

The Capstone Years: At the Top of My Game

(2009-2021)

10.1 The Quality Assurance Guy

This chapter is called “*The Capstone Years*” because the period from 2009 to 2021 represented the pinnacle of my professional journey—a time when decades of field experience converged into a full-time consultancy at the highest levels of the field. During these years, I had the opportunity to apply the full weight of my expertise to complex, high-stakes initiatives led by AMIDEAST headquarters. Having spent much of my career on the ground, I brought a field-informed perspective to the organization’s strategic core, contributing directly to leadership decisions. It was a culminating phase marked by influence, impact, and the ability to shape policy and practice from a position of seasoned authority, something that distinguished my voice among colleagues who lacked direct experience in the field.

While my previous role with AMIDEAST as Academic Director for the MLI project required a focused engagement with the specific demands of that

initiative, my new position as a headquarters director significantly broadened my scope, elevating my work to an organizational level. AMIDEAST, a nonprofit founded in 1951, is dedicated to expanding educational and training opportunities across the Middle East and North Africa (MENA). With offices in 12 Arab countries, the organization provides English language instruction, professional development, higher education advising, and cultural exchange programs. Its mission is to empower individuals, strengthen institutions, and foster mutual understanding between the United States and the MENA region. In this expanded leadership role, I was able to contribute to that mission more broadly, drawing on my field experience to support strategic initiatives across the organization.

For the MLI years, my work with the organization had been centered on a project that aligned with AMIDEAST's broader educational mission yet remained somewhat peripheral to its core operations. Now, I found myself at the heart of the organization, positioned to apply my expertise on a much wider scale. Leslie Nucho, AMIDEAST's Vice President for Programs, was my direct supervisor. In our first meeting, we collaborated on a job description and agreed on my new title: Director of Education Program Development.

While the role came with an excellent salary, returning to life in the U.S.—specifically in Washington, D.C.—brought new financial considerations. Unlike my years as an expatriate, I now had to pay considerably more in U.S. taxes and contend with a much higher cost of living, which limited my ability to save. Still, that wasn't a major concern. The opportunity to work at this level, combined with the chance to be in DC with Alisa while she went to school, far outweighed the trade-offs.

Interestingly, an old friend and former Fulbright colleague, Jim Grabowski, had also risen through the ranks and was now a vice president at AMIDEAST. I was thrilled by the prospect of collaborating with him again, even though we were in different departments. I also looked forward to collaborating with Vin DeSomma, another vice president, who oversaw new business

development. In addition, I was eager to engage with country directors and their senior teams across the MENA region—professionals I had long respected and was now positioned to support in new ways.

Starting in January 2010, I felt energized by the challenges ahead and fully ready to contribute in a meaningful way to AMIDEAST's mission. This new role marked a turning point—one that allowed me to bring together relationships, experience, and purpose at a moment of renewed professional momentum.

During the nearly three years I spent at AMIDEAST headquarters, my primary focus was on quality assurance across key programs. One of my first major assignments was to oversee the Al Faisal University training program in Riyadh, which I had previously evaluated during my earlier consultancy. I traveled to Riyadh twice a year to collaborate closely with the university's senior management team and representatives from the Saudi sponsor, the Al Faisal Foundation.

The academic program offered college preparatory and first-year and second-year courses in English, math, and science, all taught by American professors with subject-matter expertise. After two years, the program's director, whom I had recommended to succeed the previously fired one—accepted another position elsewhere. I then proposed that my former colleague, Don Schmidt, who at the time was leading the ATI testing center, become the new director. I had great confidence in Don's leadership and familiarity with my approach to quality standards, which allowed me to step back from any regular oversight, although I continued to make periodic visits to Riyadh.

With Don at the helm, I was able to scale back my involvement in the program's operational management, while still keeping strategic oversight. My periodic visits to Riyadh for program reviews remained productive and rewarding, and I believe they contributed to meaningful improvements in both the quality and outcomes of the program.

Another task during my time at headquarters was taking part in the preparation of the technical sections for large-scale proposals for donor funding. Whenever a new bid was released by USAID, the World Bank, or other donor agencies that aligned with my expertise, I took on the responsibility of crafting that part of the proposal's technical content. I also reviewed the proposed budget to ensure that the line items and costs matched the technical aspects I was preparing. I found this work enjoyable, as it allowed me the freedom to conceptualize the components of a project, typically serving as the main subject specialist.

My office hours were the standard 9 to 5, but I usually left an hour early, choosing to work through lunch instead of going to a local restaurant. At one point, the CEO, Ambassador Theodore Kattouf, noticed my empty office during his late afternoon rounds. After asking Leslie about it, she reassured him that I was productive and worked straight through the day. I never heard anything more about it, but I wasn't too concerned; I got along well with him and occasionally shared stories about my experiences in the Middle East, where he had spent 20 years in the Foreign Service.

Another area where I provided support was by offering general advice and helping with specific tasks related to initiatives in my area of specialization. Leslie, as vice president, managed a vast portfolio of training programs in the field and would enlist my help with projects that aligned with my background. This collaboration proved beneficial for me, as it allowed me to engage with management staff at the 12 country offices, broadening my understanding of the organization's operations and strengthening my professional network.

Despite a full workload, I found myself with some extra time during the day. I asked Leslie if I could explore educational technology applications, and she was fully supportive. With her encouragement, I entered a self-directed learning phase, diving into website development, database management, and online learning platforms. It was a process filled with trial and error—mostly error at first—but over time, I became quite proficient. I remember

one early misstep: I crashed a website I had built using customized HTML code, only to realize—far too late—that I hadn’t made a backup. Let’s just say, that lesson stuck with me. It never happened again.

Colleagues were often surprised by the range of technical skills I’d developed, and I’d always tell them the truth: I was entirely self-taught. I hadn’t taken a single formal IT training course. As a result, while I’d built up a solid and practical skill set, I was also aware of the gaps—holes in my knowledge that I was constantly working to fill. Still, that imperfect, direct approach gave me a kind of flexibility and persistence that formal training often doesn’t teach.

