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Up Close: Cool Head in the Hot Zone

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UP CLOSE

Cool Head in the Hot Zone

This past summer, Deborah Malac (pictured in a white shirt) stepped onto the world stage as the voice of the Ebola epidemic.

“We were looking forward to a really good year in 2014,” says **Deborah Malac** ’77, the United States’s ambassador to Liberia. “We had a lot of great projects that were coming to fruition. Obviously, we had to adjust our expectations.”

In March 2014, the first case of Ebola was documented in Gueckedou, Guinea. By the end of March, the disease had crossed the border into Liberia, and by August 2014, the United Nations health agency declared an “international public health emergency.” At the end of 2014, the outbreak had affected 15,913 people, with the majority of victims in Liberia.

“When I was first informed about the outbreak, of course I was a little terrified,” admits Malac. “But then I did something Furman taught me to do. I educated myself. When you

know something backward and forward, you’re able to deal with it, and it doesn’t seem as threatening.”

Malac learned quickly. She had to. She would be challenged with managing accurate information about the disease and the outbreak to the rest of the world, which was frantic from both panic and ignorance.

“Of course the sensational stories get the most attention,” she says. “[But] those of us who live here and deal with it every day have the advantage of perspective. Reporters would come and see all of the dead bodies and see how overwhelmed we were, but they didn’t know about the plan that was in place or the steps we had taken to slow down the spread of the disease. It just couldn’t all happen overnight, and I think they were looking for immediate results.”

According to Malac, previous outbreaks of the disease had been in rural areas, with the most efficient tactic being to burn those areas out. This outbreak, however, occurred in a highly mobile and densely populated urban area, where the disease traveled much quicker. Complex treatment centers needed to be built, which required time to construct. And even when they were constructed, transportation of the infected to the centers was a challenge given the Liberian infrastructure, which can present travelers with no, or merely dirt, roads. Not to mention that the country was in the middle of its rainy season, which meant monsoon-like conditions and mud, day in and day out.

Malac freely admits the scope of the epidemic “was

beyond anyone’s imagination... it took a while for all of us to understand what a huge, complex problem we had. When things seemed overwhelming, I would remind my team to stop and step back and identify the positive things.”

What’s positive about an Ebola outbreak? Malac says she saw communities taking ownership, with leadership in rural areas growing organically. Liberians, she says, “understood that they could be a positive force, and that they [would] become the new generation’s leaders. These are all critical pieces of good governance.”

With the epicurve trending downward, Malac looks forward to a recovered Liberia and feels “absolutely confident” that they will see the end of the epidemic.

“In December, case rates were averaging about 20–25 per day from a high of more than 100 per day in the late summer. We are adjusting our strategies to focus on those last cases.”

Malac says she feels a newfound kinship with the people who have weathered the storm alongside her. “Ask anyone who has chosen a career at the embassy, and they’ll tell you there is something about this place that hooks you. I was captured by the amazing potential of the people and the continent.”

Still, after long days like the ones recently spent—many in the presence of the dead—Malac looks for solace in memories of another place near the ocean: her childhood home in Savannah, Georgia.

“I’ll breathe in the salt air here, and I’ll close my eyes, and I’ll feel home. For me, the ocean is home—no matter where I am.” **E**

—Lindsay Niedringhaus ’07