

# Our First Friendship Force Journeys



friendship force  
GREATER DES MOINES

## Foreword

Once Covid -19 became a constant part of our lives in 2020, Friendship Force of Greater Des Moines (FFGDM), just like every other organization, needed to be creative in how it provided programming. It was do this or lose our membership to isolation and an empty activities calendar. Large group gatherings were out. Nice weather allowed us to do small group activities outdoors through November. But the winter of 20/21 plus no end in sight for the Covid issue presented newer challenges. We did quite well and managed to stay busy, actually, and this book is one of those projects we entertained ourselves with.

FFGDM members were asked to write about their first journey ever, whether it was with our club or another one; domestic or international. As you read these stories be aware that what we now call 'Journeys' used to be called 'Exchanges.' What is now called 'Journey Coordinator' used to be called 'Exchange Director.' You may see all of these terminologies. Also be aware that a few prompts were given for those who weren't sure how to start such a story, but not everyone used them. Others followed the prompts to the letter. It was their choice. Most of the stories you see here are pretty much the way people wrote them. Only gentle editing was offered and utilized. We also asked a few former members if they would like to contribute to the book. That status is noted after the person's name.

Newer members who have not had the opportunity to journey with Friendship Force yet were invited to write stories about a place they would like to go. I'm sad to say no one took us up on that offer, even with the prompts.

Thank you to Shelley Bain for the formatting and the graphics you see throughout the book. Thanks also to all those who took the time to write their stories, and to share them with the rest of us. I hope you enjoy reading our stories. Perhaps your grandkids will too.

Patricia L. Headley  
Editor/Co-President

## Current Members

### Polly Antonelli

Hi! This is Polly Antonelli. I'm going to tell you about my very first FF exchange. This was an exchange to two different FF groups in Brazil, with an add-on trip to Iguazu Falls and another to Rio de Janeiro. I chose this trip because while I was day hosting a couple from the Austin, Texas FF group, they mentioned that their group was going to Brazil. Because I showed interest, they invited me to go along with them. A few weeks later I flew to Atlanta, Georgia, and joined most of the group for the last leg of the flight to Sao Paulo. I had only met a few of the group before and didn't know them well so that was the beginning of making 13 new friends from the Austin, Texas group. They were very welcoming to me from the first minute!

The Sao Paulo group and the rest of the Austin, Texas group met us at the airport and we went directly to a welcome party in a beautiful home with lots of food and some time to start to get to know our new friends in the Sao Paulo group. They were very eager to talk with us and practice their English-speaking skills. Our hosts were very protective of us, especially when taking a walking tour of downtown Sao Paulo and when riding the subway, as there are some locals who try to take advantage of visitors.

I found Sao Paulo to be a place of contrasts between beautiful residential areas and slums. I was surprised to meet descendants of Japanese with Brazilian names, some of whom spoke little or no Japanese. Apparently, about 100 years ago a significant number of Japanese people immigrated to Brazil in search of better opportunities, just as some immigrated to the United States. Coffee plantations in Brazil were in need of workers in those days. Coffee is still a big industry there. My host, Mario, spoke some English, but often said his English was "terrible". Sometimes he used Google Translate on the computer to help explain something. His friend, Roseangela, spoke better English and was able to help whenever she was around.

Similarly, the Maringa Friendship Force group made us very welcome and were eager to speak English. Some of the time a young adult daughter of one of the members accompanied us to help with translating. My host couple had lived in Canada for 18 months so they were easy to communicate with. They are both of Japanese descent but speak English better than Japanese. Maringa is much smaller than Sao Paulo, similar to Des Moines in population, and the area is very agricultural, similar to Iowa. Some highlights for me were visiting a large beautiful Japanese garden, going to a mosque, and clothing shopping!

The Iguazu Falls and Rio de Janeiro add-ons were very interesting and worth doing. The falls are gorgeous with a very impressive walkway out over part of the water below a section of the falls. At the end of the walkway, you looked out over water falling further down!!! It is a very wide waterfall with many sections of falls and not in a straight line at all. I only stayed in Rio for one day of the add-on but was able to make the best of that day: Cristo Redentor (the big statue of Christ the Redeemer), Sugarloaf Mountain, Escadaria Selaron (famous outdoor staircase), and a cathedral were the highlights. We had a quick late afternoon visit to the beach before taking a taxi to the airport to return home.

I have visited Austin, Texas twice since that exchange. Once for our trip reunion and once when FFDGM went to Austin for an exchange. I have remained in casual contact (or more) through Facebook and/or texting with several of them, as well as some of the Sao Paulo and Maringa Friendship Force members. These friendships are a testament to the goals of Friendship Force, that we who are from different countries and cultures can come together and teach each other and become friends.

The only reason I was able to keep this to under 5 pages is that I've forgotten a lot of details, ha ha!!!

## Shelley Bain

My first Friendship Force exchange and first time out of the country was with FFGDM in 1987 to FF Kapiti Coast. The Exchange Director was Lucy Gutankauf. On that exchange I met long-time member Elaine Bredesky who was as helpful and encouraging then as she is today.

My host was Connie Summersell who lived in Paraparaumu Beach (known locally as "Pram Beach") and we corresponded until her death many years later. Connie was the widow of the police chief and her childhood dream was to travel the world. Ironically, she never acquired a passport and never left New Zealand, not even to visit family in Australia. Her home, built around a lovely walled garden, sat on a hill overlooking the Tasman Sea where we walked the beach every morning of my stay.

It was commonly said at the time that New Zealand then was like Britain 20 years earlier. Connie and her friends reminded me so much of my grandmother and her sisters that I felt at home immediately. We enjoyed her garden, took tea and griddle cakes with her friends and she slapped my hand when I grabbed the dashboard while she drove. Of course, I thought she was turning in front of another vehicle because it was my first experience with left-side driving.

