, again—we're having our first advisory meeting on that in early October and that's going to get kicked off. And we want to get—we're only here for another five years and so we can't putz around for three years figuring these things out. We've spent the first few months doing the strategy. We have to spend this next year on implementation, on getting that going. And then the third guideline is to promote and protect the reproductive health of Americans. Even with a change of administration, there's still at the state level a great deal of threat to—you live in Texas, so you know—women's reproductive health and rights. And so we're going to continue to support—this is money that will allow us to continue to support the ACLU Reproductive Freedom program. And the Center for Reproductive—I guess it's called the Center for Reproductive Rights and argues before the courts to protect our freedoms here. And we will also be having special California-specific teen pregnancy prevention work. So that's what we'll be doing over the next five years here.

Sharpless

And you mentioned that even when national level politics change, state level

politics stay in place. How much was your work affected by the change from Bush to Clinton to Bush.

Seims Well, at Rockefeller we came in under Clinton administration. And ended when Bush was elected.

Sharpless 2000.

Seims Yeah, okay. So I guess I had a Clinton administration the whole time at Rockefeller. And it was—the transition was made when I was at AGI. That really, of course, dramatically affected AGI. So coming under a Bush administration here, I tried to design a strategy that will be relevant whether it's a Bush—a second Bush term or not. If it's a second Bush term, my whole time here will be under a Bush administration. Because even if there's a change—if there is a change in administration, things will get better very quickly. But there will still be a lot of challenges. A lot of what we want to do will still be there, regardless of the administration. And I think that, in a sense, in defense of the Bush administration, a lot of what they're blamed for is more nuanced. Everything is more nuanced, almost everything than we think. There's a sense among our community that the Bush administration is using cultural imperialism to impose abstinence only on foreign countries. But in fact, in many, many cultures, abstinence- only and restricting women's freedoms fits into their cultures, too. And the Bush administration's policy found very receptive soil. And so what that means is that we need to work with those civil society elements who care about the status of women and their reproductive choices in those countries, regardless, because if there is a change of administration, Kerry will stop that emanating from the U.S. But

there's already been so much work done by the Bush administration that has done so much harm to women that we will need to support those civil society groups that can help combat it. And certainly if there is a second Bush administration, things will be very grave for women and the fight against HIV/AIDS. And that will affect how we set our priorities. But that won't affect what we do.

Sharpless Now, to circle back to days at AGI when Jeannie was at AGI, where she spent time pounding the halls at Capitol Hill.

Seims Yeah, I didn't do that. And Jeannie didn't do too much of that in her later years. That was not my strength. You see, one of the things you have to do when you come and head an organization is figure out where you individually, given who you are, can best help. And because I had never worked domestically and AGI has a Washington office filled with wonderful lobbyists and advocacy capability, I would contribute nothing by trying to do that. My relative strength that I could bring to AGI was to help build on the synergies of issues between domestic and international. And that's what I focused on. So Jeannie and I focused on very different things.

Sharpless But AGI certainly has had people very able in that area.

Seims That's right and still does. In fact, I was in D.C. yesterday and was briefed by the AGI Washington office on various what-if scenarios. And I still—of course, I'm biased, but I think AGI has the best advocacy team around.

Sharpless Sounds like there's never any shortage of good work to go around.

Seims That's right. Never a shortage of work to go around. That's why I think our field needs to avoid the trap of competition unless it's kind of positive,

collegial competition. There's enough work to go around for all of us.

Sharpless Well, that's been one of the interesting things to me, coming to this work as an outsider, is seeing how many people, how many organizations, are niche-driven. And you know that FHI [Family Health International] does this and AGI does this and different organizations have—there are pieces where there is relatively little overlap.

Seims Right, right.

Sharpless Well, in our last few minutes then—we really have made quick strides through your very distinguished career. But what are the lessons learned that you'd like for people reading these transcripts to know about?

Seims I think the most important lesson on a personal basis is to devote your life to something that really interests you, gives you passion. And I feel very fortunate, through a total sense of fortuitous circumstances, I ended up in this field. And I didn't know what it was. And I feel that I have been privileged to work in something that I consider important. So I think that's kind of one personal piece of advice. And since I imagine a lot of the people reading this will be women, younger women, maybe starting out on their career—is negotiate for yourself and be tough. Don't be afraid to ask for things. You're not being selfish. And I still see that with women. Even at my age and at my level, I hate to ask for anything for myself, whereas I know my male counterparts have no such qualms. So be tough and remember that, you know, women rule the world. So that's one lesson. The other is, in terms of this particular field, is to continue to see it in its totality, that reproductive health, family planning, abortion, sexual violence, HIV/AIDS doesn't exist

