



A wall in Liberia became a platform for the “Ebola Must Go” public health messaging campaign that Christina PioCosta-Lahue ’00 helped coordinate.

Helping Liberia Battle Ebola

In the summer of 2014, with bodies literally piling up in the streets of the capital, the government of Liberia was desperate for an organized plan of attack to handle the Ebola crisis.

Tony Blair’s Africa Governance Initiative (AGI) offered its expertise. And **Christina PioCosta-Lahue ’00**, who had spent the previous four years with AGI working with government officials in Rwanda, Sierra Leone, Haiti, and Mongolia, asked to be sent there. “That’s where the situation was worst,” PioCosta-Lahue says. “I felt they needed the most help.”

She arrived in January 2015 and remained for six months, until the epidemic was under control. “From January through March we were in crisis mode,” says PioCosta-Lahue, who organized daily press briefings, met with international health organizations, and coordinated the public-health messaging campaign, “Ebola Must Go.”

“For almost a month straight, it was hard to stop and take a break, because everything feels important, and seems like it will make a difference if you do

it now,” she says. (Liberia was declared Ebola-free on Sept. 3, after experiencing minor outbreaks over the summer.)

PioCosta-Lahue, who has spent time on five continents and 40 countries, was inspired to work overseas after



Christina PioCosta-Lahue ’00

studying for a semester in Nepal in 1999. “That was the first time I’d spent an extended period abroad, and I thought, I’d really like to work in a developing country in the future,” she says. “It was so different from any experience I’d ever had, and that really stuck with me.”

After graduation, though, the Growth and Structure of Cities major got into cooking and spent several years working in New York bakeries and at a Mediterranean restaurant. Observing how the restaurant sourced its food from local farms got her interested in agricultural production and she decided she wanted to do something around food, but with a global impact.

The determined PioCosta-Lahue moved to Rome in 2005 and landed a job with the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations. “I learned on the job what the big issues are on an international scale,” she says.

She went on to earn an M.A. in city planning from MIT, and then worked for Chiquita Brands International, in Costa Rica, Ecuador, and the U.S., collaborating with the government and local farmers to set up small-farmer sourcing and energy-efficiency projects.

In 2011, she was hired by the Africa Governance Initiative, which sends experts into some of the world’s poorest nations to help governments run more effectively to achieve their goals. Her first posting was in Sierra Leone, working with the ministry of agriculture to provide technical assistance to small farmers and putting in place better systems to help attract investors. PioCosta-Lahue was working in Haiti when the Ebola epidemic was unfolding and AGI put out the call for experienced staff to help out.

AGI employees were briefed and vaccinated before heading to West Africa. In Liberia, every government building and restaurant had a bucket of chlorine in front for mandatory hand washing, along with a device for instantly detecting a fever, which every Ebola victim has. “We were told who to call immediately if we had any symptoms,” PioCosta-Lahue says. “But as a government adviser, the risk was extremely low because we weren’t in contact with frontline health workers.”

Today the Essex Fells, N.J., native is back in the U.S., starting a new phase in life with New York City-based real-estate and urban-planning firm HR&A Advisors. She says she is looking forward to testing her skills at home, and there is no doubt she’ll bring to her new job the same grit and curiosity that helped her thrive overseas.

“No matter what’s happening, you have to take a step back, look at the long term, and realize it will get better,” says PioCosta-Lahue, explaining the mindset of dealing with crises and broader government reform. “You need to look at where you were and the improvements that have happened. You always realize there are frequent ups and downs but you’re on a trajectory to where you want to go.” —Anne E. Stein