

Interview with Eric Greitens

Eric: Currently I'm a White House Fellow and this year I'm working at the Department of Housing and Urban Development. I'm working on a project called The Universities Rebuilding America Partnership. The idea is to give grants to colleges and universities to enable them to assist communities that have been affected by the hurricanes. We are currently in the process of reviewing grants. When the grants are approved, the universities will work with communities to design plans for rebuilding and reconstruction. Then the Universities will help the communities to rebuild.

The other part of the White House Fellowship Program, which incorporates leadership and service, is a very strong education component. We've met with a number of leaders from government, industry, academia, the media, all of whom speak with us in an 'off the record' forum and give us their perspective on what it means to lead in America.

It's been a very good program.

Alissa: Can we take a step back for a second? Talk to me about the transition you were making out of college.

Eric: Well, after college I knew that I was going to go to Oxford for graduate school. I had a wonderful opportunity, through the Rhodes scholarship program, to study there for a couple of years. I decided to concentrate on Development Studies for my Masters Degree. Development Studies is the study of the politics and economics of the developing world. I made that decision because of the humanitarian work that I had done in college.

When I was in college, I had a couple of interesting experiences. The first experience was during the summer after my freshman year. I received a grant to study in China where I studied joint ventures and political economy. During the summer I had an incredible adventure, which included being arrested after teaching about human rights in an English class. This was an incredible experience for someone who was nineteen years old and had never been abroad before. It really brought home to me the reality of political rights and civil rights and what they really meant in the United States.

The summer after my sophomore year, I went to the former Yugoslavia and I worked in Croatia with a project called The Project for Unaccompanied Children in Exile. That was a project that was designed to reunite children that had been separated from their parents or traditional caretakers during the war. I went with Duke University professor Neil Boothby and several other students. We went to evaluate the effectiveness of the project and to do service work in refugee camps. It was also in Croatia that I started to do documentary photography work. That summer, I worked in a refugee camp called Puntizela that was near Pula and a refugee camp called Gasinci that was near the city of Osijek. In both situations I was living and working in the refugee camps. This was an incredibly moving and important experience for me because it gave me a real first hand appreciation for the challenges that face people who want to do humanitarian work abroad.

Later, in the summer after my junior year, I again worked with professor Boothby. We worked in Rwanda where I worked on unaccompanied children's issues. I worked with UNICEF, UNHCR [United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees] and several small NGOs to assess how best to provide services to unaccompanied children. The summer after my senior year, I worked in Bolivia in a small home called Mano Amiga, which was a home for street children. I was really moved there by the example of two wonderful people, Jason and Caroline Bernhardt-Lanier, who had moved to Bolivia and were running this home that did really incredible work on behalf of Bolivian street children.

It was a combination of all of those experiences and the examples of Professor Boothby, Jason, Caroline and some of the other volunteers whom I had met that really helped me know I wanted to focus my study on those kinds of humanitarian issues.

Alissa: Did you have to write a thesis at Oxford? What was your topic? And did you continue your service work abroad?

Eric: I did. At Oxford, I first completed a Masters degree and later completed a PhD. I wrote both my thesis and dissertation on the challenges that face international organizations that attempt to work with children that have been affected by war. The focus of my research and my writing was on the ways humanitarian organizations can overcome the challenges that they always face in these emergencies in order to best deliver services to war affected children.

When I was at Oxford I also had the opportunity to continue my humanitarian work. I worked in India at one of mother Theresa's homes for the destitute and dying. I also worked in Cambodia with a small NGO that provided prosthetics to children that had lost limbs due to mines or polio.

Alissa: Did you do these things as part of your research?

Eric: I went primarily to volunteer and to photograph, but I was able to use each of the experiences to enhance what I was studying.

Alissa: So there you are graduating from Oxford and looking out into the world. What was that transition like?

Eric: I had come to believe very strongly from having worked in the former Yugoslavia, Rwanda, Cambodia and Albania that in certain situations of ethnic cleansing and genocide, it was important for the United States and the international community to respond and, if necessary, to respond with force. I found myself becoming a strong advocate, in certain cases of ethnic cleansing and genocide, for the US to respond with force. But I also felt very strongly that no one should advocate for the use of military force who hasn't served in the military him or herself. So being an advocate, I felt that it was incumbent upon me to serve.

In addition, I really was drawn to the kind of leadership opportunity that one has as a Special Operations Officer. It's an incredible opportunity to serve your country and to serve the

people who you work with. At that level of command in special operations, you have real power to affect others lives in a positive way and great autonomy to run your unit as you see fit.

Alissa: And when you were making the decision to join the military, what was the response like from your community- your family and your friends?

Eric: My dad was very supportive and my mom was supportive because she knew that it was what I wanted to do, but she would have preferred that I not put myself in dangerous situations. I knew that they would both ultimately be supportive because I knew that they loved me and wanted me to do what I felt called to do.

Alissa: What about friends?

Eric: I think there were some friends who were surprised by the decision. I believe that a thoughtful, values-driven use of military force is compatible with and indeed sometimes essential to effective humanitarian response. I don't think everyone understood that.

Alissa: Can you talk a little about that experience?

Eric: Yes. Being in the military and being a [Navy] SEAL is a great opportunity to serve your country and more importantly it's a great opportunity to serve the people that you work for and with. As a SEAL officer, I always thought that you had two obligations. One was to serve your country and complete your mission; the other obligation was to fight for your men.

One of my expectations was that I would have the opportunity to truly lead in a challenging environment and to do things that would be of genuine service. Those expectations were fulfilled because the SEAL training is incredibly challenging, and the operations that we had to conduct were important. I think that I developed as a decision maker, developed as a leader, and developed as a planner and strategic thinker.

