

# THE LIFE OF AN INTERNATIONAL CIVIL SERVANT

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## *Marlene O'Dell '56*

“Self-centered living is self-defeated living.” Marlene O’Dell’s words define her own career of service to others. Yet as a volunteer, as a teacher, and as Liaison Officer for the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), she has received so much in return for such service that she defines its essence as “listening to and learning from others and giving when needed.” O’Dell’s life has always been centered upon service. As a young adult, she believed she was called to be a missionary, but decided instead that living her Christian faith deliberately in daily life demonstrated better this mission vocation. Hospitality and tolerance, two characteristics that have



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served her well in her role as an international civil servant, also fundamentally inform O'Dell's calling. Whether working in refugee camps, in the classroom, or in the halls of the United Nations, this 1956 graduate of Indiana Central College labors effectively behind the scenes to discover and try to address the needs of those whom she meets.

Born and raised in Dayton, Ohio, and brought up in Indianapolis, Indiana, where her father served as an Evangelical United Brethren pastor, Marlene O'Dell discovered that although she had only three biological siblings, her family included many members of the congregation, who treated the minister's family as an extension of their own. Yet, in the midst of this nurturing

environment, the O'Dell children acquired a crucial life lesson. Since the goal of ministry was so paramount in church life, each individual in the family learned to be self-directed, acquiring an internal discipline and self-sufficiency that shifted the prime focus to others. O'Dell thrived in the parsonage environment, becoming quite involved in the church outreach programs and youth groups. Earning a scholarship upon her high school graduation allowed her to enroll in college at Indiana Central.

At ICC, President Esch placed renewed attention upon service as the natural outcome of education in the EUB Christian tradition. Indeed, O'Dell found her home faith tradition seamlessly reinforced at the college. One marked difference from traditional practice, however, concerned the questioning of received authoritative information. O'Dell was encouraged to ask questions and think more broadly while studying at the college. She remembers Professors Robert McBride and Robert Cramer in philosophy and religion as teachers who pushed her thinking in new directions, while sociologist Dr. Marvin Henricks "challenged me to look beyond the sociology textbooks for answers in the real world." Other faculty members who influenced her included Dr. Sybil Weaver, "whose enthusiastic teaching of English literature ignited my imagination," Dr. Robert Brooker, "who mixed humor with chemistry to achieve positive results," and Dr. Anna Kek, "who opened the world of foreign language to me." These and other professors helped O'Dell come into her own as a student and as an individual as she began to think for herself.

This new-found independence prompted a new direction in her vocation and in her studies. Serious in her dedication to the principles of faith, O'Dell had gone to the altar as a youth and "vowed to live a life of fulltime Christian service." She came to college convinced that she was called to be a missionary nurse. In pursuing her education at Indiana Central, however, she realized that though her calling to service remained resolute, her skills did not lie in nursing. After

further vocational reflection, she switched her major to education, graduating in 1956 to become a licensed high school teacher. Recalling this period of her life now, O'Dell questions whether she "was really prepared to teach," evaluating her upbringing and education as "too insular" to properly prepare her to instruct others, given her limited life experience. She wanted to know more about the world beyond her hometown.

After working the summer after graduation, O'Dell sailed to Europe to visit her brother, who was studying in Vienna, Austria. This year marked the October uprising against Communist rule in neighboring Hungary, a protest that O'Dell would soon experience firsthand. Beginning with protests in support of Czechoslovakian policies that defied the central authority of the Soviet Union, the movement in Budapest evolved rapidly into a wider call for social and political freedom. When the Soviets responded with force in October of 1956, several days of street fighting followed. The Soviet's ultimate crushing defeat of the nascent revolution prompted some 250,000 refugees to pour across the border into Austria to escape the crackdown that followed.

The Austrian government, overwhelmed by the staggering number of refugees, urgently called for local volunteers to help in the forty-two camps being set up throughout the country. Eventually, the League of Red Cross Societies mobilized its own workers from Europe and the USA to administer the camps. Among those who answered the initial call for volunteers to help bring relief to those who needed it so desperately was Marlene O'Dell. For months, she worked long hours registering the new arrivals, distributing blankets and clothing, sorting relief supplies, preparing and serving food and teaching English to those Hungarians hoping to emigrate to America, Canada and England. "I felt so inadequate,"

she remembers, and discovered that she “had so much to learn” about the world and the enormous price people will pay for freedom. She spent that first Christmas away from home in a refugee camp, deeply moved by the faith and courage of these people who had sacrificed so much and who faced such an uncertain future. She treasures the life-long friendships she gained in those camps.

This eye-opening experience provided O’Dell with valuable insight into the practical nature of service as well as the limits of human resources. Indeed, she now found herself in Austria without any money. Always self-sufficient, O’Dell put the typing, shorthand, and language skills she had developed at Indiana Central to good use, finding a secretarial position in the fall of 1957 at the newly formed International Atomic Energy Agency, a specialized organization of the United Nations. She remained there until the fall of 1961, when she joined some friends for an overland trek from Europe to Asia. Though Marlene took \$350 dollars to finance her journey, four months later, she arrived in Bangkok, Thailand, with only \$10 dollars left. Out of necessity she soon found work and spent the next three years teaching in Thailand. At first, she taught as a substitute at the American school, but soon moved to a British mission school, where she instructed eleven and twelve year olds. Later, she taught at a young man’s college in Bangkok. She describes her years in Thailand as “most enlightening and thoroughly rewarding.”

