

BEST FOOT FORWARD

BY MELINDA MURPHY
PHOTOGRAPHY MARZENA HUGHES

STEPHANIE SYPTAK-RAMNATH's life of high-level diplomatic jobs across the globe, emergency evacuations from war-torn nations and days as a naval officer reads like a novel. I was so inspired when I left our interview, I wanted to write that book myself! Read on and find out why.

I've been lucky enough to meet Stephanie Syptak-Ramnath several times, so when she sweeps through the front door of her home, she gives me a giant bear hug, a sign of her hallmark warmth. That's the thing about Stephanie: she seems just like a regular gal with a contagious laugh and quick smile – only she's not. This fierce and brilliant woman's list of accomplishments is, quite simply, incredible.

Fluent in both French and Spanish, she has been a lieutenant in the US Navy, held major diplomatic positions in Mexico, Mali and Tunisia, worked at the US Mission to the United Nations, and been one of 35 women to participate in an international women's leadership forum, which included completing courses at Harvard Business School and Singapore's INSEAD. And that's just for starters. Perhaps her most important job? She's also the mother of two teenage daughters.



Now, as the Chargé d'Affaires at the US Embassy in Singapore, Stephanie is the highest-ranking American official in Singapore, which has been without a US ambassador since President Trump took office in January 2017.

What does a Chargé d'Affaires do? It sounds like a big job.

There are two sides of my job. I manage 300 incredible employees across 29 sections and agencies, making sure we have a work environment where everybody can be successful and happy and can all put their best foot forward on behalf of the United States. Management and leadership are something that I'm passionate about. If I can get that right, the other pieces fall into place.

The other half of my job is representing the US in Singapore, whether it's participating in high-level meetings, speaking at an event or attending a reception.

From left:
At her residence in Singapore.

Family delivering sewing machines in Mali, 2006.

United Nations Security Council, 1999.

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I get up at 5.15 every morning, pray, then read the news. I've never felt a sense of being overwhelmed by responsibilities, but as I move to more senior levels, I am conscious that the decisions I make have greater consequences. My decisions have lasting impact on other human beings or possibly the future of US relations with another country. That's the thing that makes me catch my breath a little and causes me to strive to do my best.

You're a woman in a position of power, dealing with high-level people from all over the globe. Who is the most powerful woman you've ever met?

My Singaporean mother has certainly been the most powerful influence on my life. Fifty years ago, my father was an American F-4 pilot flying in Vietnam. He came to Singapore on R&R, met my mother, and the rest is history.

Her message to me was, “You are wonderfully made, and ‘can’t’ is for dead people.” That's guided the way I look at the world. There is really nothing that we can't do. It's just a matter of being determined and putting in the work.

It's hard to identify any one most powerful woman because there is so much power in almost every woman I've met. Every woman gets up and does the best she can do and often betters the world along the way. To this day, Kadi, my housekeeper in Mali, is one of the strongest women I've ever known. She took care of us, but also found a way to build her own house and have other businesses to provide for her community.

How do you juggle a job like yours with mothering two teenage daughters?

I try to leave the office every day at 5pm to have dinner with my daughters before heading out again for engagements most evenings.

Some days, my kids won't see me, but there are other days when they are going to get 100 percent of me. That will change year to year and sometimes even day to day.

It's not just work and family, but it's also time for community and faith. I have to make a conscious decision about how I'm going to spend the hours and then own that decision.

The real key *[she says with tears in her eyes]* is that I married my best friend and he has enabled me to be who I am today. This is the one thing I always say: choose your husband very wisely. That person is ultimately going to be key to any success in your personal and professional life.

There have been some times that were tougher than others. After the coup in Mali, we had to decide whether or not to evacuate the Embassy families. Every day when I put my kids on the bus, I wondered if I was risking their lives. But when you represent the US at a high level, it has to be so much bigger than thoughts about your own family. I had to ask myself, "What is the right thing for the Embassy? If we send our kids home, what does that signal to our Malian partners?" In the end, families were evacuated. My husband took the girls back to Washington DC, where they remained for six months before I also returned.

What do you think the world will be like for your daughters?

I am very optimistic. The world is more prosperous and better than anything our parents could have imagined. People have never been healthier or lived longer. More people are rising out of poverty. The whole world is open to our children. From my father, I learned the importance of giving back to your country. As a parent, you can never predict what your children will become, but I do hope our family's dedication to public service will inspire them.



You've worked in some jobs and countries where women don't always command respect. Has this been an issue for you?

There have been many women who have paved the way for me because they were good at their jobs. As an officer in the Navy, there were female pilots and female commanding officers. At the State Department, women such as Madeline Albright, Condoleezza Rice and Ambassador Mary Beth Leonard were important role models.

Even though I've served most of my career in the Muslim world where gender equality is not

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always a given, I never had a problem. People were willing to engage with me because I represented the United States. Being an American diplomat opens doors that otherwise might be closed.

How tough is it to represent the US during the Trump presidency when so many criticise his foreign policy?

With more than 25 years in government service, I have worked for many US administrations and have seen both support and criticism for our policies across the decades. At any given time, we have people who appreciate what we are doing and people who prefer we would take another course of action. In the end, the basic good the US does every day should make every American proud. Yes, we have ups and downs and, yes, we need to listen carefully to what our international partners are saying. That's part of diplomacy. But I always feel privileged to represent the American people. That never waivers. *el*

From left:
US Navy Lieutenant pinning-on ceremony, 1996.

Book signing with President George HW Bush, 2000.