

VISITORS' VIEWPOINTS ALTERED BY THE CRISIS SOUTH AFRICANS IMPRESSED WITH SOUL OF AMERICA

By Kenneth D. MacHarg

Visiting the United States during a national crisis provided an unexpected perspective for five South Africans who recently completed an education exchange program in south Florida. But, participants said that their experience has helped them to better understand the soul of the American people.

“Being here during this time took our trip to a different level,” said Bradley Scheepers of Durban. “We feel that rather than a study exchange, it was a love exchange.”

“My priest back in South Africa once told me that true love is to be giving and not expecting to receive,” he explained. “That’s what we have experienced here.”

The visitors, all from the KwaZulu-Natal province, were in south Florida for several weeks as part of the Group Study Exchange program sponsored by Rotary International. Their local host was the Rotary Club of Weston. The group was composed of four business and professional people and a team leader, according to Barbara Showalter, a member of the club.

In addition to the Weston club, the group visited Rotary clubs throughout south Florida and the Bahamas, including Plantation, Davie, Coral Springs, Miami, Coral Gables and Ft. Lauderdale North.

“There was more bonding on this trip because of the events,” explained Peter Terry-Lloyd of Richards Bay. “We established more ties and realized our limitations.”

Terry-Lloyd, a retired headmaster, said that one moving moment for the group was a visit to a prayer service at Granada Presbyterian Church in Coral Gables. “We were able to share the grief of the people and their hopes for the future,” he remembered.

Being here helped to change some of the South African’s perceptions of the American people. “Our original impression was that Americans are too dynamic,” said Scheepers, a chemical engineering technician. “Their technological development is so fast and impressive and they communicate so quickly, we were afraid that we would not be able to get to know them. However, we found them to be people with deep feelings and a humane concern. I especially noted their strong resolve.”

There were some unexpected surprises for the group. “We were prisoners of air conditioning,” joked Terry-Lloyd, explaining that in his country many people do not have air conditioning, or it is limited to just their bedroom, so they get used to living without it.

Winnie Khanyile, a teacher from Durban, was surprised by the size of many things here. “Everybody has such huge houses,” she remarked. “I was surprised to find that many households have only two people, yet they live in such a large house.”

Referring to American expressways, she commented that even our roads are large. “The portions of food are large too,” she observed.

Occupational Therapist Marthie Combrinck said that she was startled to find that she could not physically touch any patients in health facilities that she visited. “You have a lot of structures here that prevented me from demonstrating therapy techniques,” she said, referring to liability laws that prohibited her from practicing her profession or taking photos in some situations.

Returning to the terrorist attacks, Terry-Lloyd said that his country “will support the United States in whatever needs to be done to eliminate this evil from the world.” Noting that his country had been through periods of violence in its struggle against apartheid, he said that, “no other country has had to go through what the United States is going through at this time.

All expressed their feelings that the United States will prevail. “We discovered that you Americans have big hearts and realistic hearts,” Scheepers said.

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