

## Health News

### VITAL SIGNS

# A diplomatic path to less stress

US Ambassador to SA Donald Gips tells Marika Sboros about the magic, stress and insanity of working in the White House, why he has broken so many bones over the years, and his vision for a better world for our children

**Q** WHAT did you want to be when you were growing up?

**A** A pro footballer or a rock star, but I had no talent in either direction. So I was forced to find other paths. **You go back many years with President Barack Obama. You were an adviser when he was a senator, and on the campaign trail before his election in 2008. How stressful was that?**

It was more exciting than stressful. I was lucky enough to be involved in strategy sessions, and in June 2008 as one of a group of 10 or so when the then Senator Obama asked us to start planning the transition and thinking how he would run the government if he won.

**Was what you were doing common knowledge?**

We were working in secret as it ran the risk of seeming presumptuous, given how early we were in the campaign. President Obama understood the risk of beginning transition planning early, but he felt the challenges were so great it would be imprudent to wait: two wars, the fiscal crisis that had the potential to cause much greater damage than it has ended up causing, and all the other numerous problems — healthcare, education and so on. **You're a White House veteran — for the Clinton administration as vice-president Gore's chief domestic policy adviser, then for the Obama administration leading the presidential transition team, then running the office of presidential personnel, overseeing several thousand political appointments. All that must have been stressful?**

The White House is incredibly inspiring, but also an incredibly insane place to work. No problem with an easy answer ever gets to the White House. By the time it gets there you are left with the choice of lesser evils.

It's a place where, given the politicised nature, you are constantly under pressure — political and media pressure. It is also a place where you can make a huge difference.

**Do you miss the White House?** I don't miss those stresses. I miss the people — some of the greatest, smartest, most dedicated people, starting with the president.

**The turmoil in current global events must make your work even more stressful?**

The challenges are great and this job is never boring. It is very rewarding. I am always struck by the similarities between our countries — trying to make a multiracial democracy work, a rich diversity that can either be a great strength or weakness, depending on leadership and the will of the people.

**Any other similarities?**

We share challenges around the same social problems — the need to create jobs, deliver healthcare to all citizens, provide education, especially to those who are less advantaged, though SA's problems are greater, given the history of apartheid — but we can learn from each other.

**How do you handle stress?**

I try to exercise. I walk, go to gym. I play tennis when my knees allow. I play basketball with my sons, though I broke my nose the last time. I also occasionally play cricket — as an American, I don't play well.

**What time does your day start?**

At 6.30am when I put two of my boys, Peter and Ben, on the bus to school. My oldest son, Sam, is doing a gap year. He has been teaching in Port Elizabeth and working at a refugee centre in Cape Town and is now at a game reserve near Kruger.

**Do you try to eat healthily?**

If I have one major weakness (I have many), it's food. My wife will attest to that. I try to eat healthily, but I love to eat and this country has incredible food.

**Any favourite foods?**

Bobotie, boerewors, malva pudding, and I have to say I've grown fond of your wines.

**Do you take vitamin and mineral supplements?**

Fish oil omega for the joints and the brain.

**What's the least healthy thing you do?**

Oh, there are so many things, but mostly too much coffee. I



HIGH OFFICE: US Ambassador to SA Donald Gips, above, says when US President Barack Obama offered him his first diplomatic posting, to this country in 2008, he jumped at it as he had grown to love SA and its people. Gips, below, enjoys a game of cricket to keep fit, but says that as an American he plays 'badly'. Pictures: © US EMBASSY.



Gips enjoys being able to make a difference. Here he sets an example, and gets tested for HIV in SA in December 2009. Picture: © GALLO IMAGES

please think of something else."

**Was that your intention?**

Yes, so I was befuddled and had to think of something else.

**What did you come up with?**

We couldn't go to an area of our choice in Pakistan and ended up heading off on a trek without any of the gear we needed. The trail was washed out. We were climbing to about 6 000m over a snow-covered pass and our guide kept disappearing in the snow. We passed a shepherd's village, where I don't think they had ever seen Westerners — the locals sat outside our tent with guns. At that altitude, we could barely breathe. At times I wondered if we would survive. We came to a beautiful spot near the top, and Liz said: "We must remember this moment forever." A light went on, and I blurted out: "Will you marry me?"

**Did you have a ring with you?**

No. Later I gave her my grandmother's engagement ring, which she had redesigned.

