

JOSÉE MÉNARD

OPERATIONS OFFICER IN
CONSULAR AFFAIRS

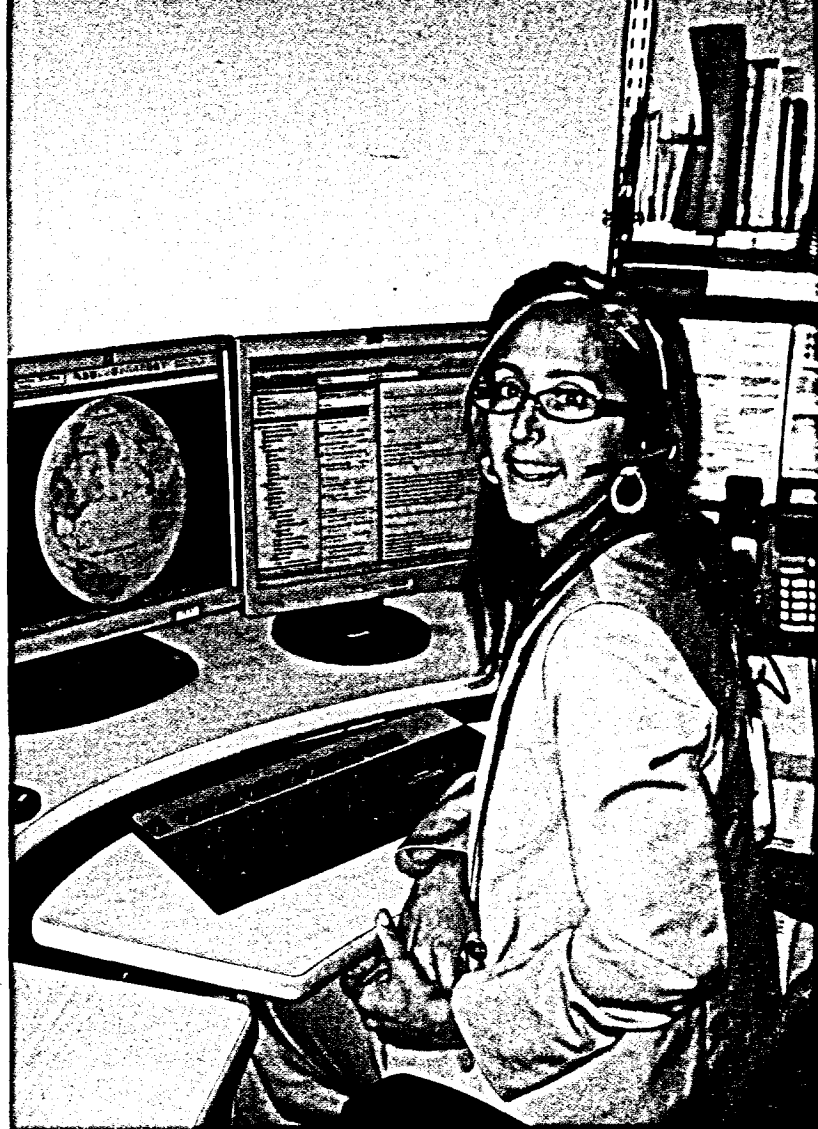
In the midst of chaos and crises, a calm head and sympathetic ear are critical. And sometimes, Canadians not only acknowledge the extra help, they are extremely grateful for it.

Being an operations officer in the Consular Operations Bureau's Emergency Response Centre means facing challenges on a daily basis and interacting with people from all over the world. Providing instructions and support to people in distress requires patience and resourcefulness, empathy and calm when faced with the unexpected.

When I started at the Emergency Response Centre almost two years ago, I was partnered with senior officers for training that lasted approximately one month. The initial training is this long to allow new officers to accomplish the specific tasks for each shift and to become familiar with consular operations. Shifts cover days, evenings and weekends because the Emergency Response Centre is open 24 hours a day, seven days a week, 365 days a year.

Shift work is not always easy and, over time, can become exhausting. But it also has its advantages. Imagine: you can spend beautiful, sunny days in June on the patio of a little café or at the beach, calmly reading your book while everyone else in the city is at work. And in the winter months, you can tear down your favourite ski slopes during the week, with no one there but you, the snow and just a few other winter-sport fanatics.

With countless Canadians travelling in various time zones around the world, calls can come in from anywhere, at any time of the day or night. Generally speaking, the usual calls—such as those concerning loss or theft of a piece of identification, like a passport, or requests for information on travelling abroad—do not take very long, as there is a procedure to be followed for each of them. However, more complicated calls—such as those about an arrest, hospitalization or death of a Canadian abroad—require greater skill. We need to calm people down and provide comfort, which is not always easy on the telephone. Once we have calmed the individual,



we can provide the necessary information to handle the situation as quickly as possible.

The centre is also responsible for managing crises that may arise—during the hurricane season, for example, or after an earthquake or tsunami. We also take care of Canadian travellers caught up in political crises, like the one that took place in Lebanon about two years ago, or the recent events in Kenya. The centre will operate at full capacity during a major crisis, which is something to behold. Such intense situations can prompt an adrenaline rush rarely experienced in other working environments.

As in most jobs, we have moments of great personal satisfaction and others filled with frustration. One of the challenges we face most often is managing the unrealistic expectations of Canadians abroad with regard to consular services, especially during crises or outside the working hours of Canadian missions. But one of the most fulfilling aspects of our job is when clients recognize the efforts we have made to resolve the crises they were in. Whether a spoken thank you, a follow-up note upon their safe return to Canada, or a thank-you message sent to our supervisors, it is extremely gratifying to know that our work has helped someone in a moment of need.