My favorite memory was when I returned from a cold and dreary day of getting lost in Wellington, getting lost is what I am prone to do, and she picked me up at the train station. She was excited to get home because she had prepared a lovely Pavlova and "American" pizza, with corn, because I was from Iowa. Both were delicious! She also took me to the grocery store, my favorite thing to do in other countries, and introduced me to Anzac Biscuits, a delicious cookie with an important story.

Visiting New Zealand and staying with Connie was the perfect first exchange for me. It gave me the travel bug that continues to this day. Thank you to Connie, New Zealand, and Friendship Force for this wonderful experience.

## Elaine Bredesky

When Ff asked me to write about my early memories, I eagerly accepted because connecting with this group has been such a positive experience in my life.

We started home hosting in 1979 and welcomed people from Dublin, Ireland, and Newcastle, England, when our motto was: "A world of friends is a world of peace."

Hosting gave us an opportunity to explore other countries without leaving home, offering an inside view of what life is like in other parts of the world. In 1979, it also provided our neighbors a chance to be ambassadors to Ireland when we agreed to serve as host. At that time, ambassadors had to provide a home host for the people from Ireland before they left, because when the 250 U.S. ambassadors got off the plane in Ireland, it would depart directly back to Des Moines with 250 Irish ambassadors that we would be waiting to host.

In 1980, my late husband Lou and I took our first trip with Friendship Force to Cardiff, Wales. Again, on July 28, 1980, there was a DC-8 plane with 254 ambassadors from the Des Moines area going to Wales and another group of ambassadors there waiting to be directly loaded in the same plane to come back to Des Moines.

Jim Wise served as our flight director with Ed Mann as his assistant and Betty Roberson as flight coordinator. Our group consisted of five ambassadors under 10 years old, 17 teens, 17 people age 20-30, 33 people age 30-40, 36 people age 40-50, the largest group (72) age 50-60, 43 people age 60-70, and nine over 70 years old.

By the end of our week in Wales, we felt like the world was a little smaller. We had experienced the Friendship Force magic of discovering that lasting friendships can be established by spending a few days together in our homes.

It was such an ordinary concept, yet with such extraordinary results. Through the years that followed, we can proudly say we have friends all over the world, several with whom we continue to correspond and many others who have visited us in our home. I feel that Friendship Force made a difference in improving relations of peace, one person and one family at a time.

### **Marla Carr**

Asheville, North Carolina, March 2015 Exchange or Bust! This was the first journey Jerry and I went on together. He felt he could never take the time off, or he was too busy, or it just wasn't his cup of tea. I finally talked him into going to Asheville, and it was the best trip ever. He's not here now to second that statement but I know he would. We stayed in a beautiful home with Bill and Karen Hogan and had a wonderful time visiting the sites of the area. The Biltmore Mansion, all the breweries and taste testing, beautiful architecture, food, and the activities were so much fun.

Before our trip, Jerry was a little concerned about our accommodations. He jokingly said that we would probably have to stay in a closet. I knew better, but to be honest, he wasn't too keen about staying in someone else's home. As we were settling in, we had the whole upstairs to ourselves with a sitting area, beautiful bathroom and bedroom with a huge empty WALK-IN CLOSET. We jokingly took a picture of the empty closet and sent it to our sons and told them this was where we were staying. That would never have happened at our house because we don't have any empty closets. When we hosted people, I tried to clear out a section of a closet in the room they were in to hang some clothes or put a rod on a door, but we certainly don't have a big enough empty closet for anyone to stay. So, we always remembered our joke about Jerry thinking he was going to stay in a closet on our first journey, and our lovely room did have an empty closet just for him!

### **Carol Corrigan**

The first time I traveled with the FFGDM was to San Diego, CA. It was about 15 years ago, I believe. I was invited to join Friendship Force by my new neighbor, LaVonne Neerland, soon after I moved into my townhouse. She wondered if I would like to travel with the group to San Diego, I was quick to reply "yes"!

We were good sized in numbers, such a friendly and fun group who made me feel welcome as a new member. We flew together to San Diego and were greeted by an equally friendly group of hosts who had a most enjoyable week planned.

In reflecting on the many sights, we visited, and the fun social gatherings, the highlights included visits to the San Diego Zoo, the Maritime Museum on the harbor, the Botanical Gardens, and a bus tour narrated by a guide giving us a good overall tour of the city.

We also visited Coronado Island across the bay and walked along the boardwalk of the beautiful historic Hotel del Coronado. We toured Point Loma, high above the city with a wonderful view of the harbor and city. On the day our hosts could take us to a place without the group, we drove to LaJolla, had lunch, and spent the afternoon enjoying the beautiful beach area.

LaVonne and I stayed with a couple in their home in La Mesa, a suburb with a wonderful view of the city and the harbor. They were very friendly hosts and we had many good conversations. Our hostess was a great cook, fed us

well, and always provided an enjoyable cocktail hour at the end of our busy days. Their home was most comfortable and we could watch the twinkling lights of San Diego at night from their family room.

This first trip with Friendship Force convinced me I made a good choice in joining this group and resulted in my taking future trips to a variety of other places.

### **Mike and Ronda Davis**

Our first journey was to Costa Rica. It was a global journey led by the Lincoln, NE club. We thought it would be interesting to join members of other clubs. It was like taking two different trips; one through the rain forest with a guide who shared a great deal of information about the country (we stayed at a nice resort with open air cottages) and one with our hosts and club members while experiencing the city and tourist sites such as a volcano and a west coast beach. The people in the countryside seemed poor, but we passed by children in school. There is universal public school and a high literacy rate. The city was large and crowded. In some areas, including where we stayed, there was razor wire over home boundary walls. Traffic was heavy—rush hour started around 6 am and lasted till about 8:30 pm. Because our group was spread around the city, it took about 2 1/2 hours to pick everyone up for tours.

