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## For NPR News

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ULYSSE GOSSET

## For NPR News

A Q&A with Furman graduate **Eleanor Beardsley** about her life and career in the City of Lights.

**Eleanor Beardsley '86 has been National Public Radio's lead correspondent in France since 2004.**

*Based in Paris, she follows "all aspects of French society, politics, economics, culture and gastronomy," according to her NPR biography.*

*Beardsley grew up in Columbia, S.C., and at an early age became interested in all things French. Her father, a history professor at the University of South Carolina, introduced her to the language through the Asterix the Gaul comic book series.*

*"I can't say I was a great student," she says, "but something clicked. I knew that one day I wanted to speak French fluently. I basically just kept at it. Sometimes when people in France ask me how long I've studied French, I laugh and tell them it basically took me 25 years to learn the language!"*

*She went on to major in history and French at Furman, where she spent a term studying in Versailles. She later earned a master's degree in international business from the University of South Carolina.*

*After serving as a staff assistant to South Carolina Sen. Strom Thurmond and as a producer for a French television network in Washington, D.C., she moved to Europe in 2001 to work with the United Nations mission in Kosovo. Her article about her early experiences in Kosovo, "A Separate Peace," appeared in the Winter 2001 issue of Furman magazine.*

*Eight years later, we caught up with her by e-mail during a break in her NPR duties. This time, she got to answer the questions rather than ask them.*

— JIM STEWART

## What sparked your interest in journalism?

I didn't discover I wanted to be a journalist until I was in my 30s, but I think I was heading in that direction all along. It just took me a while to figure it out. I always loved writing and telling stories, and was always interested in faraway places and different cultures.

Journalism was a good fit for my personality and my educational background. Today the passions and interests I developed and nurtured at Furman are my livelihood. I get to cover the people and places I dreamed about and bring their stories to American radio listeners.

And I was lucky, too, because I was able to break into the field without having to start at the bottom. I always loved listening to National Public Radio, but I never imagined that one day I'd be reporting for NPR from Paris.

## Describe your work with the UN mission in Kosovo.

I first went to Kosovo to visit a friend in August of 2000, about a year after NATO forces pushed out former Serbian president Slobodan Milosevic's forces. During that trip I put together my first radio stories.

I had been working as a producer at a French television news bureau in Washington, D.C. It was a fine job, but because I wasn't French I had no chance to become a reporter. I had always loved radio more than television, so I bought radio equipment, taught myself to use it, and went to Kosovo.

A friend who worked for the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation gave me lots of encouragement. From that first exciting trip I produced three radio stories that aired on the BBC-Public Radio International show "The World." After that I was hooked.

When I was offered the chance to work with the United Nations in Kosovo, I jumped. It was originally a three-month contract, but soon I had job offers from many different UN offices in Kosovo. I took a position with the press office and ended up staying for three years.

Kosovo was not a dangerous place for internationals. The conflict was between the natives.



*Eleanor Beardsley takes to the streets for an interview about a student strike in Paris.*

Albanians felt the West had saved them from Milosevic, and Serbs felt the NATO forces and the UN were protecting them from revenge-seeking Albanians.

But you had to be careful. Once I was in an isolated Serb village drinking plum liquor with the inhabitants. Later a Ukrainian soldier warned me about telling people I was American. Another time, while I was away, a car bomb went off near my apartment and shattered every window. And Kosovo's beautiful countryside was filled with landmines.

I worked with a great team of internationals who were doing exciting things to promote reconciliation between the Serbs and Albanians. I wrote for a UN news magazine, had the freedom to travel and report on any story I wanted, and did free-lance work for *The Washington Post*, *The Christian Science Monitor* and *The Boston Globe*. And I continued to do radio pieces for "The World."

I'm convinced that being a journalist is sometimes just about being in the right place at the right time and having confidence in



Not all interviewees are human.

Being a journalist is sometimes just about being in the right place at the right time and having confidence in yourself.

yourself. The Balkans was hands down the most fascinating place I had ever lived. Nothing in the West could compare.

### How did you land the job with NPR?

After three years I felt it was time to leave Kosovo and try to live a normal and not a “mission” life. I’d always wanted to live in Paris, and while I didn’t have a job, I decided to give it a shot. And yes, I also had a love interest there — my future husband.

I signed up for a course in French language and history at the Sorbonne so that I could get a student visa and stay long term. At 40, I was the only “mature woman” in a class of mostly 21-year-old *au pairs*. But it was great fun.

