

by DIANA SCHOBERG

WAGING PEACE

Rotarian Mary Ann Peters will draw from her three decades as a diplomat to lead the Carter Center into the future

AN INTERVIEW WITH MARY ANN PETERS is a master class in the art of diplomatic responses. Asked about her most difficult assignment, the former U.S. ambassador responds that “difficulty and challenge are two sides of the same coin.” Pressed on the impact that U.S. President Donald Trump is having on the country’s ability to make peace, she says – after noting the nonpartisan nature of the Carter Center, where she is now chief executive – that administrations of both parties have relied disproportionately on the military since 11 September 2001, and she hopes the current administration will capitalize on other means to pursue its objectives. Speaking about negotiating on behalf of the Carter Center, she notes: “I like to think that we’re very useful to the government, because we can and do engage with people who a government that represents so many perspectives in the fabric of democracy can’t always engage with,” adding, “I’m saying that very diplomatically.”

Peters is able to put her astute communication skills, along with the cross-cultural savvy she developed during 30 years with the U.S. State Department, to good use at the Carter Center. Since 2014, Peters, a member of the Rotary Club of Atlanta, has led the organization in advancing human rights and fighting disease through projects such as monitoring elections, mediating international conflicts, and working to eliminate diseases such as Guinea worm.

“She’s a fabulous communicator and absolute pro in the diplomacy field, with decades and decades of experience,” says Martha Brooks, a fellow Atlanta Rotarian who met Peters through their membership in the Belizean Grove, a group of influential women that includes Wall Street executives and Army generals. Brooks is a retired aluminum company executive and past chair of the Carter Center Board of Councilors, a group of civic leaders that advocates for the center’s work in Georgia and beyond. She calls Peters “an interpreter of the world.”

Peters is in many ways different from her boss, former U.S. President Jimmy Carter, who, with his wife, Rosalynn, founded the Carter Center in 1982. He grew up on a farm, she in the suburbs; he’s a Southerner, she’s a Yankee. But she’s like Carter in her desire to be engaged in her community.

“She’s CEO of the Carter Center but she comes to Rotary every Monday,” says Bob Hope, an Atlanta Rotarian who has monitored elections in Nepal on behalf of the Carter Center. “She must be out of the country sometimes, but I’m not sure when because she’s always there, smiling, shaking hands, and making alliances for President Carter. Carter is open about what he says and that sometimes rubs people wrong. She bridges it, and she does it in such a friendly and warm way.”

Peters got an early start in her international career. She understands the value of programs such as Rotary Youth Exchange: She herself spent a year in Paris during her time as an undergraduate at Santa Clara University. "It's not only what you learn," she says. "It's the fact that you're the one who got on the plane, and so therefore you actually become the confident person you wanted to be – or at least you think you are and you act that way, so nobody knows the difference." That works in both directions: She recalls meeting a Muslim leader in Bangladesh who told her that he could never be anti-American because he had been on an exchange program and lived with a family in Pennsylvania.

After receiving her master's degree from the Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies, she launched her career as a U.S. diplomat. Fluent in seven languages, she had assignments in Germany, Russia, Bulgaria, Canada, and other countries. President Bill Clinton named her U.S. ambassador to Bangladesh in 2000, a position she held until 2003.



Peters leads the Carter Center in its work to eliminate diseases such as river blindness in Nigeria.

It was a difficult assignment, she says. Bangladesh, one of the most densely populated countries in the world, suffers from terrible poverty. Her stint in the majority-Muslim country spanned 9/11, and U.S. foreign policy goals drastically changed while she was there. Her team began meeting with local religious leaders to get their support for aid programs the U.S. government was conducting. In meeting with the imams, she says, "We were trying to follow the rules, but we were

doing things that no one had given us permission to do."

Mementos from her years in the foreign service decorate her office at the Carter Center. Her "brag wall" includes photos of Peters with President Clinton and Secretaries of State Madeleine Albright and Colin Powell. On one wall hangs a woodcut of Narragansett Bay in Newport, R.I., where she served as provost of the U.S. Naval War College from 2008 to 2014.

Peters' background as an educator is evident when she talks about diplomacy. On the notes she had prepared for her interview, she scrawls out "DIME" – an acronym for "diplomacy, information/intelligence, military, economic" to explain the options a government has to exercise its power. "As a diplomat, of course, I believe that talking is better than shooting." To make her point, she paraphrases Winston Churchill: "Jaw, jaw, is better than war, war' – I suppose it rhymes if you're an upper-class Brit like Churchill was. I believe it with every fiber of my being."

