

Intercultural Learning

**An Interview with Vincenzo Morlini,
President and Chief Executive Officer, AFS Intercultural Programs**

EDITORS' NOTE Vincenzo Morlini has held his current post since August of 2011. Prior to this, he was *Direttore Esecutivo of Intercultura*. He was a member of the board of directors of AFS-USA and also President of *Cassa Risparmio di RE*. In addition, he has been a financial controller for Apple Computer. He received his laurea, economics from *Università degli Studi di Parma*.



Vincenzo Morlini

ORGANIZATION BRIEF AFS Intercultural Programs (afs.org; formerly the American Field Service), a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization, is a leader in intercultural learning and offers international exchange programs in more than 60 countries around the world through independent, nonprofit AFS Organizations, each with a network of volunteers, a professionally staffed office, and headed up by a volunteer board.

What is the history of AFS and how has the organization evolved to where it is today?

AFS was founded 102 years ago in 1914 on the initiative of a young man in the U.S. named Abraham Piatt Andrew who, having lost the elections for the Senate in Massachusetts and because of World War I, decided to sail to Europe and do something there.

He enrolled himself in the American Hospital in Paris as an ambulance driver. But in those days, they were just driving wounded people from the train station to the hospital. He wanted to do something more so he convinced the military of France to start an ambulance service from the frontline of the war to the hospitals in Paris. He established the American Field Service ambulance drivers to support people on the battlefields.

These people remained linked together between World Wars and they went back into service during World War II. In total, around 4,500 American young people, mainly recent college graduates of middle-class society in the U.S., served in this good cause.

They provided this service in World War II extensively in Europe – especially in Italy, but also in North Africa and in Asia. At the end of World War II, they had some money left so they wanted to do something to prevent war and contribute to lasting peace.

In 1947, they started this very interesting student exchange program between the three countries that had lost the war with the U.S. – Italy, Germany, and Japan. This soon expanded to many other countries.

Today, AFS is a network of 60 partners in 60 countries exchanging nearly 13,000 high school students every year.

Is there a certain student profile you seek out?

We look for young people who are curious, open-minded, and interested in an intercultural experience in a foreign country. They have to accept that they will be going through difficulties, encountering diversity, and learning about others, but they will also be learning about themselves.

This experience gives them skills and opportunities that they will carry for life.

It requires students who have the courage to leave their comfort zones and who are good students because, in the end, they have to attend the school in a different country with a different language.

Is the program generally one-year long?

Seventy percent of our students attend the year-long program, but we also have shorter programs. In certain cases, students prefer either a six-month or three-month option, and we have also really short summer programs of a few weeks.

How important is the host family relationship in this program?

Fifty years later, I'm still in touch with my host family in Ohio. My host father is still living, he is 99 years old and every time I visit him he hugs me as "my Italian son." This is a relationship that lasts a lifetime.

Is AFS involved in the curriculum?

Another key component is that students have to attend the local school and participate in the established curriculum there, but our volunteers are trained on intercultural learning competences. We provide resources for a non-formal education in the area of intercultural dialogue, and being able to relate to people of different cultures.

How much opportunity is there for growth?

The challenge we're facing today is that commercial programs are taking over in many countries. We do this for public diplomacy but, in the U.S. last year, there were more than 100,000 high school students hosted by foreign countries, and out of those, 75 percent are commercial programs while only 25,000 are in public diplomacy.

There are families, primarily from China, Korea, Brazil, and Russia, that spend \$30,000 to have their children study in the U.S. In our case, we charge only the real cost of the program. We don't pay the host families and we don't pay the school tuition. Because of financial constraints in the U.S.

and other traditional English-speaking destinations now, there is a market to enroll a student for a \$20,000 or more per year program.

As that trend continues, do you worry that AFS will remain relevant?

We believe there are great opportunities in many emerging countries. In Europe, as an example, we recently developed our programs in the countries that were linked to the Soviet Union right after the Wall came down, like the Czech Republic, Hungary, and the Balkan countries. Today, we feel great energy and great potential for growth in areas like China, India, and Latin America.

While we are facing big challenges in the traditional English-speaking markets like the U.S., the U.K., New Zealand, and Australia, we have great opportunities for growth elsewhere.

The funding for AFS comes from where?

Twenty-five percent of our funding comes from governments and private donors for programs like the U.S.-based YES, which supports exchanges with Muslim countries. Private donors, foundations, and some corporations give scholarships under their Corporate Social Responsibility programs. Finally, 75 percent comes from the families that contribute to expenses of the exchange.

Do you feel the purpose of AFS is more important than ever today?

Absolutely. Seventy years ago, the main issue was avoiding another world war. Today, with a global society, we have a huge migration issue where people from Europe, Asia, and Latin America are moving around. One of the big issues they face is the challenge of meeting and being able to live in a different culture.

So our mission, which is focused on intercultural dialogue, is even more important now.

You have alumni all over the world. How important is it to maintain those relationships?

Nearly half a million people have participated in our programs through the decades and we have some very prestigious alumni, including the Managing Director of the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the Deputy Secretary General of the UN, the Chief Justice of the Massachusetts Supreme Judicial Court, many diplomats, and CEOs of prestigious corporations around the world. We are in touch with our alumni and we now have an electronic tool called the AFS World Café, which links our alumni so they can meet when they want. But our key component is the volunteer base. They find host families, support students during the programs, and keep in touch with the schools. These are the real hands on the ground. ●