I also began pitching radio stories to “The World.” I hadn’t done radio for a while and was a bit rusty, and it must have shown because they kept rejecting my ideas.

But then I pitched a story on “spec,” meaning they’d take it only if they liked it. It was during the 2004 presidential race. I had found John Kerry’s French cousin, the mayor of a tiny fishing

village in Brittany. I got in touch with him, went to his office and did a great piece, complete with locals singing in a café as they downed oysters and white wine. After that, I was in.

A few months later I ran into the NPR correspondent at the time, Nick Spicer, in a German military cemetery in Normandy. We were working on the same story for our respective networks. He told me he would be leaving soon and asked if I’d like it if he recommended me to take his place. “Would I!” I said — and the rest is history.

It took a while to build the relationship and status I have with NPR today, but I’ve worked hard. I realize that there was a great amount of luck in all this, and I’m grateful every day.

### Are you essentially NPR’s Paris bureau? How do you file reports?

NPR has bureaus in London and Berlin. In other European countries we have single correspondents and work with free-lancers.

I have a studio in my apartment. When I work on stories for “Morning Edition,” it often means not getting to bed until 3 a.m., so it’s good to already be home. And if the folks at NPR in Washington wake me up in the middle of the night, I’m ready to file.

I have a computer and cable television and an Internet connection. This, plus recording equipment (a mini disc player and good microphone), is about all you need to be a radio correspondent. I spend much of my time doing interviews and covering events, then return home to put things together and file.

For most stories I write a script using the sound and interviews I’ve recorded. I edit the script by phone with the Europe editor, who is based in Washington, and put the sound into my computer using sound programs. Then I track my voice with my microphone.

I send all the sound elements by Internet to NPR in Washington, where producers put the story together (mix it) using my script as an instruction sheet. When you hear, for example, traffic sounds behind my voice, that’s the mixed product.

### Tell us about some of your favorite stories.

I love going to small villages and country places to do stories about food, culture and societal trends. Outside Paris, people live simply and are so approachable.

One of my favorite stories was about a school cafeteria chef in the south of France who put his whole self into making healthy and delicious yet inexpensive meals for the kids. He was amazing, a real artist. He gave me a lot of cooking tips.

Another favorite was reporting on a restaurant called *Dans Le Noir*, or *In the Dark*. I was led in blindfolded and seated at a table in complete darkness. The servers were all blind. Everything felt noisy and close, and I couldn’t tell what I was eating. I did learn all kinds of tricks, like putting the tip of your finger in your glass to know when it’s full. By the end of the meal I was completely exhausted — and had a whole new respect for the vision-impaired.

Last year, on Memorial Day, I did a story



from the Normandy Beach graveyards. A listener in North Carolina sent me the tip. Her uncle's grave had been adopted by a French resident as part of a program called Les Fleurs de la Mémoire, or Flowers of Memory, through which a French family can adopt an American serviceman's grave. The program's goal is to provide for maintenance and remembrance, because as time passes, fewer Americans visit these graves.

I met the woman's uncle's sponsor at the Colleville sur Mer American cemetery that looks out over Omaha Beach. It was one of the most moving stories I've done. The man had written a poem to the American GI and read it to him over his grave. We were both crying.

The man's niece wrote me a beautiful letter afterward. She said that now she felt that Uncle Walter, whose grave no one in her family had visited, had family in France.

### **Talk about President Sarkozy. What do the French think of him?**

Nicolas Sarkozy was elected president two years ago, coming in on a huge wave of popularity. I covered the campaign and he was a phenomenal candidate, full of energy, exciting and well-spoken.

He is not your typical politician. He is very frank and doesn't play by the old rules, which makes some resent him. He can even be seen as crude. But he is not two-faced. He calls things as he sees them.

He reminds you a lot of Bill Clinton in his heyday. He can talk intelligently and compellingly on virtually any topic. It's obvious that he has been preparing for this role his entire life.

I think his early popularity went to his head. Suddenly he and France were in the international spotlight, and his actions suggested that France was re-establishing itself as a world power.

But then his private life became a little too public. Everyone was fascinated by the personal drama, but also critical of him for being so open with his life. He went through a high-profile divorce and then began dating Carla Bruni, a singer and model. That very public romance didn't do much for his popularity, but since their marriage they have been far less flamboyant.

Carla Bruni is definitely an asset. She is elegant and refined, and speaks five languages. When Sarkozy traveled to England to meet Queen Elizabeth, everyone was predicting that he'd make huge gaffes. But in the end Carla helped him win the day. And his popularity has improved in recent months.

