

ALUMNI SPOTLIGHT

▶ RICK GRABER, DUKE '75
FORMER US AMBASSADOR TO THE CZECH REPUBLIC

Rick Graber, *Duke '75*, just returned from a two and half year stint as the United States Ambassador to the Czech Republic, and *The Carnation* caught up with him to talk about his experience.

***The Carnation:* Can you just tell us a little more about your experience?**

Grabber: I served in the Czech Republic for two and a half years, and it really was a remarkable, life changing experience. It's a great honor to represent the United States in what is a pretty new democracy in the Czech Republic, and it was particularly interesting because we had a lot of significant issues going on while I was there.

***The Carnation:* Was there one moment that really stood out to you about your experience?**

Grabber: There were a lot of incredible moments, but I think the most satisfying thing was seeing the first Czech citizen travel to the United States without a visa. That was a major irritant in the bilateral relations between the Czechs and the Americans over the years, the fact that Americans don't need a visa to go to the Czech Republic, but Czechs needed a visa to go to the United States. That was changed during my time there.

***The Carnation:* What will you miss most about the position?**

Grabber: I will, and already do, miss the people. We made a lot of great friends all over the country, not only the leaders of the country like the Prime Minister, the President and former President, but also the everyday people. It was a very

welcoming people, and the Czech Republic is a great ally to the United States. Like most former Ambassadors to the Czech Republic, you never really leave. We'll be back to see our friends.

***The Carnation:* What was the most interesting thing that you learned about the country while there?**

Grabber: I think the appreciation for freedom and democracy that we so often take for granted in our country was the most interesting thing. When you've got a country such as the Czech Republic, formerly Czechoslovakia that endured occupations by Nazis and Soviets, finally to see democracy return, it really hits home with you. I found it fascinating talking to people of all types about that.

***The Carnation:* You mentioned in a past conversation that you and your wife were taking Czech language lessons during your time there. Did you ever master the language?**

Grabber: I can't say that I mastered it (Laughs), but we got better. We continued taking it right up until the week that we left, and I hope to be able to continue in some way here. I've got a lot invested. I got to the point where I could read newspapers fairly well, watch television and have some idea what was going on, and tried to give a paragraph or two in speeches in Czech as well.

The Carnation: What is it like being back to your normal life after living such a public life as an Ambassador?

Graber: It's a little bit of an adjustment. One week I was having lunch with the president at the presidential castle in the Czech Republic, and the next week I was cleaning the basement. It's definitely an adjustment, and I'm in the process of sorting out what's next for me professionally. I'm going to take a little time to figure it out. I say that, but on the other hand, you kind of fall back into the same routines pretty quickly.

The Carnation: There's also no security detail following you around any more either.

Graber: Absolutely not. I actually didn't have one in the Czech Republic either, I declined. I didn't think it was necessary in the Czech Republic, and it's one of the best things I did. Proving to be accessible and appearing accessible I felt were really important, and you just don't need it there. It's safe.

The Carnation: What was your last day like?

Graber: I was working right up until the end on the missile defense work. It was really three weeks of farewells. It was very difficult. We had events and dinners with friends, and members of the government each day for around three weeks. The toughest thing though was to say goodbye to the staff at the residence and to the person who drove me around in a car for two and a half years. They really become a part of your family, and it was very difficult.

The Carnation: What would you tell your successor, or President Obama, about your thoughts on how to continue positive relations with the Czech Republic?

Graber: The Czech Republic is a great ally, and we should not take great allies for granted. That's something that you can never just assume. The Czechs have a lot invested in the missile defense program that was discussed during the Bush Administration, and I would strongly encourage the President to continue on with that project for the sake of the safety and security of our country and the allies in Europe. I think that's critically important.

The Carnation: Talk a little about how the Czech Republic has fared with the global economic crisis in your view having been there for two and a half years.

Graber: I think everyone has been affected by the global economic crisis, and the Czechs are in a particularly important role right now since they have the rotating presidency of the European Union. So, they're not only responsible for their own problems, but also those of Europe. The Czech Republic may be affected a little less than the rest of Europe. For instance, their banking system remains sound, but like



A dedication on a clock in the U.S. ambassador's office in Prague led to a revelation that three diplomatic colleagues in the embassy were also fraternity brothers. Two of them, Richard Graber, *Duke '75* (Center), who was the U.S. ambassador to the Czech Republic until January of this year; and the embassy's Political-Economic Counselor Charles (Cob) Blaha, *Duke '74* (Right) already knew of the connection having studied together at Duke University. The third, John Vance, *Missouri '86* (Left) is the embassy's press spokesman.

everyone else, they are searching for answers to this problem. They are an export driven economy, so therefore as there are downturns in places like Germany, it will affect the Czech Republic.

The Carnation: Is there a specific site in the country that you would recommend be seen by someone traveling there?

Graber: Everyone goes to Prague, and it is a spectacular city. Everyone should go there, but too often, Americans stop just in Prague instead of going to some of the small villages and towns. Places like Olomouc and Cesky Krumlov and Telc are fabulous places in the Czech Republic.

The Carnation: What was it like working with two other Delta Sigs in the Embassy in Prague?

Graber: Isn't that amazing? One of them, Cob Blaha, *Duke '74*, actually went to Duke with me and I hadn't seen him in 25 years or so. That was an incredible experience, and then John Vance, *Missouri '88*, who was in our public affairs section, mentioned to me one day that he too was a Delta Sig, and we got a good laugh out of it, and it was fun working with him.