Although AMIDEAST headquarters had a fully staffed IT department and one would normally expect I’d seek guidance and support from them, my efforts went largely unnoticed. As an educator rather than an IT specialist, I wasn’t on their radar, and I rarely interacted with them—except when I ran into issues with applications that were blocked by the corporate network they controlled. Even then, their interest in my work was largely one of indifference, which didn’t surprise me. Their training and focus were centered on managing corporate hardware and enterprise software systems, with little exposure to or interest in educational technology—at the time, still a relatively new and rapidly growing area within the broader ICT field.

In all honesty, though, that distance worked in my favor. Without interference, I had the freedom to explore, experiment, and build independently laying the groundwork for innovative uses of technology in education that would later prove valuable. In the process, I was quietly developing an IT skillset on my own terms. I also discovered early on that the educational sector was increasingly turning to open-source technology, powerful tools that were not only free to use but also adaptable to a wide range of teaching and learning needs.

As I dug deeper, I found myself connecting with a global community of like-minded educators who were using these tools to create cost-effective, scalable solutions for classrooms and institutions. These were creative, mission-

driven professionals solving real problems, often with minimal resources but maximum ingenuity.

I knew I was onto something, so I naturally became more and more immersed in this evolving landscape. What began as a side project quickly grew into an enthusiastic pursuit. I spent evenings and weekends learning new platforms, testing applications, and joining online forums where educators exchanged ideas and shared successes. The more I learned, the more I saw the potential—not just for AMIDEAST, but for the future of education. This wasn't just about technology; it was about equity, innovation, and reimagining how learning could be delivered in a rapidly changing world.

It's fair to say I genuinely enjoyed those years working at AMIDEAST's Washington D.C. headquarters. I had a comfortable office among other senior staff, and I appreciated being part of a professional environment where ideas and collaboration were encouraged. Leslie was an exceptional supervisor, always supportive, sharp, and generous with trust. She gave me considerable autonomy in my assignments, and we developed a strong, collegial rapport that made the work both rewarding and enjoyable. In my role as director, I also built solid professional relationships with the country directors across AMIDEAST's 12 field offices. At the time, these connections felt like part of the job—but they would prove invaluable years later, when the world was turned upside down by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Living in the nation's capital was equally rewarding. Alisa and I could stroll past iconic landmarks like the White House and the Capitol, just three-four blocks from both her university and my office. With D.C.'s efficient metro system, getting around the city was easy, and we rarely needed a car—except for our weekend getaways beyond the city limits. The wealth of museums was an incredible experience, offering endless opportunities to explore art, history, and culture. We also took memorable trips to historic sites like George Washington's home at Mount Vernon, Thomas Jefferson's Monticello estate, and the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, along with other powerful war memorials. Arlington National Cemetery was within walking

distance of our apartment, a constant reminder of the depth of history that surrounded us. The historical significance of it all left a lasting impression.

During our first visit to D.C. in April, we searched for an apartment within commuting distance of both the university and the AMIDEAST office. For that trip, we were able to stay with Alisa's closest childhood friend, Mon, who was living in Herndon, Virginia, with her future husband, Nat, in his family home. Mon was in the middle of her master's program at George Washington University, and having her nearby was a real blessing—she not only gave us a place to stay but later helped us get oriented and feel more at home in the area.

After viewing various places, we eventually settled on a one-bedroom unit in an apartment complex called Pentagon Row in Arlington, Virginia. Conveniently located near the Metro Blue Line, it was just one stop from Reagan National Airport and a short ride, three or four stops—from both Alisa's school and my work destinations in DC. Its proximity to the airport also made weekend car rentals convenient, giving us a great jumping-off point for exploring Virginia and neighboring states. During that first trip, we also selected furniture and arranged for it to be delivered in August.

After settling in our own place, we were able to spend time with Mon and Nat, often taking weekend trips to places like Kings Dominion in Virginia and Hersheypark in Pennsylvania. I still remember feeling queasy after riding the “Wild Mouse”—a deceptively intense coaster with tight curves and sudden drops. Though the mouse ride itself was relatively small and only seated one person per car, the sharp turns made it feel far more extreme. While rounding tight curves in the track, the upper half of my body leaned alarmingly far out to the side before I was yanked back inward. I think that was the last time I got on any amusement ride that combined speed with sharp turns.

When Mon's parents came from Thailand for her graduation in May 2010, the two families—hers and Nat's—rented a van for a road trip to New York

City, and we were lucky enough to tag along. While there, we visited iconic landmarks like Times Square, Chinatown and the Statue of Liberty, then made a stop in Atlantic City on the way back. Interestingly, while we were at Ellis Island, I spent time in the building where immigrants were processed in the 1800's, and thinking about my ancestors, imagining them arriving there generations earlier, full of hope as they began their journey toward a new life in Minnesota.

Alisa's first semester began in September, but I wasn't able to join her until mid-December, after wrapping up my relocation tasks and finishing my work with ADNOC. During those initial months, she lived alone in the apartment, though thankfully her best friend Mon was nearby to offer support and companionship. Once I arrived, the following years living together became an exciting chapter for both of us—it was our first real experience sharing a home. Alisa quickly took to cooking (a skill I entirely lacked), and we settled into a comfortable home routine. To balance out the domestic tasks, I became the one who did the dishes and laundry, something I've continued to do ever since.

Living in the Pentagon Row complex was easy and enjoyable. The neighborhood had a good mix of restaurants, and a popular shopping mall was just a short walk away. Arlington itself felt upscale—full of things to do—offering a lively yet laid-back home base during our time in D.C. In the winter, an ice rink would be set up in the courtyard just below our second-floor apartments, adding festive energy and courtyard activity to watch from above.

After a mild winter, spring arrived in D.C. and it was gorgeous, with cherry blossom trees in full bloom, painting the city in shades of pink and white. During one of our many photo ops among the blossoms, I was wearing a new pair of sunglasses—an indulgent \$300 purchase. As we posed near the Tidal Basin, the glasses suddenly slipped off and fell into the water. Too late to catch them, I could only watch as they slowly sank out of sight, destined to become a permanent part of the Tidal Basin's hidden collection of lost treasures.

As time went on, I continued to enjoy my role at AMIDEAST headquarters, while Alisa steadily progressed through her two-year master's program. Our three years in the Washington, D.C. area were rich with personal growth and exploration. While our weekdays were spent there, we often rented a car for weekend getaways and road trips, sometimes venturing as far as Charleston, South Carolina, New York City, and Philadelphia. We also took flights to explore cities like Orlando, New Orleans, Seattle, and San Francisco, fully embracing the chance to discover new places together.