He is actually quite refreshing for French politics, even if he's a bit too active sometimes. His critics say he tries to do too much and, as a result, doesn't accomplish anything.

*Beardsley and her son Maxime enjoy visiting the baker near their home each evening to collect a baguette.*



Beardsley gets a little help from Frisonne as she prepares a report from her home office.



### How do you approach a story?

When you report for radio, you have to transport the audience with you — provide the small details and sounds that will paint the picture. You have to find good characters to interview. You try to mix in sound and visual imagery. It's not always easy, especially if you're doing a story about economics.

People seem to enjoy when you put yourself

in the story. But you have to be careful not to interject yourself too much. As a journalist, you need some distance. Still, people are interested in how you, as an American, view things. They like the personal details.

I once did a live interview on "Morning Edition" during a period of public strikes, and when host Steve Inskeep asked me if I was affected by the strikes I said yes, because when my nanny couldn't get to work, I didn't know

what to do with my 2-year-old son. I described how I had to book taxis for my nanny two days in advance, things like that. Well, people just loved to learn that NPR's Paris reporter faced the same child-care problems as everyone else!

Another story that prompted a lot of listener reaction was about all the specialty food shops in France — the butcher, the baker, the candlestick maker. I had just left a butcher shop famous for its head cheese, which isn't cheese at all. It's basically parts of a pig's head stewed down and then made into a gelatinous loaf. I know, it sounds horrible.

Anyway, as I was leaving, the shopkeeper came running down the street to give me a couple of thick slices of head cheese. I caught the whole thing on tape, and it was a nice exchange. I went home and had head cheese for lunch. It was quite good!

### What do the French really think of Americans?

I came to Paris just after the French-American fallout over the war in Iraq. The French were really shocked and a bit hurt by the virulent backlash in America as a result of their opposition to the war. But the bad blood has passed. You'd be surprised how many people say, "Oh, I love America. I visited here and there."

You always hear that the French are anti-American, but it's not that simple. They're opposed to what they consider no-holds-barred capitalism, and they weren't fans of the Bush administration, but they don't dislike Americans themselves.

### Where do you live? Is there a large expatriate community in Paris?

Paris is like a giant village — actually 20 villages, or *arrondissements*. And each has its own atmosphere.

I live in the 15th *arrondissement*, right beside the Seine. It's a great neighborhood for strolling

The French are opposed to what they consider no-holds-barred capitalism, and they weren't fans of the Bush administration, but they don't dislike Americans themselves.

and playing with kids. It's very lively, with street markets and specialty shops.

My son, now 3, is known in all the stores. We make our shopping rounds and people say, "Hello Maxime!" Especially the baker where we buy our baguette every evening. She loves children. And Maxime, like any good French child (well, half French), loves bread.

Paris does have a lot of expats and I have many American friends. Most of them have been here for a long time. There are a lot of international organizations in Paris.

**Do you have much opportunity to travel, either for work or for pleasure?**

For NPR I've traveled to Britain, Switzerland, the Netherlands, Belgium and Kosovo. I suppose I could propose more destinations, but there is a lot going on in France. And it's not easy to pick up and leave for a week when you have a child.

I've been to Brussels frequently. It's only an hour and a half on the speed train. London is two and a half hours away, so that's really great.

I think I will travel more in the future. That is one of the great things about living in Europe — knowing that so many diverse places are so close. Even in France you have so many different destinations, from the Mediterranean to the Alps to the beaches of Normandy.

**Do you see Paris as your permanent home?**

I come back to the States at least once a year, and my family visits me here. One thing that keeps me here is my husband, Ulysse Gosset,



*At a base in southern France for a story about the French rejoining the top command structures of NATO.*

who's a journalist as well, and my two stepsons, who are 16 and 14. So it's not likely we would leave in the immediate future.

I wouldn't mind living in the States. I've never lived there as a married woman or parent. But for now I'm enjoying France and Europe. I feel like such a part of the world and the living is good here, even if you don't make a lot of money. People eat well, take a lot of time off and really seem to enjoy life and family.

And it doesn't seem to be linked to money. Of course, with times the way they are, I hope this doesn't change! <sup>1</sup>

*To hear some of Eleanor Beardsley's reports from Europe, visit [www.npr.org](http://www.npr.org). Photos courtesy Eleanor Beardsley except as noted.*