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### **Roberta “Bertie” Burns : Distinguished Achievement in Public Service**

St. Norbert College

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# 2019 Distinguished Achievement in Public Service

## Roberta “Bertie” Burns ’99

Fighting the spread of Ebola, destroying bombs in Afghanistan and saving polar bears sounds like the next “Mission Impossible” movie plot. Instead, it’s all in a day’s work for Roberta Burns. The former St. Norbert student government president has built an impressive U.S. State Department career in which she’s proven to be a trouble-shooter for our country, as well as a tireless worker for public safety, security and welfare.

Becoming a foreign service officer in the State Department is a highly selective process in which 300 to 500 candidates are admitted. Roberta ranks among the chosen few, and, following her admission and training, she received the Glenn Munro Award as outstanding student in her officer-training class.

For her first assignment, Roberta refreshed her Spanish and went to work in the Mexico City embassy where she performed visa reviews and consular services. She was soon tapped to become assistant to Antonio Garza, then-U.S. ambassador to Mexico. As the front-office liaison, Roberta became an expert on a vast array of issues ranging from security to narcotics policy, from U.S. citizen concerns to the implementation of the historic Merida initiative.

In 2010, Roberta volunteered for Afghanistan. She learned Dari, becoming one of only 40 non-native speakers at the U.S. embassy in Kabul. She was assigned to manage the largest State Department weapons-abatement program in the world, overseeing the humanitarian de-mining, mine-risk education, conventional-weapons destruction and victim-assistance efforts of more than 20 grantee and contract organizations.

One of her most outstanding achievements in Afghanistan was resolving a longstanding threat on thousands of lives. For more than 18 months, a foreign government had precariously stored 850,000 kilograms of explosives near NATO coalition and Afghan military installations. Roberta facilitated the highly contentious negotiations among disparate parties to successfully secure the explosives’ safe destruction, for which she received a Superior Honor Award.

Ultimately, Roberta returned to Washington, D.C., as the State Department officer in Arctic affairs, where she led the U.S. delegation to the Arctic Council’s sustainable development working group, addressing climate change and enhancing the lives of indigenous people. She also served as an Arctic senior advisor and as the council’s international chair of the sustainable development working group.

Adding French to her repertoire, Roberta also served as deputy counselor for the environment, science, technology and health section, working with the French government to address pressing global issues. She coordinated the cooperation between U.S. and France in combatting the Ebola epidemic in West Africa, seeking increased French intervention in disease-affected Guinea.

Today, Roberta serves in South Africa as an environment, science, technology and health officer for the office of economic affairs. She manages and monitors millions of dollars in U.S. grants targeted at preventing and prosecuting transnational wildlife crime, and she leads engagements on pivotal environmental issues.

Roberta’s unwavering service to others speaks volumes about her character and about her commitment to Norbertine values. It is with great pride and gratitude that we honor Roberta Burns with the Distinguished Achievement Award in Public Service, and say *gracias, tashakor, merci* and thank you.

## St. Norbert College

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