In 2010 and again in 2011, we flew back to Thailand. As the saying goes, *"You can take a Thai out of Thailand, but you can't take Thailand out of the Thai."* Alisa remained close to her mother typically calling her long-distance every night, so those trips back to Thailand were always a special time for both of us. On our first return in 2010, we visited Pattaya to check on the condo I owned there. While there, we were able to reconnect with Ken DeVillis. He was living in Chiang Mai at the time but also had a condo in Pattaya as an investment—an idea I'm pretty sure I got from him. I eventually sold mine for a small profit in 2018, after twelve solid years of tax-free rental income. Not bad at all.

Until 2011—six years after we first met—my relationship with Alisa remained unknown to my kids. During earlier visits to Minnesota, we would part ways at the Minneapolis airport: she'd fly up to Duluth to visit her former host family from her exchange student days, while I stayed in the city with the kids. Looking back, I suppose I was exercising caution, especially since I was still married to Miam at the time. But that careful separation wasn't going to last forever—for either of us.

Things began to shift in 2011, when Joey became the first family member to meet Alisa. He had flown to D.C. to visit a high school friend, and I'd given him a heads-up that he'd be meeting someone important to me. Still, he was clearly surprised when he arrived at our apartment and realized this was more than a casual relationship. Fortunately, he took it all in stride, which was incredibly reassuring.

Once I introduced Alisa to Tricia and Danny on a later trip home, we began spending more time with them whenever we returned to Minneapolis. My kids were warm and supportive, as were my siblings and their families—with only a few exceptions. That acceptance was an enormous relief. It allowed me to move forward, knowing that the people closest to me respected the direction my life was taking.

On Alisa's side of the family—or rather, her host family, I had the chance to meet Tom and Deb Dwyer, and their son Logan when they flew to D.C. to visit and explore school options for Logan. We had lunch together at a local restaurant and at once hit it off. On a later trip to Minnesota, we drove to Lucent, the small town where Alisa had lived as an exchange student back in 2001. It was a meaningful visit—not only did I get to hear stories from that time, but I also had the pleasure of getting to know a truly kind and welcoming family who embraced me without hesitation.

After two years of coursework, Alisa graduated from her master's program in May 2011. Her mom and favorite aunt, Gobei, flew to D.C. for the ceremony, and afterward, we all took a celebratory trip up the East Coast to New York City and Niagara Falls. A humorous mishap occurred when the GPS mistakenly guided us into Canada at a crossing which for some odd reason did not have an immigration checkpoint. But we had entered Canada. Since Alisa's mom and aunt were traveling on single-entry U.S. visas, we realized—just in time—that continuing forward would have prevented them from re-entering the U.S. I had no choice but to backtrack—literally driving the car in reverse—to avoid the situation. It made for a good story afterward.

They stayed with us for two weeks, enjoying the museums and tourist sites around D.C. The graduation itself was a truly emotional moment for Alisa's mom, who didn't have a high school diploma and had spent her life working tirelessly in the food industry. Watching her daughter walk across the stage to receive a master's degree moved her to tears. It was a proud and unforgettable day for all of us—but especially touching to see the pure joy and pride on her

mother's face as she celebrated Alisa's achievement.

On the day of their departure, Alisa's mom had one special request: a stop at the nearby Krispy Kreme shop. There, she enthusiastically bought three-four boxes of assorted donuts to take home with her. Apparently, Krispy Kreme had recently opened a location in Bangkok, where long lines of eager customers would queue up just to get a taste. At the time, it was the most popular donut in town—and Alisa's mom wanted to bring some treats back to share with friends and family. And she did, with great pride. That was Alisa's mom—always a foodie and always thinking of others.

Once Alisa graduated, she took an opportunity to work for a year, landing a job with a development organization with projects in Africa. Although it was a short-term position, it marked the start of her career in nonprofit international development, which was also part of her master's program. By August 2012, however, she had to return to Thailand as her student visa was nearing its end. She had applied for and accepted a position as a program specialist with the Asian Forum of Parliamentarians on Population and Development (AFPPD) in Bangkok.

Nearing the end of my third year at headquarters in August 2012, I had developed a comprehensive blueprint for an integrated online educational management and learning platform. By that time, I had become deeply enthusiastic about e-learning and strongly believed it was something AMIDEAST should adopt as a blended component to complement its classroom-based training at field offices. My proposal outlined a fully integrated system that included an entry-point website, a student information system (SIS), a learning management system (LMS), a web conferencing tool, and a framework to seamlessly connect all components. Although the original concept was inspired by Ken Devillis' work at ATI, I designed and built the platform model entirely from scratch, using only open-source tools and freely available applications.

My work was a product of intensive self-learning and experimentation—an effort driven by both curiosity and a clear vision of how educational technology could serve AMIDEAST’s mission more effectively. Despite the platform’s potential, my initiative was met with indifference from the IT team at headquarters. As professionals focused on traditional corporate infrastructure, they showed little interest in my work, perhaps viewing it as outside their scope—or outside their comfort zone. My efforts, rooted in education rather than IT, didn’t fit neatly within their corporate framework.

When I presented my e-learning platform proposal to the IT Director and the Vice President for Administration, it was quickly dismissed as unsuitable for AMIDEAST, brushed aside with rather offhand remarks about being unsuitable. Their main argument was that my proposed software solutions relied on open-source technologies and were therefore incompatible with AMIDEAST’s Microsoft-centric infrastructure—a convenient excuse for avoiding deeper engagement. Years later, I would have the chance to prove them wrong, but at the time, their casual dismissal was disheartening, especially considering the time, thought, and potential impact behind the plan.

Still, I left the meeting more determined than ever. I saw the potential in the idea and invested significant time and effort into charting a path forward. Whether it would eventually be used at AMIDEAST, adopted by another organization, or developed further as a personal project in retirement, I knew I was onto something meaningful for the future of learning. The role of technology in education was only beginning to grow, and I stayed committed to exploring its potential—not just as a tool, but as a transformative force for expanding access, enhancing quality, and supporting learners across a wide range of contexts.