One highlight was seeing baby turtles hatch, leave the nest, and head for the sea. We have heard people say that everyone in the country speaks English—obviously not the case, but true in the resorts, but can't always learn about a country by staying in a resort. You have to meet the people. We would have loved to maintain contact with our host.

The people were very friendly and warm. The Costa Rican club members loved to sing and talk and they seemed enthusiastic about our journey to their area. Only a couple of our hosts (not including ours) spoke any English, but one was fluent and provided information on the tours.

We have not returned there and have not been able to stay in touch with our hosts. We tried several times through email (including some rough translation into Spanish through Google Translate) but did not get a response. While we were there, Google Translate was really useful.

We highly recommend taking advantage of global journeys to go places you are interested in and meet people from other places. This first journey verified that the person-to-person approach allows you to learn about everyday life. The global journeys expanded that to meeting people from around the country and other countries. Since that journey we have been day hosts and dinner hosts and look forward to hosting in the future.

### **Carol Grimm**

I happened to read an article in the newspaper saying that the Des Moines Chapter of Friendship Force was holding a meeting at the Urbandale library to talk about their upcoming adventure to Brazil. Wow, I thought, I've always wanted to go there. So, when I walked into the library that Sunday afternoon in July 2007, I began my own journey with FFGDM.

Our first homestay was in the city of Curitiba, in the state of Parana. My hostess was a lovely woman with 2 grown daughters who had been with their club for several years and loved to host. Curitiba is a very modern city and has received many awards for its human rights development. Glacy didn't feel comfortable with her English skills and I have no Portuguese ability, so our conversations were limited.

This is in contrast to my next homestay in the city of Salvador. My hosts were Teresa and Jesus. They had not hosted for Ff before my coming and they were so excited to have a guest in their home. My bedroom was



actually their 4-year-old grandson's room and I woke the first morning to see him standing in the doorway, eyeing me suspiciously. Can't say I blamed him; I was taking his spot and who knew what I would do with his toys!

Although Teresa didn't speak English and Jesus was not at all fluent, we sat on their patio with the English/Portuguese dictionary between us to carry on a spirited conversation about the state of the world, passing that book back and forth. One night, they decided I should have ice cream and when they discovered there was none in their freezer, we all packed up and headed to the supermarket in the middle of the huge city. Teresa dragged me down the frozen food aisle, threw open the ice cream case door, grabbed a Dove bar package, tore it open and handed me one of the bars. Seriously!!! There were no limits to what they could do to make the American lady happy.

Meeting the wonderful people in Brazil and being able to spend time with them and their families was great. I had many memorable experiences during those 2 weeks, and I am glad my first "journey" was positive and that made me excited to travel this way again.

I can't end without saying that perhaps the best part of the first journey were the friendships I developed with Nancy, Charlotte, Cathy, Bill, Janet, Marvin, Diane, Pat, and Adrienne...our homegrown FF folks which continue today.

### Pat Headley

I asked my friend Carol if she ever wanted to go to the Czech Republic. She said, "No, but would you like to go to New Zealand?" I gave that three second's thought and said "Sure."

She gave me an application and I attended my first event at the Happy Feet lunch in December 2016. In March we went to New Zealand with the Quad Cities Club. The three-week journey, called Exchange then, started out in Napier on the north island. This community struck me as being somewhat affluent. Everything along the water's edge was slowly changing from decades old cottage-like structures to modern three-story homes with plenty of balcony space from which to view the world. Though it was March, it was their fall, and we saw fields of apples, wine grapes, kiwi fruit, and roses being grown/harvested. Those kiwi fruits were so much better than what we get here. We also went to an apple packaging factory, where everything was automated from measuring the size of the fruit, to attaching the little sticker we have to peel off before we can eat it. At a rose farm I learned a few things about raising, storing, and displaying roses; most of which I can't remember now, but it's all in my journal. I do remember how to turn a white carnation into three different colors. We also toured the downtown area and learned about the earthquake in the early 30s and how so many people died from all the gargoyles and grotesques falling from the buildings. Thus, the Art Deco movement hit Napier. These buildings were inexpensive, practical, and all the decorations were painted on.

Our next week was in Levin, pronounced LaVin, and still on the north island. We were assigned to a person new to hosting and quite nervous. But we all managed just fine since we were easy to take care of. We saw a slide show and learned about one development project that caused lots of stir among the older folks in the area. The main street had been four or five lanes wide and the city decided to reduce that to two. The older folks were used to all that space and now were concerned that their driving habits might cause problems in the now narrower street. We learned about the flax industry, and I discovered that what they call "cabinet food" is to us a deli. Our host took us to a licorice factory, and we bought bags of it. She did tell us that Levin is an area where retirees from Auckland can come to live a less expensive life, and do.

Our last week was in Nelson, just barely into the South Island. We took hikes and saw lots of natural wonders. We stayed with a very nice couple who had a little friendly dog and two solar panels on the roof. I was impressed. We were assured we would not run out of hot water for the shower because we had our very own solar panel. I

quite enjoyed the breakfast routine. She cooked; he set the table and said the prayer. "Thank you, Lord, for this food and all thy blessings. Amen." I appreciated the brevity. On our free day, we went to the WOW museum. Every year there is a contest for designers who make clothing out of unusual stuff; things like lamp shades, circuitry, rubber hoses, metal, plastic, and almost anything except fabric, though there was some of that too. The talent was phenomenal. One other thing in Nelson tickled me. It was a street sign saying "Elderly Crossing." Now that's progressive.

