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Alumnus Resolves Conflicts on the Ground

By Melissa Smith

2008 in Afghanistan saw the deadliest suicide bombing of the war, the Sarposa prison raid by the Taliban that freed nearly 1,000 prisoners and the bombing of the Indian Embassy in Kabul. In December 2008, the United States vowed to send 3,000 more troops to help quell the violence. By February 2009, an additional 17,000 troops would be promised, rising to an additional 30,000 by December 2009. Through this show of force, the U.S. government was determined to destroy Taliban forces and bring stability to this war-torn nation.

During this time, Jason Ladnier (LAS '95), director of the Office of Learning and Training of the Bureau of Conflict and Stabilization Operations in the U.S. Department of State, began a 14-month appointment at the U.S. embassy in Kabul. "The idea was to help all the different parts of the U.S. government work together to help the Afghans stabilize their country," he says. Ladnier traveled throughout the south and east of the country, assisting U.S. military and civilians in the development of stabilization strategies.

By 2009, he was working in support of General Stanley McChrystal, then commander of U.S. and NATO forces in Afghanistan, and U.S. Ambassador to Afghanistan Karl Eikenberry to develop the U.S. Integrated Civilian-Military Campaign Plan for Afghanistan. The plan provided guidelines for civilians and military personnel in operations geared toward defeating the Taliban. His reports even reached President Barack Obama. "I was in the middle of one of the most exciting foreign policy challenges of our time," Ladnier says. "Did we succeed? Looking back, we could have done a lot of things differently or tried to be more realistic in our goals. At the end of the day, we're still learning."

At the Office of Learning and Training, Ladnier oversees a team of 15 people as they set best practices for conflict prevention and stabilization and provide professional development for Department of State civil servants and diplomats. "We try to help them better understand where they will be posted, as well as understand the major threats to stability either by being in the field with them or by helping to design programs that foster stability," he says. "Diplomacy is about influence and being able to find common goals with the people you are working with."

During his time with the state department, he has handled several high-profile conflict cases both in Washington and in the field. Ladnier worked on contingency plans for Kosovo's independence from Serbia in 2008, helped South Sudan during the vote for independence in 2011, supported U.S. efforts to prevent a repeat of electoral violence in Kenya during its 2012 election and traveled to Iraq to capture lessons from the U.S. military pullout in 2012. Prior to his position with the state department, Ladnier spent six years at the Fund for Peace, a nonprofit research and educational organization that strives to prevent violent conflict. While there, he helped develop the annual Fragile States Index, a report that details threats each country faces to its stability.

To date, Ladnier has traveled to more than 60 countries on four continents, but it was his time at DePaul that first opened his eyes to the world outside his rural Kentucky home. "I grew up on a horse farm,"



Photo credit: Ruben Cantu

"Diplomacy is about influence and being able to find common goals with the people you are working with."

-Jason Ladnier

he says. "I was pretty naive and sheltered. Then I came to Chicago, played soccer and met a whole host of people who really broadened my horizons." He first experienced international travel while completing a community service trip in Mexico and later studied abroad in Sheffield, England. The instruction Ladnier received in both the political science and honors programs prepared him for the challenges of his career. "I am who I am because of the experiences I had at DePaul," he asserts.

The mantra "do no harm" remains at the forefront of Ladnier's mind. "There has to be some degree of patience and humility when you work in a place like Afghanistan or Sudan," he says. "You have to understand what influences people. We may find we have less influence than we'd like." Ladnier relishes the challenge. "My career will be measured by how many people I was able to help."