With her visa running out, O’Dell decided the time had come to go home. Still, she traveled deliberately, taking a year to make the trip. She journeyed first to Israel, to visit her brother who had moved there from Austria with his family to study and to work. Then, she made her way to Cyprus, where she witnessed the destructive impact of that country’s conflict between Greece and Turkey. After that, she went to Vienna to work for the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) again to earn money for the flight to the United States. Finally, she made it home to Indiana, where she stayed for nearly a year to help her family.



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O’Dell’s calling to service drew her to New York City in 1966. There, she resumed her career with the United Nations and was eventually deployed once again by the IAEA, this time in a professional capacity, as Liaison Officer representing the IAEA at the United Nations. In this position, she served under officials who would later become household names during the build-up to the 2003 Iraqi War, including Mohamad El Baradei and Hans Blix.

The International Atomic Energy Agency was created in 1957 in response to a December 1953 statement by President Dwight D. Eisenhower, who asserted that “we have seen the destructive power of the atom,” and proposed that the United Nations create an organization to promote the peaceful use of atomic energy and “to seek to ensure that nuclear energy would not serve any military purpose” in the future. Since that time, the IAEA has helped nations plan and develop nuclear technology for use in medicine, agriculture and power production. It also sets safety standards for the nuclear power industry worldwide and, most famously, uses its inspection system to ensure that nations comply with international treaties outlawing the military use of nuclear power.

The Safeguards Agreement with the IAEA pursuant to the first known violation of a Non-Proliferation Treaty was discovered in the 1990s, when Saddam Hussein, dictator of Iraq, began a clandestine nuclear weapons program. This violation, and others that came to light in succeeding years, brought worldwide attention to the IAEA and its inspections system, as the international community put its hopes for peace in the hands of the Agency. Though war could not be prevented in the case of Iraq, the IAEA continues to play a vital role in the world, both in the realm of peacemaking and in promoting peaceful, productive, and safe uses of what is considered by many to be a necessary energy resource. Marlene is proud of her long service in the IAEA, which in recognition of its ongoing efforts to curb the spread of nuclear weapons, has been awarded the 2005 Nobel Peace Prize.

In addition to her official role at the IAEA, she has served the community as a volunteer in social service and charitable projects. In her work at a New York suicide crisis center, she has seen the dangers of self-absorption clearly demonstrated, for when people become too self-centered, they



“become miserable.” And, so, she urges today’s students to avoid self-absorption by being open to others. She encourages them to listen to others, to “learn to consider other people’s viewpoints” while still keeping strong “standards to live by.” O’Dell cautions that “balance is so important in life” and is confident that a proper balance between self-interest and concern for the rest of the world will lead to a successful and fulfilling life.

Marlene O’Dell’s diplomatic experience has taught her that those who talk the most about service often do so in a way that implied “sacrificing oneself for others, which can result in a condescending attitude toward those we seek to help.” In fact, she is “wary of do-gooders” and self-promotion, and is somewhat reluctant even to

define service. O’Dell views her own service in a different way. For her, it has been not about what she has done, but rather about what she has learned by “letting people teach me.” Indeed, she observes that “listening to other people is more important than preaching to them.”

Once she relinquished her youthful sense of particular calling to the mission field, she did not think of herself as serving others. Yet, her Christian faith remains a bedrock foundation for her professional and personal life, as she is “a firm believer in the teachings of Christ.” She points to “Christ himself as the best example” of how to serve, as “he was available to others and willing to listen to them.” And Christ commanded His followers to perform duties for the sake of others. Such work and assistance is required, in O’Dell’s view, to be a true believer. She also believes that tolerance and respect for others comprise significant elements of service, as both ways

of being are part of the Christian tradition of hospitality. The warmth of friendship, the show of concern, the availability to others, opens the door to caring and to bringing comfort to troubled hearts.

O’Dell fundamentally resists viewing service as altruism, since those who serve get so much in return and, at base, are so often motivated by their own interests. Yet, she concedes that even this kind of service does “get us away from self-absorption.” Remembering the powerful influence on her life of exposure to other peoples and places in the world, she encourages today’s students to take every opportunity to travel: “I am so pleased that the University of Indianapolis continues to sponsor study programs in countries other than our own, and to encourage travel by its students. Through travel we learn and stretch our horizons.” She believes that “there is always something that people of another culture, another religion, another history can teach us.”

When she hears someone say, “Iran,” she does not think of that country in terms of politics or conflict. Instead, she remembers an “Iranian family in a small desert village who invited my traveling companions and me to their home for supper.” The family “slaughtered a lamb in our honor, and I remember how difficult it was for us to eat that meal, knowing that they would probably go hungry for days thereafter.” In that and many other examples, Marlene O’Dell has experienced the power of hospitality and learned “the fallacy of making harsh and collective judgments about a people.” Overcoming self-absorption through openness and hospitality allows us to understand each other. In the work of Marlene O’Dell, it brings us one step closer to making peace.

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1. Marlene O'Dell teaching a group of young men from Thailand in school at Bangkok (ca. 1958); photograph used by permission of Marlene O'Dell
2. Marlene O'Dell, 1955 Homecoming Queen at Indiana Central College, used by permission of the Frederick D. Hill Archives of the University of Indianapolis.
3. Marlene O'Dell, with group of international aid workers in Austria in 1958; photograph used by permission of Marlene O'Dell.
4. Marlene O'Dell (center) with officials of the International Agency for Atomic Energy in early 1960s; photograph used by permission of Marlene O'Dell