**What was a defining moment in your life?**

Well, apart from that moment in Pakistan there have been many, but I'll tell you about two. The first was getting to meet Madiba when he was meeting Vice-President Gore. It was inspiring to be in the room with two Nobel peace prize winners and see the deep respect they have for each other.

**And the other?**

When President Obama was about to become senator he had several of us do interviews for prospective senatorial staff. He asked for our opinions on each candidate and we sat up with him until late in the night as he described his vision of what he hoped to achieve as a senator. It was one of those special moments. I was inspired by his personality — a combination of humility and intelligence, the weird set of circumstances that had catapulted him to where he could make a difference to the US and the world. I got chills down my spine. I called my wife and said: "I've got good news and bad news."

**What was the good news?**

That I had just spent time with the most incredible person in the world who would be president of the US one day — though he had never said that was a part of his vision for himself.

**And the bad news?**

I had told him I would do anything, go anywhere to help him and be part of his journey. **What's the best lesson life has taught you?**

A good friend who is now a friend (of religion) said life is about the four Fs — family, friends, fun and fulfilment. You need to pick careers that balance those to allow you to make a difference.

**If you could be a comic-book superhero, what would your super power be?**

Flying — that would be cool.

**Where is paradise?**

There are many paradises for me: sitting on the front lawn of my house overlooking Pretoria; in Cape Town watching the sun set from the top of Table Mountain; also sitting on the deck of a cabin we have in Minturn, Colorado, overlooking a beautiful river.

**If you could edit your past, what would you change?**

My weight and my injuries. My wife tells me there is a relationship between the two.

**Any hopes and dreams?**

This may be a little corny, but my hope and dream is that we could somehow recapture the spirit of the World Cup — people coming together across race and nationality — and turn it into an everyday reality around the world. The most moving moment I have had in SA was being stuck in one of the worst traffic tie-ups I have ever been in, on the N1 on the way to the World Cup opening. Instead of people complaining they were singing, dancing and blowing their vuvuzelas, waving their flags in a display of our common humanity. My hope and dream is that people around the world can identify what united us and use that knowledge to build a peaceful planet and a better future for all our children.

country views your country so you can take back an accurate view. You are trying to persuade others of your viewpoint, so you need to do that with full understanding of their views. You need to know when to stand up and make yourself heard — that doesn't always mean publicly. Diplomacy, by its very definition, is best done quietly. **Has Wikileaks changed the way you communicate as a diplomat?** It has made many people more reticent, not just American diplomats but more importantly the people we talk to are now hesitant. Things they thought they were telling us in private, became public. It destroyed careers and put peoples' lives at risk — quite often the people who were exposing corruption or fighting authoritarianism. It has made the challenge of getting people to open up more difficult. The digital age has posed a challenge to everyone. I come from the telecom industry, so I know that in a digital world information can always get out. **Have you had a mentor — or mentors?**

I've been lucky to make career choices that have allowed me to work for people who inspire me, who have taught me about leadership, managing people, and how to think strategically. I have been incredibly fortunate to work for President Obama, and as Vice-President Al Gore's domestic policy adviser in the Clinton administration. I've also had the tremendous experience of working for (US Secretary of State) Hillary Clinton and inspirational people such as James Crowe (CEO of Level 3 Communications).

**Ever done anything crazy or dangerous in life?**

Besides all the sport I do, I proposed to my wife when we could both hardly breathe during a hazardous trek across a snow-covered pass in the Pakistan mountains in 1989.

**Did you plan it that way?**

Not at all. I met my wife at Yale University Graduate Business School of Management. After graduating we wanted to go trekking in Nepal, but it was monsoon season so my wife had the idea to go to Pakistan and Greece. Before we started the trip, she said: "If you are planning to propose on a beach in Greece, that's not original, so

Obama offered the opportunity. I jumped at it.

**Had you visited SA before?**

In 1995 as head of the Federal Communications Commission's International Bureau. I came here to consult with the new South African government to set up their ministry of communications. I fell in love with the country and its people. **You were the US State Department's recipient of the 2010 Sue M Cobb award for exemplary diplomatic service. Did you have lengthy training for a diplomatic post — especially such a high-profile one?**

We did go through a training course, but the real skills to be a diplomat — listening, managing, persuading — come more with experience.

**What makes a good diplomat?**

When I have figured that out I'll tell you. But in general I believe you have to be true to yourself. There isn't one right style. It must suit your personality. You have to be a good listener and understand how your host