I was hooked. I love Friendship Force, which has provided me with so much more than I can ever hope to give back. I plan to take many more journeys as soon as possible.

### **Karen and Chuck Kilpatrick**

Although we had hosted several journey ambassadors before setting off on our first outbound trip, Chuck and I were not disappointed when we traveled with our club in March of 2015 to beautiful and historical Northwestern North Carolina to stay with Jan and Ron Partin! Chuck and Ron were both history "buffs" and as couples, we discovered we had lots in common! We were treated to many wonderful sights in the area such as the Biltmore Estate, state and national parks in the Blue Ridge mountains, complete with magnificent waterfalls, the Sierra Nevada Brewery, the Flat Rock Play House, and many great restaurants! Our host, Ron, was also a dedicated docent for the Carl Sandburg Home Connemara, and thus we had an excellent interesting tour there also! Sandburg is known for his poetry, but his writing encompassed a much wider spectrum!

Along the way, we met many friendly and interesting members of their club, as well as learning more about those in our own club. Traveling together always allows for conversation and people time! An extra caveat for us was that we traveled to and from this scenic destination with longtime friends Alice and Ken Rasmussen. So, we had lots of time to reminisce and chat! On our way east, we stopped in the Smokey Mountain National Park area to do a little exploring!

What a memorable first journey in all ways we had. To this day, we are in touch with our hosts Jan and Ron. Ans when their club visited Iowa, it was their intention to stay with us. However, Ron had to have foot surgery during that time and we instead hosted another lovely lady from their club, with whom we correspond. Our first journey with Friendship Force was definitely a memorable and educational adventure, opening the doors to lasting friendships!

### **Gail and Gene Lucht**

We travelled to Russia in 1995, the time after communism but before Putin. The country was a Wild West kind of place and we discovered that very quickly after our arrival.

I should explain that the trip was not through the Des Moines club. It was a national trip, the first time the organization put together a theme of cruising the waterways of the Czars. We were to spend a week being home-hosted in Moscow, followed by a week of travelling by riverboat to St. Petersburg during the longest days of the year, in late June. Our group had studied Russian culture and tried to prepare ourselves. We were ready for an adventure and got one before we ever got close to the Kremlin.

Our hosts were named Oleg and Olga. They were a young couple and Oleg met us after we got off the plane. He loaded our bags into his small Russian car and we headed out to the communist era apartment block where they lived. That's when things got interesting. We raced down the street at speeds well above the speed limit. We went the wrong way down a one-way street. We drove on the sidewalk. By the time we reached their home it was all we could do to not kiss the ground in appreciation of the fact we were still alive. Of course, Oleg would be driving us to our events for the next week.



It said something about the state of Russia in the 1990s that when Oleg took us to the river boat a week later, he made a point of parking the car near an intersection where a traffic cop was working so he could pay the cop to keep an eye on his car.

There were many more adventures on that trip. We swam in a stream and grilled fish for a picnic. We saw the Bolshoi Ballet. We waved at Boris Yeltsin (and he waved back) during our tour of the Kremlin. But the story of Russia in the 90s was told to us in a very real way during that first car ride. Six months later Oleg and Olga visited us. We didn't let him drive.

### **Beverly Lytle**

I have traveled around the world in Hats. My love of traveling and hats has been a fun exciting opportunity for me. FF has given me the incentive to meet new people, explore new countries, cultures, food, clothing and hats. On another page you can read about Linda Robel's trip to Germany. I was on that same trip and met Linda in Berlin. So, you see you can make great new friendships with folks in your own community by traveling. Our organization gives everyone a fantastic chance to be a part of this great big small world.

My second trip was a 2-week jaunt to Japan. The plane took off from LAX airport and landed in Osaka, Japan. It was a very long trip which included crossing the International Date Line and seeing the sun rise and set 3 times. After landing we changed planes and flew to the city of Fukuoka on the island of Kyushu. It was there that I met my first host family. The husband, a flight chief with JAL Airlines; wife, old fashioned Japanese housewife and 2 daughters. They were a warm loving family and treated me as one of their own best friends. There were many firsts on this trip: sleeping on a traditional Japanese mat on the floor, wearing a kimono with wooden Japanese shoes, bowing many times, and visiting a Shinto shrine. I was also invited to an old fashion family tea house for a traditional tea ceremony. It was a whirl wind week that I shall never forget.

The second week we flew to Ehime Prefecture on the island of Shikoku. There my host family lived in the middle of a cemetery in a temple. The father worked in temple, his wife cleaned the temple and the house, their 2 sons were away at college, and their daughter was a high school senior. Japanese tradition says the woman walks behind the man. I went in the front door and left my shoes on the step when I got there. After that we three women used the back door and the back stairway. It was at their house that I learned to use the "squat pot" upstairs where my room was located. The family stayed on the first floor and we three women ate in the kitchen. The husband always ate in his study. It was a very interesting week. Quite different from my first week. I loved Japan and learning about their people, traditions, food, and culture.

P.S. Yes, I bought hats ---3 while in Japan.

### **Mary Marshall**

My first journey was shortly after I had joined FFGDM. I went to Costa Rica, in February 2015, after I saw an email from the St Louis club that had room for a few more people. I had never been there and thought it would be a great way to see Costa Rica.

It was a very clean, beautiful country. They were very friendly and wanted to be sure we had a good time. My hosts Victor and Ana Alba were wonderful hosts. Unfortunately, I have not been No, neither of my hosts spoke English nor do I speak Spanish, so we have not stayed in touch.