in a vacuum. It exists in a very complex set of circumstances. And then your job as an individual, if you have decided to devote your life to making things in this area better, is to identify that margin upon which you can make a difference. And to be realistic, but be visionary. And I think those are very complementary goals. One of the big pitfalls, particularly in a funding agency, is you become victim to your own hyperbole. And one of the things I keep telling my—I have a small team of brilliant young people I work with who are going to be the next generation of leaders. And one of the things I keep telling them is, Don't believe your own PR. When you work for a funder, everyone thinks you're brilliant, sing well and dance well, but they don't mean it. And you must not believe it. You negotiate your passage through life based on you doing what you think is important in the field that you've decided to devote your life to. And here, the other thing I keep telling our team is we should judge ourselves on finding that margin on which we feel we can make a difference. And I hope that we've got it right. We probably have not got it completely right in our strategy, and that will be revisited periodically. But the margin—I think, that we can make a difference is in getting some of these technologies out there, is helping the community make more concrete how HIV/AIDS and family planning can work closer together. And it will probably be very modest, maybe some help to help prevent the birth of HIV-positive babies and some other child-transmission work. I will be thrilled if we can reinvigorate the research base on reproductive health and poverty, and that people find it interesting and useful. And so those are the types, kind of practical operational margins, that

you should be willing to hold yourself accountable for. And even though I'm not madly in love with logical frameworks and measurable indicators, all of which have developed—they didn't exist when I came into the field. It was very much more of a gut instinct type of job. I do think that we have to be willing, and no matter what job we have, to not only identify that margin, which we think could make a difference, but be willing enough to come up with—to answer the how will we know whether we've succeeded or not question. Because inevitably you're going to get some things wrong and you'll need to change. And there's no shame in that, at all. So I don't know if that answers your question.

Sharpless

It does, it does. One more thing: you mentioned the brilliant young people around you. I've heard some people moaning about the ageing of the field.

Seims

Yes, it's really interesting. I think we've got a bimodal problem here. We've got my cohort, which is aging—people who have been here all their lives and have risen now to leadership positions. And we're aged mid-fifties to mid-sixties; that's our age. And that's old. There seems to be very few people I've noticed—there are some—but very few kind of exciting people. Apologies to all the exceptions between forty-three and fifty-three.

Sharpless

So people who went to college in the late seventies and early eighties.

Seims

And I don't know why. But behind them in their thirties, I see brilliant people. And that gives me a lot of confidence for the future.

Sharpless

Now, how do you anticipate best bringing those people along?

Seims

Well, I think it's definitely the responsibilities of my cohort to spend a lot of time with those people, identifying those people and encouraging them.

When you're in your early thirties or in your thirties—the thirties for women are probably the most important decade of life, because you enter it as a young girl and you end it as not a young woman. And expectations for you change in every aspect of your life during that decade. And I think that it's really important for those of us who have been through that decade and beyond, when we see talent—and I don't mean to exclude men. I just wish there were more men in our field. We just—at AGI and Hewlett, we could never find any men to come into this field. So young men reading this, send in your résumé. I think it's our responsibility to spend time and give these young people confidence that they can do stuff, because if people have confidence in you, you usually end up being able to do things very, very well. And so I think that's a responsibility for all of us. Another way the field has changed in my professional lifetime is that there's now much more expertise in developing countries, which is why our PhD program is now shifting. And so to develop talent, leadership talent, in developing countries is a real serious responsibility we have. And it's something that we, that I want to devote—I think I've got one more job left in me after this one and I really want to do more and more and more of that type of nurturing and mentoring if I'm able to do it for the remainder of my life, professional life.

Sharpless

And this may sound terribly obvious, but what about the change in communications technology. You may—

Seims

Oh, of course, yes. I mean, that has changed drastically. And there is a generational divide there. I'm nowhere near as proficient at it as my younger colleagues who are a generation younger than I am. They find things on the

Internet that I will never find. They and their counterparts in other organizations and in other countries that are their age just are at a different level. And I think I'm not atypical in experiencing that. Though the Internet has changed everything, it's changed what you personally can do, but also what you are able to do and what you should fund. One reason why there's more of a level playing field now is because of IT. So we have an educational program here at Hewlett. And it's doing wonderful work with open-content course work on the Net. And so over time, when Africa combats its bandwidth problem, which it's going to in the next five, ten years, there's no reason why the universities in Africa can't use the content of the finest universities anywhere in the world. And if we can help with that in some small way in population with some other—it's not a panacea obviously—but to help that content, that course content, be adapted for that particular university, help train the faculty, et cetera. Then that's something that IT enables to be possible that never was. And it improves all the time.

Sharpless What else do we need to talk about that we haven't covered? I think we had a quick run through your distinguished career.

Seims It's not been that distinguished and I think I just feel sorry for the poor reader listening to this stuff.

Sharpless No, it's great.

Seims But thank you. I think we've done everything.

Sharpless Well, thank you so much for your time and best wishes.

Seims Okay, thank you.

end of interview

© Sophia Smith Collection 2006