Alissa: Okay. And what about the kind of impact that you were thinking about making?

Eric: One of the things I'm most proud of is the feeling that I was able to have a positive impact on the men that were under my command. I was very glad for the opportunity to help men to realize their potential, not just as special operations personnel, but as men and as citizens.

Alissa: Do you feel like this experience will help you if you are in a policymaking position?

Eric: Yes. What I think that you can learn only from serving, is how absolutely seriously one has to take decisions about the use of force. You learn how critical it is to question intelligence. You learn how critical it is to balance the plans that are brought to you, versus the realities on the ground. You realize how absolutely precious every life is when you're making those kinds of decisions, so that you will always make them while keeping the interests and the welfare of the country and the people who have to implement those

decisions in mind. I feel that decision makers who don't have that experience are at a fundamental disadvantage when it comes to making tough decisions about the use of military force.

I had spent a lot of time both in humanitarian work and military work with a hands-on approach to dealing with humanitarian and military problems. When I was doing this work I would often ask a lot of questions such as, "wouldn't it be better if we...? Wouldn't it be wiser if we...?" And so I came to feel very strongly that I needed a better education in how policy is actually created. The White House Fellowship Program offers an incredible education in how policy is created in the United States and that was the attraction.

Alissa: I don't know if a lot of people know what the application process is like for the White House Fellows Program. Was that a very involved process?

Eric: The application process is very substantial. It is probably the longest application process I have ever been involved in. There is a very substantial written application which is similar to the application for applying to college. It has essays, a number of different questions, a resume, letters of recommendation, etc. There is a regional competition where you do four interviews and a national competition where I think you do nine or ten interviews. All told you're doing about fifteen different interviews for the White House Fellowship position, in addition to a number of breakfasts, lunches and dinners. During the entire process you are meeting with the commissioners who are making the decisions.

Alissa: Where is your route taking you?

Eric: I don't know exactly where the route is going but I am sure that I will stay in public service.

Alissa: What are some of the suggestions that you would have for people who are interested in doing public service work and serving in that capacity?

Eric: I think it's absolutely critical that students engage in service both as undergraduates and as graduate students. Students are under incredible pressure to get good grades so that they can apply to graduate school or get a job. They're under incredible pressure sometimes from their parents, their teachers, people who love them, because those people want students to be safe. That's understandable. But the benefit of engaging in service is that it gives you the opportunity to understand what you really want to do with your education. The process of engaging in service certainly helped me to make decisions about what I wanted to do with my life. If I had never been involved in community service work or humanitarian work, I would not have had any idea what I wanted to do with my education. So I think that the purpose of service for a student is not only to be of service, but it also helps you to decide what you want to do with your one and only life.

Alissa: In your own experience, where do you think that drive for service came from? Was it a family ethos?

Eric: My parents encouraged community service by their example. They were not only

engaged parents but also engaged citizens. My dad was a baseball coach and a Cub Scout leader and my mom was involved in the PTA. I also had some wonderful, wonderful mentors and teachers as I was growing up who took a real interest in me and helped me to see the possibilities for being of service in my life. I had, for example, a Youth Leadership program teacher who once took me and a group of other young students to downtown St. Louis where we slept in a homeless shelter for a night. I was 16 or 17 years old at the time and looking back on it I can see that he was taking a real risk. If someone tried to do that today, they might be concerned about liability, about getting sued if something went wrong. He had the real courage to know that it was extraordinarily important for us to have that kind of hands-on experience. It's not enough to read about humanitarian issues or to read about the problems that people face. Actually going down and getting our hands on problems, looking at other people face to face, it gave us a sense of how important it was that we keep community service foremost in our minds.

Alissa: Are there things you wish you had done differently, when you look back?

Eric: Things I would have done differently...? No. [Laughs]

Alissa: Well that's wonderful. What are some things that you would suggest people think about as they are transitioning out of school? How would you guide someone who was coming to you at a transition point?

Eric: I think the first piece of advice I would have is to relax and to know that things have a way of working themselves out. A lot of people who are facing that decision are burdened by debt or burdened by their own expectations about progressing in their careers immediately. And some of them feel that they don't have time to engage in service work. What I would say to them is that every opportunity that they have to be of service will actually help them to better shape their lives and their careers.

[This path] has worked for me in a couple of ways. I am much wealthier in terms of my experiences because I did the humanitarian work and engaged in military service. Now I am doing service work as a White House Fellow. The other way that it's been extraordinarily helpful is that it helps you to make clear what you really value. When you work in one of mother Theresa's homes for the destitute and dying it's very, very difficult to leave an environment like that and feel like you need a new car. Working in that kind of environment helps to keep the important things in perspective and helps to fundamentally orient you towards what is truly valuable when you have to make decisions about using the limited time that we have on earth wisely.

One thing that was really important to me was that I had wonderful teachers and mentors but I also had many wonderful examples of colleagues, coworkers and other students who were similarly dedicated to service work. Whether that was when I worked with street children in Bolivia or with refugees in Croatia, having those colleagues really strengthened and reinforced my conviction that doing this service work was not only valuable, but in some ways helped me to see that it was what I was meant to do. That it was my purpose.

Alissa: Are there any drawbacks or negatives to the path that you've chosen: personal or

professional?

Eric: No. I think that if your values are aligned in the right way, then the things that you deem to be important are the things that you get out of service work. I'm trying to figure out how to explain this. We're shaped by what we do. When we serve, it shapes our character and shapes our values. If we do the right service, in the right way, at the right time, with the right people, then we gain strength of purpose and strength of character.