Meanwhile, with Alisa starting a new job in Bangkok, I realized that staying in D.C. would make it much harder to visit Thailand regularly and stay connected. Neither of us was eager to return to a long-distance relationship, so I began looking for a way to make the situation more manageable. I

spoke with Leslie and proposed transitioning into a regional role based out of our country office in Amman, Jordan. With its central location within AMIDEAST's network and an eight-hour nonstop flight to Bangkok, Amman seemed like a practical choice. I also believed Leslie would see the strategic value—being based there would make my regional travel far more efficient.

After discussing how my responsibilities would expand with a broader regional focus, Leslie agreed. Not long after, Alisa and I packed up our apartment, storing anything, such as furniture, that we couldn't ship or didn't need anymore. In August 2012, we flew to Thailand together. After spending a couple of weeks there, I continued on to Jordan to begin my new role as AMIDEAST's first regional director.

Back in Bangkok, Alisa found a small one-bedroom apartment to rent not far from her new workplace at AFPPD. I began making short visits, flying back and forth between Amman and Bangkok so we could spend time together whenever possible. In so many ways, it felt like *déjà vu*—returning to the kind of long-distance relationship we had managed during the early years after first meeting in 2005.

Fortunately, with 24 days of annual leave and often combining them with holidays, I was able to make regular trips back. I was also lucky that my new role was entirely self-managed, allowing me to organize my workload in a way that made longer trips possible. Still, it wasn't always seamless. On one occasion, I had extended a visit in Bangkok beyond the dates I'd originally cleared with Leslie—only to find out that a VIP delegation was arriving in Amman and she needed me to meet them. I quite literally hopped on a flight that afternoon to make it back in time. Such was life in a transient, international role—constantly balancing responsibilities across borders, all while trying to stay connected to someone who mattered most.

On one of those trips back to Thailand in 2013, as part of my plan to eventually retire and settle in Thailand, Alisa and I took a significant step by making

a long-term financial commitment. We visited a housing development in Nonthaburi, near Alisa's mom's home, and shortly after, Alisa secured a loan to buy a two-story house in a gated community called "The City." While the house was under construction and we began buying furniture, Alisa continued living in her apartment, which was more convenient for her to commute to work.

Our decision to buy a house had been in the works even while we were still in the U.S., where we bought a refrigerator, washing machine, and bed, all of which we shipped to Thailand and stored at Alisa's mom's house. Despite being newly built and fully furnished, the house remained empty for the rest of 2013 and all of 2014, except during my short trips to Thailand every three or four months.

Apart from being away from Alisa, my posting in Jordan was a highly enjoyable and rewarding experience. I arrived with a strong existing rapport with the country director, so we already had a close and collaborative working relationship. While I continued reporting to Leslie and traveled often to various country offices across the region, my role also offered a great deal of autonomy and independence. I had a comfortable office space where I could focus without constant oversight, which made my day-to-day work both productive and fulfilling.

I especially enjoyed acting as a kind of roving consultant throughout the region. At one point, I had prepared a proposal and needed to fly to Jeddah to meet and discuss it with a prospective client. That trip turned out to be particularly memorable—my brother Randy was still working for Raytheon and living at the Rayville compound with his wife, Kim and son, Justin, so I was able to stay with him at his place for a night and catch up. Seeing the compound again after so many years was memorable. It was a brief but meaningful visit that added a personal highlight to an already rewarding assignment.

Living in Amman was refreshing considering my earlier experiences in Saudi Arabia, Egypt and the UAE. The city, with its blend of tradition and modernity, offered a unique cultural experience while keeping a distinctly Western-oriented atmosphere. Its cosmopolitan vibe, diverse food scene, and relatively relaxed social norms made it a welcoming environment for expatriates. The infrastructure and amenities were more familiar compared to other postings I'd had, and the warm hospitality of the Jordanian people added to the appeal. Despite the challenges of being away from Alisa, my time in Jordan was one of the most professionally and personally enriching periods of my career in the region.

I often traveled to different countries in the region to conduct program reviews and needs assessments for prospective projects. One particularly noteworthy assignment involved Helena Simas, who had previously worked for me in Egypt and had recently been appointed an AMIDEAST regional director, like me. We traveled to the UAE to conduct initial field research for a prospective proposal, and I thoroughly enjoyed that week with her. She had become a highly competent educator, and together we combined our skills to develop a top-notch proposal. It was incredibly rewarding to see someone I once supervised grow professionally and excel in her new role.

During an overland trip to our office in Ramallah, I saw firsthand the harsh realities Palestinians endure under Israeli military control. At the border, Israeli immigration officials directed me to a side area for further questioning. Afterward, I found myself seated next to a man who struck up a conversation about my travels. He looked and sounded American, and as his questions grew increasingly probing, I began to suspect he might be undercover. Once cleared, I was stamped into Palestine and continued to the AMIDEAST office in Ramallah. Along the way, I was deeply unsettled by the frequent roadblocks, where Palestinians were forced to exit their vehicles, show identification, and undergo searches of both their bodies and cars.

When I arrived at the country office and inquired about my situation at the border, the AMIDEAST country director explained that such scrutiny

was routine and mentioned they had called to verify my credentials. This experience was highly revealing about Israel's control over the occupied territories. I had also wanted to visit the country office in Gaza, but I never did so due to safety concerns. This story is not about my politics, so I'll leave it at that, except to say that I was deeply troubled by the treatment of Palestinians in the occupied territories.

I enjoyed engaging with Jordanians more than any other Arab nationality. They were generally well-educated, informed about world events, and lacked the sense of entitlement I had seen in Saudi Arabia and, to somewhat lesser extent, in the UAE. Alisa, having lived in the UAE, agreed with me about how different Jordan felt when she visited Amman in 2014. We had a wonderful time exploring the stunning ruins at Petra, the ancient Christian churches from the Roman Empire, and various castles and historical sites, all while soaking in the vibrant atmosphere of Amman. At one point, we watched religious tourists across the river in Israel as they immersed themselves in the water for what seemed to be a baptism. It was a notable reminder of the rich culture and history that surrounds the region.

In early 2014, AMIDEAST held a senior staff gathering in Amman, Jordan, where the CEO, vice presidents, and directors gathered for a week-long series of meetings. Since I was posted there, I had an opportunity to host Leslie at my apartment where we discussed topics related to my regional posting. There was also a forthcoming request for proposal (RFP) coming from the Saudi Electric Company that she wanted me to take the lead role in preparing. The week-long meetings were highly beneficial as they brought headquarters and field staff together to discuss issues related to a new strategic restructuring for the organization. While this didn't affect my work, it was clear from the interactions with other senior staff members that I held a prominent role in AMIDEAST.