But my roommate from FFI St Louis had some Spanish so we got along pretty well. Our hosts also had their grandchildren come over a few times as the grandkids wanted to be able to practice their English. It is also amazing how you can communicate with facial expressions and pictures.

We had a pre- and post-trip that added a lot to the eco portion of the trip. We spent several days in Manuel Antonio National Park in Quepos, Costa Rica. We saw a lot of very colorful birds, had a lot of monkeys in our eco lodge, and beautiful weather. Our post trip was to Villas Eco Arenal We were able to see a volcano and did a lot of hiking in the area. This journey was very well coordinated with the before and after trips and our hosts trips as well. I looked forward to being able to reciprocate hosting, even if not the same people or club.

My bedroom window looked at the mountain that had a volcano getting ready to erupt. It did erupt about a month after we had left. One of the most memorable moments was when we were driving to our eco lodge, we were stopped by a sloth crossing the road! There was quite a traffic jam and sloths do not move very fast. Finally, a man got out of his truck, picked the sloth up by the scruff of his neck and carried it across the road and put it in a tree. Not something you are going to see much here in the US! I met Marty McKnew from Sacramento, CA, while on this trip. Because of that meeting we have been to India and Thailand together with John Shors. In 2019 Marty lead a bus trip to Spain and Portugal with FFI which I was able to be on and be her roommate. FFI makes for a very small world! My only disappointment with my first trip is that we were not able to stay longer.

### **Adrienne Moen**

*“Special to the Des Moines Register”*

Twelve ambassadors from the Greater Des Moines Ff embarked on an outbound exchange to Curitiba, Brazil, in November 2007. In Curitiba, we were hosted in the homes of enthusiastic, congenial, and gracious families who are members of a local Ff chapter.

The ambassadors were officially received by the Curitiba City Secretary of Government and the Advisor of International Relations and Protocol Department. We gave them letters from Des Moines Mayor Frank Cownie and Iowa Governor Chet Culver. Then they invited us to a lovely reception and took us on a bus tour of Curitiba.

Curitiba is located on a large plateau in the southeastern part of Brazil near the Atlantic Ocean. Curitiba comes from the Indian words “land of plentiful pinion pine seeds.” This metropolis of about 1.7 million is a blend of many European cultures with native Brazilians. Curitiba is an internationally recognized exemplary well-planned city with many outstanding social programs.

The greenbelt surrounding Curitiba provides fresh produce. There are two groups of farmers: one group is low-income individuals who join community associations where they maintain shared vegetable patches sponsored by social programs. The other group of farmers utilizes highly developed practices like hydroponics. All farmers take extra care in conscientiously preserving ecosystems.

We toured many of Curitiba’s thirty beautiful parks including a world-renowned environmental university. Breathtaking gardens, waterfalls, wildlife and historic buildings could be expected, but a Wire Opera House? The circular theater was built with only metal tubes and glass. It stands in the middle of a deactivated quarry crater. Imagine walking over a lake on a metal grate to attend this theater. No high heels, ladies.

Curitiba resembles many US cities with high-rise office buildings, and apartments. The city attracts corporate investment due to its exceptional quality of life including a marvelous bus system which is a commuter’s delight. Yet amidst all this hustle and bustle, there lies the historic city center with its architectural charm and flower clock. Cobblestone streets blend together with many museums, including the very unique Oscar Niemeyer “The Eye” Art Museum.

We visited the historic town of Lapa where we saw how the centuries unfolded. The citizens of Lapa take pride in preserving all documentation of their heritage. Influential politicians, battles over their Republic Independence, old theaters and museums of yesteryear. Lapa's mayor welcomed us and we exchanged pins.

Another adventuresome day was spent traveling by railroad from Curitiba through the Atlantic Forest and along the steep slopes of the Coastal Mountains to the Atlantic Ocean coastline. It was very foggy (typical of a rainforest) but we could see gorgeous masses of wild hydrangeas and impatiens. We traveled through fourteen tunnels and sixty viaducts; some were brought from Belgium in parts for assembly in the 19th century. We arrived in Morretes for lunch at a villa by a swirling river surrounded by lush vegetation.

This Curitiba exchange was a wonderful learning experience. Our evenings and weekends were spent getting to know our home hosts and blending in with their daily family activities. Most of the Ambassadors were brand new to our Des Moines group; so, a REAL first for all. We had several workshops to orient everyone in how the "exchange" process works as well as learning much about the areas of Brazil and the people we would visit. I stayed with a single woman on the 22nd floor of a high-rise, and we figured out a way to communicate with each other through photographs. I had learned a few words/phrases before traveling, but that only went so far, and she didn't speak English.

We flew to historic Salvador, Brazil for a second week. This was the original Capital of Brazil and famous for the slave trade round houses and many commodities favored by the Europeans. I stayed with a native Salvadorian couple and became immediately immersed in this city which was completely different from Curitiba. I especially remember my hostess wanting to choose my wardrobe for each day and playing the role of my mother. She gifted me with a towel set that had been embroidered with my name. Very SPECIAL! Another fond memory was a full day spent in the bay out to the Atlantic Ocean where we swam and enjoyed drinks with snacks before taking a group picture on a small island. That photo would later be submitted to the Des Moines Register.

There are many additional memories, but I don't want to give it all away in case our Des Moines Club has the opportunity to visit that country again.

### **Alice and Ken Rasmussen**

2005--our first Friendship Force trip. The Bredeskys asked if we would like to travel to Hanover, Germany. That "yes" started a love affair with Friendship Force travel. Ken and I were hosted by the wonderful Busch family--perfect for a first experience of staying with "strangers." I remember Germany's wonderful rolls and breads, white asparagus, tree lined roads, ornate old buildings, cobblestone, Aldi (not yet in the Midwest) and all the McDonald's.

