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Army wife credits experiences, opportunities provided by military life for successful rise from small town to Fulbright scholar

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HEIDELBERG, Germany -- Rosella Glenn doesn't live like most Army wives.

She wakes up in the morning and checks to see if the lights turn on. If the heat has gone out again she decides whether to drain the radiators. She tries the water to see if it's working and clean enough to take a shower. Sometimes she takes a walk and chats with farmers and villagers at the local bazaar in Tajik, Uzbek and Russian.



PHOTO COURTESY ROSELLA GLENN

This is Glenn's life in the Central Asian republic of Tajikistan. Just north of Afghanistan, the country is the poorest of the former Soviet republics. Her job there is to teach people about America and conduct research about the hardships the nation's women face.

Rosella Glenn (right) helps a Tajik woman harvest cotton in a field outside of Dushanbe, the capital of Tajikistan, Oct. 25. Glenn said Tajik women in the central Asian nation often must work hard to make enough money to support their families, sometimes without the aid of a husband. Glenn credits the experience she has gained during 16 years married to Col. Mike Glenn, deputy chief of U.S. Army Europe's global rebasing and restructuring division, for much of her success as an expert in international affairs.

It's a far cry from her own humble roots in northern Italy to her mission today as a U.S. State Department expert in international affairs, from small-town girl with a limited grasp of English to Fulbright scholar. And Glenn gives much of the credit for her success to the opportunities and experiences provided by 16 years as an Army spouse.

"There are always challenges," she said. "But within the military community there is always help. Even moving around; it allows you to think outside the box, to adapt to different cultures and environments. You just have to learn to organize your life in a way that gives you support."

When Glenn left Borgosesia, Italy, at age 22 to live with her new husband, then an Army captain stationed at Hohenfels, Germany's Combat Maneuver Training Center as an observer/controller, she immediately faced obstacles because of her limited English.

"I spoke what broken English I learned in high school with my husband, but it was overwhelming speaking with a lot of people at once," she said.

In a new environment with many challenges ahead, Glenn said she realized her situation actually offered unique opportunities.

"The military always has something for you to do, even if it's just volunteering," she said.

So that's what she did. One day before leaving for a field exercise, her husband took her to Army Community Service to see what they could offer.

"The best way for someone to get around handicaps like a language barrier, or simply not having friends or knowing the area, is to dive right in and volunteer," said Col. Mike Glenn, now serving as deputy chief of U.S. Army Europe's global rebasing and restructuring division here.

While she may have been new to life as a U.S. Army spouse, Rosella discovered she had skills ACS could use.

"Back in Italy, I had some background in fine arts," she said. "ACS started me off designing flyers, which led to learning computer skills, which then opened up doors to marketing and advertising."

Eventually volunteering led to a paid job as a marketing specialist. At the same time she began studying German affairs and started the process of becoming a U.S. citizen.

When the Glens were later reassigned to Garmisch, Germany, Rosella said she was compelled to return to volunteering, and a new window of opportunity opened.

"While I volunteered at the visual information branch I saw published material that dealt with former Soviet republics. I then saw and met people from those countries coming to

Garmisch to attend conferences and courses,” she said. “I was so curious, because I’ve always enjoyed reading about world affairs and watching news.”

That curiosity drove her to continue her formal education in foreign affairs, even as she added raising two boys, Bryan and Martin, to her challenging regimen.

During the family’s next tour in Virginia she enrolled at George Mason University, earned her bachelor’s degree in global affairs with a focus on Russia and Central Asia, and began work on a master’s.

Unfortunately, delays in her citizenship application process pushed back her goal of working for the U.S. government. Yet she said even that delay led to opportunity.

“I had to go back to volunteering in the Washington D.C. area,” she said. “I took any opportunity that came along, and I was given an intern position at the Helsinki Commission.”



PHOTO COURTESY ROSELLA GLENN

Rosella Glenn (center) poses for a photo with a pair of Tajik women who clean the streets of Dushanbe, the capital of Tajikistan, Dec. 3. Glenn, an Army spouse for 16 years, said Tajik women who need to supplement their incomes often need to resort to this type of work.

She said her work with the congressional commission, which is responsible for monitoring and encouraging international human rights compliance, taught her about many issues involving the Central Asian Turkmen, Uzbek, and Kazakh peoples.

Faced with even greater challenges when her husband deployed to Afghanistan, leaving her to take charge of the household, she said she still managed to continue her studies and seek out

opportunities. She said that while studying the Uzbek language she became involved with the Fulbright program, a renowned academic fellowship whose membership has included heads of state, congressmen, and Olympic athletes.

The State Department calls its Fulbright Student Award the largest international exchange program offering opportunities for students to undertake international graduate study. Rosella said the program seemed ideal for her.

“I thought it would be very exciting,” she said. “It would finally be something that would match what I’d learned with a practice.”

The program required her to choose a country in which to pursue that practice. She said she chose Tajikistan because she felt women there were most affected by changes after the fall of the Soviets.

While her formal education prepared her for the job, she said the Army taught her how to do something equally vital to her new mission.

“Move to a new place and adapt,” she said. “My 16 years as an Army spouse prepared me so much for what I’m doing now. Because of it, as they say in Italy, I’m not lost in a glass of water.”

Rosella said working, studying, and raising a family has not always been easy, but that she feels strongly about giving back to America because it has given her so much.

“I’m not sure what’s ahead, but I can feel that it’s going to be good,” she said.

“I’m very proud of my wife,” said Mike Glenn. “I’m most proud of the example she has set for our children. They see in her the ability to jump right in and do something without reservations. She has shown that life is full of experiences ready for the taking.”



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