In early 2015, I took on the role of lead proposal writer for that Saudi Electric Company bid. I eagerly reviewed the RFP, conceptualized a design and implementation plan, and drafted a comprehensive technical and budget

proposal, which ultimately led to AMIDEAST winning the project—a \$26 million initiative to set up a polytechnic institute in Dammam, Saudi Arabia. After securing the contract, I made one stipulation to Leslie: I had absolutely no interest in any direct management role for the project. I didn’t want to be assigned to work there, primarily because of my earlier experience living in Jeddah.

After two years in a long-distance relationship with Alisa, I was seriously considering early retirement at 63 so that I could move to Thailand. When I conveyed my retirement thoughts with Leslie, she quickly asked what it would take to keep me on. Since we now had a house in Thailand, and I wanted to return to live there with Alisa. I replied that I would stay with AMIDEAST if I could work remotely from Thailand. She promised to discuss this possibility with the CEO.

In December 2015, I received my bonus letter, a regular annual occurrence. Towards the end of the letter, I was overjoyed to read that the CEO had agreed with my request and was willing to allow me to work remotely in recognition for my role in winning the Saudi bid. With that, I became the first AMIDEAST employee to be placed on remote work status. To say I was ecstatic would be an understatement.

10.2 The E-learning Guy to the Rescue

By early 2015, I was living in our house in Nonthaburi with Alisa—whom I’ll refer to by her nickname, Gig (pronounced “Gik,” with a hard “K”). She had recently left her position at AFPPD and was actively searching for a new job. Around that time, we decided to get a dog. In April, we welcomed a two-month-old yellow Labrador puppy, whom Gig named Elsa. Elsa quickly made her presence known by chewing on the wooden legs of our furniture. Gig focused on her job search opportunities in Bangkok and, by September, had found a new job when she joined FHI 360 as a senior program officer. FHI 360 is an American nonprofit organization working to improve lives

in over 60 countries through integrated, evidence-based solutions in health, education, and sustainable development.

While a great deal of my work was computer-based and virtual from my laptop at home, I continued to make site visits travelling from Thailand to the Middle East to conduct quality assurance assessments of AMIDEAST's country office programs. I also remained involved in proposal development with headquarters staff. My trips typically lasted about a week. Since I had recommended Don Schmidt for the director position at the Saudi Electric Polytechnic startup in Dammam, I was able to rely on him to manage preparations for the official launch of the new facility. This allowed me to focus primarily on oversight during my visits.

Just before the grand opening, I flew in to attend, only to discover that not all of the logistical work was ready. Don was busy leading an orientation, so at one point, I found myself unloading office desks and other heavy furniture from a truck into the facility. It didn't take long before I was winded and breathing heavily. I felt completely worn out and had to admit—I wasn't that young, spry guy anymore. The team I was working with was gracious; they kindly told me to take it easy and let them manage the heavy lifting. For me, it was one of those humbling moments when you realize that the slow creep of age is very real.

Aside from occasional site visits, I became increasingly focused on my e-learning initiatives. Recognizing both the potential of online training programs and the limitations of support from AMIDEAST's IT department, Leslie approved separate funding for me to develop an independent online portal, which we named amideastonline.org. I personally set up two servers on separate domains, installing the operating systems and configuring the firewalls, databases, and email systems from the ground up. Once the infrastructure was in place, I installed the educational platforms: Moodle for the learning management system and BigBlueButton (BBB) for web conferencing. BBB was specifically built for virtual classroom instruction, and early on, I connected with its developers—eventually becoming one of

their primary users and testers.

This e-learning initiative, which closely mirrored an earlier proposal I had made within AMIDEAST, began to attract attention from staff at country offices who were eager to explore online learning solutions. As interest grew, my regional role expanded to include not only quality assurance and proposal development, but also leadership of this new educational technology initiative—which soon became my primary focus.

Working from home became my daily routine, especially after I converted one of the upstairs bedrooms into a fully equipped virtual office—complete with a large-screen monitor and all the necessary devices to work efficiently online. The two-story house we'd bought a couple of years earlier was also turning into a lively social hub for Gig's growing circle of colleagues and friends. It wasn't unusual to have a group over for meals and relaxed evenings of conversation.

Though I was the “old guy” in the mix, everyone welcomed me as one of the gang. In 2016, Gig and I decided it was time to get married. After so many years together, it just made sense. And true to form, there was no formal proposal, no engagement ring, no dramatic moment on one knee—just a quiet, mutual decision that had taken shape through the conversations we'd been having. After nearly twelve years, it simply felt right.

Before we could move forward with any wedding plans, I needed to ask Miam for a divorce, something she graciously agreed to without hesitation. She had met Gig before and could see that I was happy. Thankfully, the process was straightforward. Miam was understanding and supportive, and she sincerely wished me well. With our children grown, there were no custody issues, and we were able to reach a fair and amicable agreement on financial matters. So, on March 4, 2016, the paperwork for divorce was completed in couple of hours at the very same district office where we had gotten married 38 years earlier. In many ways, it felt like we had come full circle.

With that personal chapter taken care of, Gig and I turned our focus to planning a beachside wedding for November in Hua Hin, a coastal town about three hours from Bangkok. Gig worked closely with a hotel wedding planner and received generous support from her tight-knit circle of friends. But in August, the Thai king passed away, and the country entered a three-month mourning period during which all entertainment venues were needed to close. Our wedding date—November 12—fell on the final day of that mourning period. We were worried that we'd have to postpone, and at that point, finding another date or venue felt virtually impossible. Thankfully, after some anxious waiting and back-and-forth, we were allowed to go ahead with the wedding as planned—though not without a fair amount of fretting along the way.

In the end, the ceremony and reception brought together around 100 guests: Gig's family and relatives, friends and colleagues, and even her former host family from her high school exchange year in Minnesota. It meant so much to both of us to see people from so many different chapters of her life gathered in one place.

