

## INTERVIEW: A SECRETARY'S PERSPECTIVE with Claudette Vachon

**LIAISON:** What attracted you to the Department of External Affairs in 1968?

I was looking for something that was both useful and enjoyable and felt that working and living abroad would suit me. My initial illusions were quickly dispelled, in the words of a colleague, the Department is not a travel agency. The position of secretary in a foreign country is demanding and the difficulties are not always appreciated.

**LIAISON:** You were a member of the first team that went to the Abidjan Embassy in 1969. What did you think of Africa?

The humid, unhealthy weather can wear you out. You must follow medical advice to avoid sickness in the short and long-term. Despite the administrative restrictions, life in Africa can be very exciting. One of my fondest recollections is the trip I took with a British friend during my holidays. We went to Gao in Mali on the edge of the Sahara. We travelled with the native people in buses, bush taxis and trucks, and even had some chickens as travelling companions. We had some fine times with the Africans, who showed us why they have such a reputation as hospitable people. We were especially impressed by the respect they showed their elders.

There were also some difficult moments. When the young wife of one of our officers died as a result of an accident in the bush, this tragedy weighed heavily on us. Events that affect one person or family affect everyone tremendously at the "hardship" posts, where the people are drawn closer together. Living abroad has its fascinating side, but there are also the ups and downs of daily life.

**LIAISON:** How would you compare your status to that of a secretary working here in Canada?

There are many more differences than similarities, and our status should be

revised to include the special responsibilities we have abroad. We operate in an environment where we must face unusual situations and learn "on the job". Flexibility helps, especially since government cutbacks have reduced staff size, leaving the remaining employees with a heavier workload. When you receive a posting, you have to adapt to a new socio-cultural environment, and often learn a new language. In addition, you are expected to perform in the new position, and move in, all at the same time. It has to be "business as usual", even though the conditions are highly unusual.

**LIAISON:** You have had eight postings with the Department. What advice would you have for today's secretaries?

I would say that life abroad is very stimulating and demanding, and requires considerable flexibility. In many ways it can be highly stressful adapting to a new work environment. The culture shock that people talk about is very real. I would advise newcomers to be as independent as possible, to show initiative, and not be afraid of being alone, because this is always part of the adventure. You also need a good sense of humour to keep yourself - and others - under control sometimes. Returning to Canada is not without its surprises in this type of life, which at times seems to be one constant upheaval. However, for personal and professional reasons, you must return home occasionally. My experience has enabled me to broaden my horizons, to improve my general knowledge, and to meet some unusual people that I otherwise would not have met. The only drawback is that one must leave behind friends with whom one has shared some unique moments. Experience has shown me that friendship is something quite different when you are abroad. I would say that it is a rewarding life, but one in which you must be ready for the unexpected.