

My First International Visitor

I'd spent long hours meticulously arranging the two-day program for my first International Visitor and was quite proud of it. Serving as the volunteer programmer in mid Michigan for the U. S. State Department's National Council of International Visitors was the most challenging and rewarding work--paid or unpaid--I've ever done. The program is essentially the same as it was when I became involved in 2003, but its name is now Global Ties U. S. The State Department invites people who show promise of becoming future influencers, typically at mid-career, from all different fields, from all over the world, to spend two weeks meeting with leaders in their fields in four different regions of the United States. The State Department calls it their program of citizen diplomacy. Alumni of the program include more than 350 current and former heads of state worldwide: Tony Blair, Nicolas Sarkozy, and Felipe Calderón among them. Big cities that host large numbers of visitors have offices with paid staff who arrange programs and hotel accommodations and assign volunteers to accompany visitors to their meetings and to host social gatherings in their homes. Smaller communities such as the Lansing area of Michigan rely on volunteers entirely. Whether I was arranging a program for a single visitor or a small group or a large one, the initial task of identifying local leaders in a given field was exciting. Sometimes it took many frustrating calls to people who didn't want to be bothered before I found someone who understood the value of the program and was eager to connect me with the right people. Even more

exciting was accompanying the visitors on their programs and meeting interesting people in my own community.

My first visitor was the director of libraries in Namibia. Finding leaders in that field was easy, starting with Michigan State University Libraries, then the Library of the State of Michigan, and the Lansing Public Library. Oh, my! I had lined up impressive professionals who were using information technology in fabulously innovative ways. Fortunately, someone thought to advise the newbie I was to include a visit with the Dean of International Studies in Education. Unfortunately for my vanity, he was the first person I took her to meet. His first question to her was: "How many computers do you have?" "One," she said. In all the libraries in Namibia, there was a single computer. She had been able to travel to Scotland to learn to use a computer. But can you imagine having to be your own I T support person? Back then? It was painful to have to take her from one palatial, by her standards, library to another, to have all these experts show off their wares. It taught me to consider my audience in future.

This woman was the most unforgettable of the International Visitors I met. She shyly asked if I could take her to a grocery store. She used her per diem allowance to buy food instead of eating in restaurants, so that she could use the savings to buy books for her library. The one other thing she wanted to shop for was the Barbie doll her little girl longed for. Thank goodness our local Toys R Us had a black one.

Marjorie Porter

Kendal at Oberlin