We chose a Western-style wedding, held at sunset on November 12, with the ocean providing a breathtaking natural backdrop. The event was as beautiful as it was emotional. Gig was a stunning bride, and I was one very proud groom. A fun tradition at Thai weddings is for the couple to pose for photos with every single guest—so we ended up with an entire gallery of memories, each one capturing a smiling face and a shared moment. After the reception, with a stage set up at the front, Mon served as emcee for a lively round of games and lighthearted entertainment, much of which came at my expense. At one point, I even found myself wearing a snorkel mask to everyone's delight. There were also speeches and among them was a touching moment when Gig's mother expressed her thoughts. She spoke with warmth and sincerity, expressing her trust in me and her hopes for our future together.

Three weeks later on December 2nd, we made it official by registering our marriage at a district office in Bangkok. Having already spent nearly twelve

years building a life together, we didn't feel the need to take a honeymoon. For us, the wedding wasn't a grand beginning, but a meaningful milestone—one more chapter in a life already rich with shared experiences and quiet devotion.

In early 2017, Gig and I decided to adopt a pescatarian diet, cutting out red meat and poultry while still enjoying fish and seafood. For me, this was primarily a health-related choice, while Gig embraced it for both health and environmental reasons. In June, we traveled to Washington, DC, and then rented a car to drive to Asheville, North Carolina for Gig's host brother Nolan's wedding. We also stopped in Durham for a delightful overnight stay with a friend. That year was busy with international travel, culminating in a trip to Minnesota in September for Danny and Candi's barn wedding, where Tricia officiated the ceremony in a hay field. The barn reception and dance were so much fun, especially the dance where my relatives seemed to really let loose on the dance floor.

Later that year, during a routine annual physical, a stress test revealed that I had an arrhythmia. Fortunately, it wasn't like a heart attack and immediately life-threatening, but it carried longer-term risks—like atrial fibrillation and blood clots—that couldn't be ignored. Concerned but calm, Gig did what she always does in moments like this: she sprang into action. After doing thorough research, she found a highly regarded cardiologist at Bumrungrad Hospital who specialized in cardiac catheter ablation.

Before the procedure, I was fitted with a vest covered in sensors, which would be connected to a large array of monitors—an intimidating sight when I was wheeled into the operating room. I was anesthetized for the operation and woke up afterward groggy, but thankfully in no pain.

The procedure itself was precise and minimally invasive. A catheter was inserted through an artery near my left groin and carefully threaded up to my heart. Once in place, the cardiologist used radiofrequency energy to target the area responsible for the abnormal electrical signals. The energy created

a small scar, effectively blocking those errant impulses from disrupting my heartbeat. Just like that, the irregular rhythm stopped.

I spent the night in the hospital for observation and was discharged the next day with a steady, normal heartbeat—and no side effects. While the first diagnosis had been unsettling, the successful outcome brought immense relief. Knowing the issue had been resolved gave both of us a deep sense of peace.

However, two years later, the arrhythmia resurfaced during another routine checkup. This time, though, I knew what to expect. Familiar with the procedure and reassured by the earlier experience, I felt much more at ease going into it. Once again, I was reminded—just as I had been back in 2008 when I had two cervical discs replaced—of how truly impressive Thai healthcare can be. From the quality of care to the professionalism of the medical teams, everything was managed with efficiency, precision, and compassion.

Our international travels continued into what became a personal highlight of 2018: a two-week trip to Belgium in April to visit one of Gig's closest friends, Ness, who had married a Belgian and settled there. What began as a simple visit soon evolved into a broader European adventure, taking us through Belgium, Amsterdam, and Berlin. We were joined by a small group of friends, five of us in total, which made the experience feel like one extended, unforgettable road trip.

In Amsterdam, we stayed overnight and, as you might expect, stopped by a local coffee shop. Things took a dramatic turn when one of the girls in our group overindulged—smoking too much, too quickly—and fainted. Fortunately, she recovered quickly, and though it gave us a real scare at the time, it turned into a story we could all laugh about later.

From there, we continued to Berlin, where we immersed ourselves in the city's deep and often sobering history. One moment that stood out to me was

visiting the site where Hitler's body is believed to have been incinerated—an unremarkable patch of ground, yet heavy with historical weight. I later visited a couple of World War II cemeteries in Belgium, which offered significant historical insights.

The trip was meaningful on multiple levels. Traveling with a group of friends provided opportunities for shared meals, cultural observations, and social interactions. But for me, the historical dimension, especially the deep dive into World War II sites and stories, added a layer of reflection that was both moving and intellectually enriching.

In September that year, Gig and I embarked on a wonderful trip that began with a flight to San Francisco, where we caught up with my longtime friend from my Hawaii days, Michael Clarke. From there, we drove to Idaho for my niece Erin's wedding—she's the daughter of my brother Fuff and his wife, Rita. The celebration took place in the picturesque setting of Sun Valley.

We rented a spacious house and had the entire family stay together, including Miam, which made the occasion even more meaningful. It was a rare and special gathering, filled with warmth, laughter, and shared memories.

After the wedding, we traveled through Utah and viewed the mountain scenery. Next, we traveled to Fort Collins, Colorado, where we stayed with Craig and Jenna and their two kids, friends we had met first in Washington DC and then in Thailand when Craig worked for the USAID as a contractor. It was a truly memorable trip—one filled with beautiful landscapes, reconnections with old friends, and cherished time with family.

In October, AMIDEAST hosted a senior staff gathering in Cairo, marking my first visit back since my Fulbright days. The meetings were productive, and I had the chance to present my ideas on educational technology again, though the IT director remained unsupportive. Nonetheless, there were country directors who wanted their staff members to engage with me so that they could offer e-learning using the platforms I had developed independently.

While in Cairo, I rekindled old friendships and attended a reception at the Mena House, where we enjoyed the sound and light show at the foot of the pyramids—a particularly nostalgic moment, as that was where my daughter, Tricia, had graduated eleven years earlier. My old friend Jim Grabowski was also at the show; as vice president, he was leading the senior staff gathering. We reminisced about Tricia's graduation and shared other memories from our time together in Cairo. He couldn't resist teasing me about the time I defied Dr. Radwan and was dry desked because of it.

During my annual checkup at the end of the year, the doctor noticed I had a developing hernia and recommended that I undergo a procedure to repair it. After talking it over with Gig, I brought up the idea of using the opportunity to also reverse the vasectomy I'd had done 35 years earlier. I asked the doctor if it would be possible to combine both procedures in one operation.

