

South African chamber works to increase economic ties between US and South Africa

By Kenneth D. MacHarg

Hidden among south Florida's dominant Latin American population is one of the highest concentrations of South Africans found anywhere in the country.

"There are around 17,000 here," said Stefanie Hochstadter, an American whose husband David is from Durban, South Africa. "Every time I go the grocery store I hear a South African accent," says Hochstadter who lives in Tarpon River.

David Hochstadter, who is an instructor at the Art Institute of Fort Lauderdale, explained that many South Africans relocate here because the weather is similar to what they experienced back home. "Many of them also like water sports and that is very accessible here," she said.

With a growing population of their fellow countrymen, many local residents are starting to work together to increase economic ties with their homeland. Two years ago several business people formed the South Africa USA Chamber of Commerce that today counts 150 corporate members.

"Our country's traditional links are to Europe," explained the chamber's president Anton Hendler of Fort Lauderdale. "But the market is full of opportunities to do business with Latin America," he said, explaining that many South African business people in south Florida are working to connect businesses from back home with Latin markets.

"We have worked with one company in Port Saint Lucie that is sending citrus products to South Africa and bringing back fruit when it is out of season here," he said. "We also want to help them with other products such as Rooibos Tea, or Redbush Tea, which is popular there. They want to introduce it to the U. S. market."

Hendler says that the concept of doing business with South Africa is a challenge to U.S. companies that have traditionally focused on other regions. "We have to let them know what is available and correct their stereotype that our country is famous only for its wildlife. We need to help people learn that we are a developed country with a first-world infrastructure."

Russell Abratt knows about those stereotypes. He is a South African working as a Professor of Marketing at the Huizenga Graduate School of Business and Entrepreneurship at Nova Southeastern University. "The daughter of a friend was very upset when a classmate asked her if people ride elephants to school in Johannesburg," he said. "In fact, South Africa has fine ports, airports, railroads and highways, along with an reliable electricity supply, a world class banking and financial sector and advanced telecommunications."

“We had a Chinese company that went to South Africa to sell a phone system,” said Nomaxabiso Majokweni, the Regional Manger for the Americas for Trade and Investment South Africa at the South African embassy in Washington, D.C. “They returned home and told their company that they could not survive in South Africa. They said that our telecommunications systems were too developed to be able to use their products.”

Another company tried to set up a business selling black and white televisions in her country. “Our broadcasting system is very modern,” she said. “Don’t bother to try to sell black and white televisions in South Africa.”

Area residents are excited about new opportunities that have been offered through the African Growth Opportunities Act (AGOA) that was signed into law by former President Bill Clinton in 2000. “AGOA was patterned after the Caribbean Basin Initiative to help Africa help itself,” said Bryant Salter, who is Director of the African Trade Expansion program of Enterprise Florida, Inc. in Coral Gables. “The agency exists to help export Florida products.”

“The AGOA act offers trade preferences with African businesses, especially in the areas of textiles and garments, Salter said. “South Florida is the most capable and qualified area of the country to handle import and export shipments. We are the gateway to the Americas but also the gateway to Africa. Florida wants to do business with Africa,” Salter told a recent chamber meeting at the Beach Community Center in Fort Lauderdale.

“People in south Florida are beginning to think more globally,” Hendler said. “For too long we only thought locally or about Latin America. Now people are beginning to realize that we can do business with other parts of the world.”

While the South Africa USA Chamber of Commerce is based in Fort Lauderdale, it provides services throughout the United States. “We’re really a national chamber even though we are based here,” Hendler explained. “We receive requests for help from businesses all over the country, especially U.S. businesses that want to establish themselves in South Africa.”

Layna Fischer of Lighthouse Point is seeking help from the chamber with a new business venture. “I bought 750 acres of pristine property in South Africa, overlooking the ocean,” she said. “There are medicinal plants on the land that have been used by shamans for hundreds of year. Their properties can be beneficial to people with cancer and AIDS to help lift their mood and dispel their hopelessness.” Fischer is working with chamber members find a way to import and market her products in this country.

Chamber members said that the reinstatement of direct flights between south Florida and South Africa are crucial to improving business ties. South African Airways landed at Miami International Airport when it had a code sharing arrangement with American Airlines. However, the airline now code shares with Delta Airlines, so directs its flights to Delta’s hub in Atlanta.

“Until September 11, they would land in Fort Lauderdale for refueling,” Hendler said. “But since then, for security reasons, they no longer do that. We feel it’s important to get them back to Fort Lauderdale so that we will have direct flights from here to Johannesburg.”

For now, the chamber is working to attract new members and improve communications between the two countries. “In a month or two we are going to launch a new quarterly magazine that will be distributed in both South Africa and the United States,” said Hendler. “It will have articles about businesses, services and products and will provide a lot of education and information for people in both countries.”

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