One unique event was the day we took the train to Weiherfeld and then the two clubs taking a covered farm wagon to a field to plant a Linden tree. The Dubuque club had planted one there the previous year. I still have a picture of the tree on which a plaque was posted with the Forest's Prayer written on it.

Hanover and the surrounding area were beautiful: some shops and houses built in the 1500's, the palace (now a museum), red roofs everywhere, and great people. We gave a flag pin to a man who had never talked to an American! We drove to the Buckenberg Castle in another village. The guided tour was in German! We also visited a helicopter museum before taking a scenic road home which required us to take a ferry across the river.

After 7 great days in Hanover, our club boarded a bus for Berlin and areas south. We took a bus tour of Berlin - the Brandenburg Gate, Checkpoint Charlie, and the last of the areas of remaining wall between East and West Germany were the most impressionable sights.

Again, 20 euros to use the toilet at the rest stop! In Dresden we had a local guide and visited the Zwinger Palace and Residenz-schloss (a 41-carat diamond was on display). In Leipzig our guide talked about Luther and Bach. On to Bamberg, Nuremberg, Rothenberg and Dauchau (wow, such a horrible history there.) We saw so much beautiful scenery going south and especially enjoyed the Black Forest where we bought a cuckoo clock which we still have as a memory. We also remember several evenings spent with Nancy Lundstrom (Exchange Director) and Mary Mulligan drinking and laughing! We ended up in Frankfurt before boarding our plane for the US. Such wonderful memories from a great Friendship Force journey.

## **Ginny Renda**

My first and only international journey was to the city of Ottawa, the Capitol of Canada. The FF Ottawa did an excellent job of planning for our visit. Their club has a very large membership and they do things somewhat differently than our Des Moines Club. In order to give more members of their club an opportunity to be involved in an inbound journey, they have home hosts and day hosts so I had the opportunity to get to know a greater number of Canadians. My home hosts only went with me a few times when we visited places like Parliament, Omega Park, Rideau Hall, the Museum of History, and the quaint town of Almonte where we went on a food tour, shopped, and had our Farewell Dinner.

Everything we did in Ottawa was interesting and informative, but if I had to pick one day that was the most memorable, it would be May 14, 2019 when we had an unexpected but welcomed change in our schedule. Instead of visiting Rideau Hall, we went to Beechwood National Cemetery for a special ceremony. Before attending the ceremony, we walked around observing beautiful 20-foot tree carvings in the cemetery. Artist Peter Van Adrichem explained how he created these beautiful works of art.

The Beechwood National Cemetery of Canada hosted a special "Canadian Tulip Festival Veterans Day Ceremony" to commemorate the liberation of the Netherlands by the Canadian Army during WWII, and their resulting special bond of friendship, symbolized by the gift of thousands of tulips to the Canadians. Among those represented were: The Government of Canada, the Royal Kingdom of the Netherlands, local embassies including the USA, the City of Ottawa, veterans, First Nation Representatives, and Friendship Force members. The ceremony was beautifully orchestrated and concluded with the laying of wreaths by governmental officials and military personnel.

After lunch, we visited Rockcliff Park where 70 ambassadors from around the world reside, including the US Ambassador. These homes were quite large and beautiful inside and outside.

Next we visited the stables of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police and were lucky to observe a practice of the Musical Riding Touring Company. Magnificent horses and skilled riders provided an outstanding performance. We also were able to visit the stables after the performance. Later that afternoon we visited Rideau Hall which is the official residence and workplace of Canada's Governor General. The building is full of Canadian history and many beautiful works of art. The Governor is the Queen's representative in Canada. This building began as an eleven-room mansion but subsequent governor generals expanded and improved the original building.

I ended my day at a small dinner party where the wonderful dinner was prepared at the table on a special grill that cooked beef and chicken on the top of grill, and we then picked out our vegetables and put them on little trays that slipped into the bottom of the table grill to cook. I was impressed with this grill and have never seen such a grill not even on QVC or HSN, I guess I just don't get out enough!

If you ever have the opportunity to visit Ottawa, Canada with Friendship Force, do not hesitate to sign up, write a check, grab your passport, and go!

## Kathie Swift

In December of 1982, Iowa was overwhelmed by snowstorms, ice, winds, and freezing rain. It was hard to keep up with all the perils. One evening in the newspaper, I noticed a short article on Friendship Force's plan to fly 250 area people off to an unknown destination at the cost of \$250 each. To sign up, I needed to call and set up a personal interview later that month. The thought of heading off into the unknown during this miserable winter thrilled me right down to my snow boots. I made note of the date and planned to attend.

While I knew little about the Friendship Force then, I planned to learn. So, on a very sunny day reflecting off Polar Bear size snow drifts, I made my way to the meeting place which I think was at Roosevelt High School. Plenty of people were milling about, but lots of volunteers were directing them to filling out applications and setting up interviews. Three members of the group seated at a table before me, explained that the destination would remain a mystery for several weeks while interviews and applications were scored to choose applicants. If I were chosen, I would receive a letter inviting me to a meeting at North High School in a few weeks.

Finally, the long-anticipated letter arrived. I had made the cut and had been accepted! Lo and behold, when I arrived at the meeting, I joined a huge crowd in the auditorium. The program began, and after learning more about the club and its goals, the destination was announced: West Berlin, Germany, scheduled for Easter time. I was thrilled and elated, hardly believing this incredible opportunity to begin discovering the world. This was truly an exchange: We learned that when our charter flight arrived in Berlin, it would be boarded by 250 German travelers eager for the ship to return to Des Moines.