He said it was doable—but made it clear that, given the amount of time that had passed, there was no guarantee the vasectomy reversal would be successful. In fact, he said it was unlikely. Still, I decided to go ahead with it, fully aware that the chances were slim but feeling it was worth a try. I should also mention that my health insurance covered both procedures at Bumrungrad Hospital, which—true to Thai ingenuity—prepared the billing in such a way that the vasectomy reversal, which typically isn't covered, didn't appear as a separate line item. Once again, you really have to hand it to the Thais.

In 2018, an exciting e-learning opportunity appeared when the Queen Rania Foundation in Jordan sought to set up a K-12 online curriculum for public schools. The director of the Jordan country office approached me to put together a proposal, which I eventually presented to a committee from the Foundation. They were impressed and approved funding for AMIDEAST to hire curriculum writers to develop the course materials for the portal.

I tapped into my network of former educators, selecting the ten best-qualified individuals for this task. I then asked Ahmed Kandil, an Egyptian bilingual advisor from the MLI program, to lead the project. Ahmed had continued to grow professionally, earning a Ph.D. and moving to Canada. Together, we enjoyed collaborating on the program structure, using our strong working relationship to guide the development process.

The project was conducted remotely, with the curriculum writers preparing their content for Ahmed to review. My role centered on oversight and quality assurance, but with Ahmed in charge, my involvement was minimal. I felt a great sense of professional satisfaction watching former colleagues excel in this project. Ultimately, the curriculum was made available to Jordanian government (public) school students, enhancing their classroom learning experience.

Gig and I continued our international travels that summer, flying back to Minnesota to spend time with my kids. A highlight of the trip was renting a large log cabin in Lanesboro, where we enjoyed three wonderful days together. I was pleasantly surprised with a 66th birthday party; the kids and Gig had decorated the main room while I slept the night before. This trip felt especially meaningful, as I had recently been diagnosed with another arrhythmia and was on medication, making the comforting presence of family more significant.

Upon returning to Thailand, I had that second ablation performed by Dr. Kunlawee, the same cardiologist who had successfully treated me before. He was surprised to see me again, noting that he rarely sees recurrence cases. Fortunately, following the same procedure I experienced the first time, it seemed that the issue was permanently resolved, bringing me a sense of relief and hope for the future.

After returning to Thailand, we faced a deeply tragic event. Gig's mother, Noong Ning, was hospitalized with heart issues, and while waiting for treatment, she suffered a cardiac arrest, remaining in a coma for ten agonizing

days. Each daily visit to the intensive care unit was heart-wrenching, filled with fading hope for her recovery, but sadly, she passed away on September 2nd.

This loss was devastating for Gig, who was an only child and had an incredibly close bond with her mother. Gig would call to talk to her every night, even while living abroad. I was also deeply saddened; I had grown very close to Noong Ning, who was a truly special person and will always be sorely missed. Her absence left a huge void in our lives. She used to visit us every weekend at our house, and we'd go to hers for Chinese New Year and other Thai holidays. We went on countless trips to temples and restaurants with her and other family members. To this day, we continue to cherish her memory and miss her dearly.

After the funeral and cremation, Gig and I decided to fly to Samui Island in search of solace and a way to process our grief. While there, we took a boat ride to nearby islands, and as we returned to shore, a large rainbow suddenly appeared in the sky. Gig exclaimed that it was a sign from her mom, something they had once discussed. In that moment, I felt there was something truly special happening, affirming her presence with us.

A month later, Gig took a pregnancy test and shared wonderful news: she was pregnant. I couldn't help but wonder if the rainbow had been just a coincidence or something more significant. I'm not superstitious—in fact, I usually rely on facts before I believe anything. Yet this event left me contemplating the possibilities of life beyond mortality. Noong Ning had often asked me about grandchildren, and at one point, I jokingly replied that if she kept asking, it might never happen. Now, I found myself reflecting on that remark, wondering if it was a beautiful, serendipitous connection to her spirit.

In January 2020, a pregnant Gig and I had the pleasure of hosting Jody, Lee, his brother Dean, and his wife Sue for two weeks at our home. We rented a van and took them sightseeing around Bangkok, visited Ayutthaya—

the ancient capital destroyed by the Burmese—and enjoyed a trip to the beautiful city of Chiang Mai. Towards the end of their visit, they spent four days at a resort down south. We had a wonderful time together, creating memories that felt so vibrant and joyful.

About a week after their departure, though, Jody emailed me about a flu-like illness that had first been detected in Thailand called COVID-19. I didn't think much of it at the time and reassured her that it was nothing to worry about. Little did I know that this initial case would soon escalate into a global pandemic. By March, all Thai schools and businesses were closed, and everyone had to stay home because of the virus, effectively shutting down not just our country, but the entire world. The lockdown had quickly a surreal and unsettling experience.

AMIDEAST's country offices were no different during the pandemic. All training operations at our 15 locations were closed, affecting over 10,000 students. While the IT department struggled to pivot to online courses but failed miserably because their corporate solutions were ill-suited and inadequate for the task, the site I had set up was well positioned to begin addressing this urgent need. It still required significant effort on my part to expand the educational technology infrastructure, but since it was already operational and most country office training staff members were already familiar with it, there was no startup delay.

I was ready for the challenge, working 18-hour days to upgrade the servers and change curricula for online delivery. Most importantly, I prepared online documentation and videos and held orientations to train hundreds of teachers on how to use our e-learning tools. The experience was both challenging and rewarding, as I focused on ensuring that our students could continue their education despite the difficult circumstances. It was all a monumental task that I started single-handedly with only one break in early June for the birth of my daughter, Anya.

Indeed, a truly life-changing event occurred for us. On June 3rd, our daughter Anya was born. At 68 years old, I suddenly found myself back in the world of diapers, late-night feedings, and the quiet, disorienting exhaustion of sleepless nights. The joy of welcoming a newborn into our lives was an indescribable experience filled with awe, tenderness, and a profound sense of renewal.

But it also came during an incredibly challenging time. The world was still deep in the throes of the COVID-19 pandemic, and with strict lockdowns in place, everything was shut down. There was no possibility of having any family members coming to help, no visits from friends, no hired help—just Gig and me figuring it out on our own. We had to rely entirely on each other, navigating the sleepless haze of new parenthood while stuck in isolation.

