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DISTINGUISHED  
ALUMNA



Candice Burgess  
Nancel '78



**T**he Legion of Honor is France's highest decoration — and one of the most famous in the world. For two centuries, it has been presented on behalf of the Head of State to reward esteemed service to the nation. Honorees include acclaimed women of politics, literature, and art, including Eleanor Roosevelt, J.K. Rowling, and Toni Morrison.

Among them, is also a Harpeth Hall graduate and 2021 Distinguished Alumna Award recipient — Candice Burgess Nancel.

In a career dedicated to humanitarian and cultural causes, Candice has met presidents, diplomats, philanthropists, and celebrities. She has devoted her life to preserving French history and promoting strong Franco-American relations. She has raised millions of dollars in support of historic restoration and preservation. And she has embraced life as the global citizen all Harpeth Hall girls strive to become.

Her journey began with a Winterim trip to France her senior year at Harpeth Hall.

"I learned that what I knew and where I lived was not the center of the universe," she said. "It was humbling to realize that there are different ways to live, to have a family, and these ways may be just as good and creative as the way we do things in the United States."

Candice didn't especially stand out in the classroom at Harpeth Hall. A self-described average student, she found the curriculum challenging. She managed "with a lot of acceptance and encouragement from my classmates and the Harpeth Hall teachers, which is a testimony to the great place Harpeth Hall is." The support set her up for the great journey ahead.

Early in her professional career, Candice sold World Trade Center memberships in Paris. She drew upon the "discipline, rigor, and persistence" she gained at Harpeth Hall in mastering the French language and understanding French history, art, and architecture. Clients remember her "conviction."

"I quickly learned that the favorite answer for most French people is 'no,'" Candice said. "To a typical American, that can be quite

discouraging. I eventually learned that 'no' in France doesn't mean the same as it does in the U.S. 'No' in France means maybe — persuade me to want to say 'yes.' French men and women like to be brought around to a 'yes.'

"... To this day, I believe if you know your product is good, you know to whom you are selling, and you add pep, a smile, a joke, a surprise — something they are not expecting, you can have successes."

There were many successes on the horizon for Candice. She served as the founding director of *Un Enfant par la Main*, a French nonprofit association affiliated with the Christian Children's Fund. Within four years, she recruited six employees and 70 volunteers, generating over 6,000 sponsorships for children in developing countries.

In 1998, she began work for the American Embassy in Paris devoting herself to the George C. Marshall Center, located in the Hôtel de Talleyrand on the Place de la Concorde. A remarkable example of a late 18th-century Parisian townhouse, the Hôtel de Talleyrand has been the site of diplomatic activity for over a century and once served as the American headquarters of the Marshall Plan, the post-war reconstruction plan for Western Europe.

As coordinator at the Center, Candice was responsible for all official American Embassy events. When she was promoted to manager, her role became even more consuming as she took on responsibility for fundraising for the Center's ambitious interior restoration. Candice stepped up to the restoration challenge knowing it was a vast undertaking that would require extensive on-the-job learning. She explained,

“I often wondered why a person thought I could do a task, but I didn’t spend too much time wondering. I just went out and did my best.”

Candice successfully raised over \$5 million for the restoration project while coordinating events and experts to achieve the highly specialized task of restoring this historic treasure to its grand past. When asked about working within budgets while inspiring both donors and artisans, Candice said: “Artisans love what they do and just want to keep doing it. They have a great capacity to adapt if they know you are on their side. When funds got tight during the 10-year restoration of the Marshall Center, the artisans slowed down to stay on the job while we kept trying to raise more funds.” Once again, Candice figured a way to get a “yes” by connecting the artisans and donors: “At one point we began working together. I would ask the artisans to come to an evening event and show the donors what they do. This was meaningful for both groups.”

Candice currently serves as cultural asset manager for the U.S. Embassy in Paris, France. She oversees the archives and conservation for 10 embassy buildings in France and a collection of over 2,000 cultural assets belonging to the U.S. Government in France. In addition to her demanding professional role, Candice volunteers as president of the Nashville-based American Friends of Chantilly. This nonprofit organization strives to increase awareness among Americans of the Domaine de Chantilly, France, and raise funds for restoration and educational exchanges.

Candice’s advice to women? “Help other women. Do the best you can and work with others who complement your expertise. Make it fun. Find a partner who supports what you do. I am so fortunate to have Frederic, Nicolas, and Natasha, who enrich my life. Set firm limits with your time for work and your time for you, your family, your faith, and your time for you, which is something I am still working on. One of my regrets is spreading myself too thin. I accomplished a lot but at the price of my health. I have survived cancer twice and still work more than I should because I love what I do. Most importantly: Take care of yourself!”



In reflecting on her achievements, Candice said Harpeth Hall is the best springboard for its students and that any career can be successful when a person enjoys what she does, no matter where she is in the country or the world.

“I’m a swimmer, so an analogy might do,” she said. “Harpeth Hall taught me to develop my intellectual and physical muscles. Harpeth Hall held me up as an example even when I was just a work-in-progress as an honored dancer. Harpeth Hall showed me that those who think or swim differently aren’t necessarily wrong, and Harpeth Hall encouraged me to swim with others who brought different strengths to the team when I spent Winterim in France.

“In short, the school encouraged me to stride out to the end of the diving board and take the plunge because I had something unique to contribute even though I wasn’t at the top of the class. I have swum in ponds and crossed oceans to find my best stroke. At times, the water has been calm and my strokes had to be consistent; at other times, there have been large waves in which I found treading water was the only way to ride them out. Successes were found in diving deep to bring up and preserve treasures. Perhaps the biggest success has been that I have enjoyed and continue to enjoy the swim.”

Candice’s years of experience living in the country taught her the ways of the French, and a deep appreciation of and respect for French culture allowed her to be successful in her career as an American in France.

The culmination of her extraordinary work occurred on May 25, 2010, in the U.S. Embassy’s George C. Marshall Center of the Hôtel de Talleyrand when Candice received the Legion of Honor Medal, France’s most prestigious award. She accepted this honor, created by Napoleon Bonaparte in 1802, with a speech to celebrated guests from both sides of the Atlantic. The first American female to receive this exceptional French award was the Titanic’s “Unsinkable” Molly Brown. She was followed by the likes of Josephine Baker, Julia Child, Barbara Streisand.

And Candice Burgess Nancel.