We learned more about what we would see, when we would pay our fees and something about insurance and luggage, as well as possible gifts to take to our host families. Of course, there were many questions, the answers excited most of us even more. During the next few days, my friend Jean, whom I had told about my good fortune, decided to apply as well. She was accepted too. We were assigned to different hosts but began to make plans for what we would do on our own during the second week in Germany.

Finally, arrival day came and Jean's mother took us to board our plane. We flew to Tegel Airport. I remember as each of us deplaned, the large crowd there clapped as we were each introduced.

I stayed with a family with three children. Mother and son met me at the airport and we took the metro, a bus, and then walked several blocks home. That evening while holiday company sat with the family in the living room visiting in German, the youngest girl and I sat in the kitchen while she read to me in German from her book about a cartoonish Black Peter. I wondered how and why I found myself there. I reveled in the reality of experiencing such a fabulous adventure in a strange country, home, family, and neighborhood.

My friend had another host, but we met a time or two, at all of the various activities while sightseeing, and dining at one home or another. At the beginning of the second week, my family's father took us to board the train in Frankfurt, and we set off to travel to Munich. After renting a car, we began to tour the countryside on our way back to Berlin. We had many more adventures including making our way to a very high-class casino in Baden Baden where we had to prove we could afford to play. We were left to discover meals on our own, locate a place to stay each night, and then explore that area. It was absolutely marvelous, a forever memory.

Since then, I have been on several more Friendship Force exchanges as well as independent travels, including three African safaris, visits to Russia, China, Japan, most of Europe, and several cruises around the world. I have also hosted several Friendship Force visitors to Des Moines from around the globe.

## John Tone

This is a story about a wonderful trip that Adrienne and I took during the Fall of 2013. My first Friendship Force Journey included hosted visits for three weeks to the southern part of Japan. We decided to add to that trip and to visit other parts of Japan so we were gone for about a month.

We landed in Tokyo on September 22 and hopped a bus to Kofu the capital of Yamanashi Prefecture and Iowa's Sister State. Our Des Moines friends, Mark and Cindy Snell, had asked us to visit them while in Japan. Kofu is Des Moines Sister City and the Snells were both teaching English in a Sister City teachers exchange program. We were on our own during the day and learned how to use public transportation. We went up in the nearby hills to their famous wine country. It was like Japan's Napa Valley. The next day we took a bus to a tourist area around a big lake at the base of Mt. Fuji that is popular for Japanese tourists. The bus also went half way up the highest mountain in Japan for wonderful views. That's as high as we could go without our climbing gear.

After six days we hopped on a Bullet Train to Kyoto for a couple of days. The trains are very fast and always on time. Kyoto is an amazing city. Lots of interesting history and beautiful architecture. At one time it was the capital of Japan and is today considered the cultural capital. It is home to numerous Buddhist temples, Shinto shrines, palaces, and gardens. We did a couple of days of self-guided walking tours that included many of the amazing temples and scenery. People were very friendly and often the women were wearing traditional kimono dresses. Because of its history and many cultural landmarks and minimal military presence, Kyoto was never bombed during World War II.

Then there is Hiroshima. Our first Friendship Force host city is best remembered as the first city targeted by a nuclear weapon. Now it is a major urban center, home to about 1.12 million people. It has become the recognized center for world peace with an annual International Peace Conference and the Peace Memorial Park and museum that is a UNESCO World Heritage Site. We were led on a tour of the site by one of our hosts, James Morakwa. He was very active in Friendship Force International and was the President and CEO of Mazda Corp. He grew up in Hiroshima and survived the blast. He was one of the thousands of children that were sent up into the mountains to avoid the regular bombing of the city during the last months of the war. After the bombs hit Japan, he was one of 20,000 children called the A-bomb orphans.

We were not home hosted in Hiroshima. We stayed in the nice Astor Hotel and our club hosts collected us each morning after breakfast. One day they took us by ferry to the nearby Miyajima Island. It is a small island less than an hour outside the city of Hiroshima. It is most famous for its giant torii gate, which at high tide seems to float on the water. The sight is ranked as one of Japan's three best views. Like the torii gate, the Itsukushima Shrine's main buildings are built over water. The temple is truly stunning at the peak of high tide, when the shrine appears to float on the surface of the bay. Miyajima is a place where wild deer roam freely through the streets and often come up to you looking for a snack.

After a ferry ride across the Seto Inland Sea we were greeted by FF Ehime home hosts Tetsuji and Masuko Tamai. They took us to their beautiful home and gardens in the city of Matsuyama in the Prefecture of Ehime. We had a relaxing afternoon and evening and an opportunity to get to know our hosts. The next day we drove to the small city of Uchiko. We walked the historic narrow streets and visited a temple, shops, national cultural houses, and a theater. After a stop to see Tetsuji's twin brother we headed home for a nice stir-fry dinner. We were up early to see the local celebration of "Autumn Festival." There were men pushing their elaborate portable shrines to get the bragging rights to see who could reach the finish before the other clubs. Next, we visited the Shinto Shrine where Adrienne rang the prayer bell. Before heading home, we enjoyed the public hot springs foot bath. For dinner we each made our own Sushi.

The fourth day we met the rest of our team at Matsuyama Castle. We rode the gondola up to start a two-hour tour of the five levels. Then we enjoyed the formal gardens and the tea ceremony. The day ended where we



treated our hosts with a traditional dinner in a private room overlooking the gardens. Next was a very full day on the Shimanami Sea Route highway that connects Ehime and Hiroshima with four great bridges. All the Ambassadors and some hosts got on a charter bus. The first high bridge was one and a half miles long and we crossed the first island where we caught a boat to experience the dramatic tidal currents. Back on the bus we crossed the second bridge which was like our Golden Gate Bridge. Then two more bridges and a temple and the National Treasures Museum. Then the two-hour ride back to Matsuyama with a mandatory stop at one of the many ice cream shops.