She's full of maxims like that one: "A diplomat answers twice and says nothing." "A diplomat can tell you to go to hell in such a way that you look forward to the trip." "A diplomat is an honest man sent to lie abroad for his country." Or one she made up herself: "A diplomat never insults anyone by accident."

The transition from provost of the Naval War College to CEO of the Carter Center, an institution whose motto includes the words "waging peace," wasn't as big a leap as it sounds. The college has a master's program in national security and strategic studies – "and the greatest security of all, of course, is peace," she says. When Oz Nelson, then the chairman of the Carter Center board, introduced Peters to the staff, he joked that the organization would have a new motto: Peace or Else! "I thought that was great," she says.

The cross-cultural skills she gained as a diplomat make her right at home leading the Carter Center; she likens managing people to negotiating mini-treaties. "It's about advocacy," she says of the role of a diplomat. "It's about words, it's about navigating cultural differences. It's about firmly remaining American while understanding better than you could in Washington what's going on where you are, and how that's likely to affect what the United States wants to accomplish."

Hope, who also sits on the Carter Center's Board of Councilors, says Peters' discipline shows in whatever she does. "Particularly in a political environment where the funding for the Carter Center comes from countries all over the world, being diplomatic and being friendly and knowing how to deal with people is critical," he says. "And she just knows how to do it."



Peters became CEO of the Carter Center in 2014.

Peters joined Rotary shortly after moving to Atlanta. Some of the first people she met in town were Rotarians, and she was impressed when she heard what they were doing. The Atlanta club is very active in human trafficking issues, and when she arrived in September 2014, the Carter Center was already working with the Rotarian Action Group Against Slavery on a world summit to end sexual exploitation that was held the following spring.

She says she continues to discover synergies between the work of Rotary and the Carter Center; she recently met with Rotarians for Family Health and AIDS Prevention to consider adopting their family health day methodology for the Carter Center's work to eradicate malaria and lymphatic filariasis, the disease that causes elephantiasis, from the island of Hispaniola.

Nonprofits such as Rotary and the Carter Center are the right groups to eradicate disease, she says, because the U.S. government must deal with annual budgets subject to approval by Congress, which doesn't always consider the long-term societal costs and benefits of such work. "They can't do it financially, and frankly, they can't do it politically, because an administration lasts at most eight years," she says. "It really seems to me that it's our job to make these commitments and then to rope in governments and other funders as we can."

As she talks, she picks up a Four-Way Test paperweight. At the Carter Center, she says, "we're action oriented and data driven, and that reminds me of the first question of The Four-Way Test: Is it the truth?" And like Rotary, she says, the center is nonpartisan and based on universal values such as compassion, equity, and respect for human dignity.

Another of the Carter Center's principles is that it doesn't duplicate the work of others; that's why it isn't involved in the fight against HIV/AIDS or polio, for instance. Instead, it has tackled a list of often largely unknown diseases. "When I first got here, I was going around chanting 'schistosomiasis, lymphatic filariasis, dracunculiasis,'" Peters says, to help her remember the unfamiliar names. Which brings her to another of the center's principles: These are difficult problems in difficult places, and if you're going to be bold and take them on, you must see failure as an acceptable risk. "That's what really sold me on going full speed ahead to try to get this job, because I thought it was so honest and so brave to put that out there."

President Carter is 93 years old and Rosalynn Carter is 90, and while the Carter Center must prepare for the day when its founders are no longer around, the center's reputation, built on that of the former president, is firmly in place. To help ensure the center remains true to its principles, Jason Carter, the couple's eldest grandson and a former Georgia state senator, was recently elected chair of the board of trustees. "They have positioned us as well as we can be," Peters says.

As the Carter Center moves into the post-Carter phase, Peters "does have an enormous task," Hope says. "When President Carter comes into a room, everyone is abuzz. She's tried to figure out how to institutionalize his reputation and what he's done. She and Jason have done a really nice job of transitioning the operation into something that will be less dependent on him as a personality. I think she's the right person at the right time for them."

As she discusses the future of the center, the ding of a meeting reminder sounds from Peters' computer. She's graciously let the interview go well beyond its allotted time, and now she needs a few minutes to prepare for her next appointment. She'll be having a conversation about a risky new role the Carter Center may play in a country whose peace process is complicated by politics, history, terrorism, and nationalist groups. But taking a risk where others can't or won't is in the DNA of the Carter Center. That will continue with Peters at the helm. ■