

"Growing up with the diversity of Cleveland Heights opened my mind to the rest of the world."

Gina Abercrombie-Winstanley

Class of 1976



Cleveland Heights served as a launch pad for 1976 Heights High graduate Gina Abercrombie-Winstanley.

From this integrated community in Northeast Ohio, Abercrombie-Winstanley headed off in directions all over the globe, from studying abroad in Israel to serving as the first female Consul General in Saudi Arabia to representing the United States as Ambassador to Malta.

"Growing up with the diversity of Cleveland Heights opened my mind to the rest of the world," said Abercrombie-Winstanley recently during a phone interview from her current home in Washington D.C. "I knew people who were African American, Southeast

Asian, Orthodox Jewish, and of European descent, all in my immediate neighborhood. My interest in the Middle East came very naturally.”

After graduating from Heights High, where Abercrombie-Winstanley had “outstanding teachers who piqued my interest in the rest of the world,” she went on to George Washington University in Washington D.C. There she earned a B.A. in International Relations and Affairs, driven by an early and sustained interest in foreign diplomacy.

Abercrombie-Winstanley had the unique experience of studying Hebrew in high school, a language she grew up listening to in her largely Orthodox neighborhood. Her high school Hebrew courses led to college Hebrew courses, which eventually led to a year abroad in Israel. “My first two plane rides ever were to and from college. And my third was to Tel Aviv.”

That experience was eye-opening for many reasons. Besides having the opportunity to truly immerse herself in another culture, Abercrombie-Winstanley was also subjected to racism in a way that she hadn’t experienced in the Heights. For her first days in Israel, she had no roommate, before finally being matched with a blond-haired, blue-eyed Canadian. “It was a long time before she told me the reason we ended up living together,” she said. “No one else was willing to live with her, as a non-Jew or with me, as a black girl.”

Her experience was overwhelmingly positive though and Abercrombie-Winstanley extended her planned semester into an entire year.

Following college, she served as a Peace Corps volunteer in Oman, then earned a Masters in International Relations from John Hopkins and joined the U.S. Foreign Service in 1985. She had served in Egypt, Iraq, Indonesia, Israel and Saudi Arabia before being appointed U.S. Ambassador to Malta by President Obama, a position she held from 2012 to 2016.

Despite her newsworthy life, Abercrombie-Winstanley quickly acknowledged that her greatest accomplishment

is “professional satisfaction and joy on a daily basis. And a good work-life balance.” She admitted that a life of foreign service can take a toll on families, with a two-thirds divorce rate in the field. “My husband (Gerard Winstanley) and I have made no decision without full agreement. We have a 100% partnership.”

She shared a regular foreign service joke that if diplomats have two children, one will love living overseas and one will hate it. “That was definitely true for us,” said Abercrombie-Winstanley of her two now-adult children.

Abercrombie-Winstanley visited Heights High this past November to speak to students at an event sponsored by Heights Girls Rock. She is deeply committed to increasing diversity within the ranks and leadership of the U.S.



Foreign Service and hopes that young people will “stay curious and be as open as possible.

This is the opportunity to try lots of different things so they can land on the one they truly love.”

She strongly encourages engagement with the outside world and was disappointed to hear about the decreasing number of Heights students participating in foreign exchange opportunities.

While she acknowledged that this is a reflection of our times, she is adamant about convincing students and their families to stay externally engaged.

“Parents should understand that the United States government does a very good job of protecting American citizens overseas. We still need to live our lives, especially if we want to break down walls and help the world get along. Staying home will not make the world a safer place.”

Her words rung true for at least one Heights High student, who has emailed her regularly about her own interest in foreign diplomacy. The two even had coffee in Washington D.C. this past January.

It seems that Abercrombie-Winstanley succeeded in her goal of “piquing the interest of some of these students in the outside world the way my teachers and mentors at Heights piqued my own interest years ago.” 🇺🇸