At the same time, I was also putting in long hours to expand our e-learning platform, balancing fatherhood and work in a way I never had before. It was a physically demanding and emotionally intense period, but looking back, it was also one of the most meaningful. Amid the uncertainty and fatigue, Anya's arrival brought light and purpose into our lives in a way neither of us could have expected.

I had to train teachers and administrative staff across 15 different locations on how to deliver online courses and register students for them. It was a demanding effort, but fortunately, the IT department eventually came on board. They began supporting the initiative by helping implement financial solutions for student payments and taking over server management for our LMS and BigBlueButton platforms, the very same education technologies they had once dismissed when I first proposed them. I guess you could say I got my comeuppance in the best possible way.

To help manage the growing workload, I brought in George McCarten, a trusted colleague from earlier projects, to help with teacher orientation and provide academic support. His contribution made a significant difference,

easing the pressure and ensuring smoother implementation across our sites.

By September, we had successfully transitioned nearly all classroom-based courses to the online platform. While we did lose students in the process, the vast majority adapted well to the new format. When in-person classes resumed the following year, we introduced a blended learning model that combined traditional classroom instruction with online components—a major shift in how we approached education delivery.

It's fair to say that none of this would have happened without the push from the pandemic. What initially felt like a crisis for AMIDEAST turned into an opportunity for innovation. E-learning became our unexpected silver lining, allowing us to support operations and sustain revenue during the most uncertain months of the crisis.

In January 2021, George was diagnosed with colon cancer and faced the immense challenges of chemotherapy and radiation treatment. Despite these hardships, his unwavering dedication and resilience shone through as he continued to work tirelessly on the project throughout the year. George had always been one of my most loyal, hardworking, and competent colleagues. Our professional journey together began in 2001 at MLI, continued at ADNOC, and later flourished at AMIDEAST. Over the years, George became more than just a colleague, he was a good friend and someone I could always depend on.

George's self-deprecating humor, cheerful attitude, and tireless efforts left a mark on everyone who knew him. In December 2023, George's battle with cancer came to an end, leaving behind a legacy of courage, kindness, and unwavering professionalism. I wish to honor him in this story not only for his remarkable contributions but also for the lasting impact he had on my life. George was one of my truest and dearest friends, and his memory will always hold a special place in my heart.

In June 2021, I informed my direct supervisor, Leslie, of my intention to retire at the end of the year, and this time, there would be no talking me out of it. This time she understood my 12-year tenure with the organization would come to an end. One of my immediate tasks was selecting a replacement, which I completed within a month, allowing for a smooth transition of my workload. I smoothly phased out, saying farewell to many colleagues I got to know well during the pandemic crisis. I received heartfelt expressions of appreciation from Leslie and other senior management members, including CEO Ambassador Kattouf.

Thus, on December 31, 2021, I concluded my employment with AMIDEAST and ended a long, rewarding career as a teacher, university lecturer, teacher trainer, advisor, consultant, and director. The 45 years since I first stumbled upon a teaching job at Dr. Chalao's had been truly remarkable, leaving me with a deep sense of accomplishment for the impact I'd made on countless individuals and an immense gratitude for the many turning points and forks in the road that brought me to this moment in my life.



The Teng Family: Before heading to Washington, D.C. for school, Alisa spent time with her family after leaving Abu Dhabi. Seen here at the airport, they gathered to send her off—a common tradition in her culture. The photo includes nearly all of her immediate and close relatives—too many to name.



Cherry Blossoms: Spring in DC is stunning when the cherry blossoms are in full bloom. These beautiful trees were a gift from Japan in 1912 to celebrate the lasting friendship between Japan and the United States. I'm still in a tie, so Alisa and I would have met there after work. It looks a little chilly, though.



Pattaya Condos: Ken Devillis and I both owned condos in Pattaya, which we rented out, so when I visited there in 2010 and snapped a photo in front of these Buddha statues. That's Ken's wife next to him, and his brother is peeking out from behind. Later, we enjoyed a scrumptious seafood meal.



Atlantic City Boardwalk: Alisa, with best friend Mon and her parents, took a fun walk along the boardwalk in Atlantic City during a trip in 2010. The trip also included sightseeing in New York City to see the Statue of Liberty and Ellis Island before a stop in Atlantic City for the gamblers in our group.



The White House: That's The White House in the background, with me posing alongside Alisa's mom and her favorite aunt, who came to celebrate Alisa's graduation in 2011. Besides the graduation, it was two weeks packed with nonstop trips around DC, followed by a fun road trip up the East Coast.



Graduation: Getting ready for the diploma ceremony, Alisa is looking elegant in her cap and gown, with a little extra help from her aunt, while her mom watches on with pride. It was such a special day for mom, celebrating her daughter's scholarly achievement. I was proud of Alisa as well!



Niagara Falls: Mom being goofy while posing in front of the famous falls. When we arrived that morning, it was raining cats and dogs, but by the time we finally reached the falls, the rain had cleared up. That morning was also the time we accidentally slipped into Canada by mistake and had to back out.



Orlando Trip: We traveled a lot while living in DC. Here we are at Universal Studios. Alisa was excited about the Harry Potter ride, having been obsessed with the books as a teen. It was amazing, bringing the wizarding world to life. I thought the Jaws ride was dramatic, with its intense shark moments!



Our Wedding Day: Our wedding took place at a beach resort as the sun was setting. After the ceremony, we had an outdoor reception with a stage where Mon acted as the emcee, coaxing Alisa and me into some funny antics. The evening ended with everyone holding sparklers, creating a stunning light display.



The Zachmans: This photo was taken on the last day of the Zachman's two-week visit (Lee, Jody, Dean, and Sue). We explored Bangkok and flew to Chiang Mai for more adventures. They then spent four days at a resort down south. Tricia and Jared joined us for a final dinner, wrapping up a fun time together.



Sun Valley Trip: In 2018, we flew into San Francisco, rented a car, and drove to Idaho for Fuff's daughter Erin's wedding and rented a large Airbnb, where everyone in the photo gathered for a fabulous family get-together. Afterward, we drove through Utah to Colorado before flying back to Thailand.



Anya and the Babysitter: Anya, at four months old and swaddled tightly while napping on her cushion bed, is in good hands with Elsa snuggled up close. While it looks like they've bonded here, Elsa was a bit jealous of the new addition to the family and would often target Anya's stuffed animals to chew on.