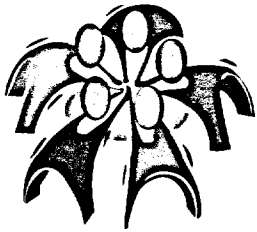


ONE of the Team



When she joined the typing pool at the old Department of Trade and Commerce in July 1967, Samiha Karam had no idea how far it would take her.

Now 61, Karam is an administrative assistant in the Europe and Central Asia Relations Division (GRA) at DFAIT, a position she has held for an incredible 26 years. Her job has opened her eyes to the world, introduced her to life-long friends—and reflects the transformation in the vital role that assistants play in the work and history of the department.

Karam was born in Kafremeshky, Lebanon, a small town in the Beka'a Valley, where her father was mayor. At age 9, the youngest of 11 children, she immigrated to Canada with her family in 1957, following older siblings seeking jobs and opportunities here. After high school, she took a commercial course, learned typing and stenography and landed the secretarial job in the West Memorial Building on Wellington Street. "It was just typing, typing, typing, and I was taking dictation left and right," she says. "Our role has changed quite a bit since then."

She married her husband Sami in 1968, and they had two daughters, Katra and Donna. Over the years her trade job began to be more closely linked to foreign affairs, she says, and she recalls the rise of the Pearson Building, which Donna as a toddler called "the chocolate building."

Following the amalgamation of the two departments, in 1983 her job moved there, and she became a non-rotational divisional secretary in the USSR and Eastern Europe Bureau. Her role, the Bureau and especially the region have evolved considerably. "There's never a dull moment," says the diminutive Karam, who arrived at DFAIT right after the downing of KAL Flight 007 by Soviet fighters and recalls long hours working on the issue as well as the Chernobyl disaster, the breakup of the Soviet Union, the Yugoslav War, Kosovo, the fall of the Berlin Wall and the Russia-Georgia conflict.

Since 1983 she has worked for 11 directors and three acting directors, seen four reorganizations and three different divisional acronyms. She has proudly watched numerous junior officers rise to become heads of mission and directors general,

crediting some of their success to "my coaching and whip-cracking." A decade ago her position changed to administrative assistant (AS), and in 2000 she became eligible for temporary duty assignments, which have taken her to Geneva, Dublin, Ankara, Beirut and twice to Kiev. "It's interesting to see how people work at the other end of the rope," says Karam, who would really like a stint in Moscow before she retires.

Colleagues praise her "gentle mentoring," generosity of spirit and intense commitment to what Karam calls her "enchanted" division. "I feel I'm one of the team, I don't work for them: I work *with* them," she says, adding with a wide smile, "They value my recommendations, and they do—sometimes—follow what I say."

Samia Karam has worked as an administrative assistant in the Europe and Central Asia Relations Division (GRA) for 26 years.