We decided to not do the day trip to Kyoto with the team because we had done that been there plus rain was in the forecast. We slept in and had a late breakfast. Our relaxed day with our hosts included a bath at the famous Dogo Hot Springs. The building is over 100 years old and the springs have a 3000-year history. Next was a travel day by charter bus to Mie Prefecture and to settle in with our new hosts who live in Tsu city. The trip takes most of the day. We zoomed through the middle of Kobe and Osaka on raised superhighways that are sometimes three stories off the ground.

Our first day in Mie we spent the day with our hosts. They took us for a gondola ride up a nearby mountain where we got a bite to eat and enjoyed the views. It is the tallest lift in Japan. That evening's dinner with all our team and hosts the local mayor was there to welcome us. The next day we got to go to a middle school and watch an entertainment program for all the students. When we got home, we were surprised to find seven friends of our hosts joining us for dinner. It was their learning to speak English club. We also took a day trip on a bus to the Friendship Force club at Nara. They showed us Temple Park where the temple has the largest Buddha in Japan and more tame deer everywhere. All in all, it was a very good five day visit with our new friends in Mie.

Our trip ended with two nice days in Tokyo. I was surprised by the big beautiful Shinjuku Gyoen National Garden which is their central park with lakes and all kinds of beautiful gardens set in the middle of millions of people. We saw the imperial palace where the Emperor lives. Some of us took the elevator to the top of the Sky Tower for lunch. We learned how to use the clean and well-run subway system. They even had signs promoting the 2020 Olympics that we now hope can be in 2021.

### **Connie Walters**

The big take-away from the year of COVID-19 is this: Time, energy, and money are never wasted on family and friends. So, my first trips will be with them in Portland and Vegas, Omaha, Wichita, Dallas and Austin.

Sailing on Lake Superior, paddling the rivers of Iowa, and hiking in the Rockies are also priorities, to experience the natural beauty of this country. I have an itch to explore the Canadian Rockies as well, and Nova Scotia and Maine. Montreal is one of few urban areas I've been wanting to visit. Then... Ireland, Scotland, Wales, and England for old world charm. Mark and I need to celebrate retirement someplace special. Southern Spain, France, Italy, from a ship on the Mediterranean would be amazing, maybe a windjammer cruise.

Domestic trips with Friendship Force are now more appealing than ever. The destination is not so much an issue as the itinerary to visit gardens, historic homes, art museums, and culturally significant events. I like the idea of homestays and want to participate with incoming groups as I am able.

### **Dee Willemsen**

My first journey with FF was to Japan in October of 2013. I was invited by Else Johnson to be her roommate for this adventure and that was my impetus to join Friendship Force which I have enjoyed ever since.

Our itinerary was:

Fly to Tokyo and on to Hiroshima  
Three nights in Hiroshima  
On to Ehime for a five-night home stay  
On to Mie for a five-nights home stay  
Then on to Tokyo for two nights

A highlight, albeit a sobering one, was the visit to the Hiroshima Peace Park where our journey directors, Joy Schaal (from Omaha) and Elise Johnson, where we laid a large bouquet of flowers at the monument. Our host in Ehime was a retired dentist and his wife, and in Mie we were hosted by the president of the local Chamber of Commerce and his wife. The grandson and granddaughter of our hosts in Mie stopped in every morning before going to school as their parents were already at work. They were beautiful and delightful children and added to our enjoyment of the stay.

A small pocket-size translator used by one of our hosts helped overcome language barriers. We experienced wonderful home-cooked meals and also meals in local restaurants. We were treated to parades, with visits to temples and shrines, beautiful Japanese gardens, Japanese tea ceremonies, shopping, and a spa experience. The high-speed train to Tokyo and the tour of the city were very exciting.

I found Japan to be a beautiful country. The people were all so kind, and our hosts and Japanese Friendship Force clubs were very hospitable. I have not been back since but would not hesitate to do so. Unfortunately, I have not kept in touch with our hosts but do think of them often and recall the wonderful memories of our visit. Maybe some time they will come to the United States. It was great to share this experience with other members of our club and with those from other states and Mexico who were also part of the journey.

### Past Members

#### Nan and Fran Keith

*(Fran passed in 2017)*

Fran and I were able to take several memorable trips with Friendship Force, one being our trip to Germany. We stayed with a couple from what was once East Germany. He was a medical doctor and she was a nurse. Their house was very nice and we were able to eat our breakfast on the patio.

We walked to a “no man’s land” – a large grassy strip between the east and west which was overlooked by guard towers manned by armed guards who shot anyone trying to cross into West Germany.

We visited Auschwitz which is a horrible but fascinating place. We saw the gas chamber, the shower rooms and the crematorium. We walked along the wooden bench which served as the toilet area. It was a bench with holes in it where prisoners sat to go to the bathroom. The urine and feces fell into a trough below. We saw room size cages – one filled with shoes, one with human hair and one with children’s toys. All of these were left behind when the owners were gassed. The sign at the entrance read “Truth Will Set You Free”. We saw the railroad cars that brought the captives to their “Hell Hole”.

We visited Berlin where we saw a section of the “Berlin Wall” that was left standing. It divided East from West. We were able to stand where Hitler stood overlooking his thousands of followers giving his speeches. We had seen the same platform in the news reels. We took a side trip to a museum which housed a large display of ingenious ways people tried to escape to the West. We never knew how many made it out!

We also visited Dachau prison in Poland. We came away counting our blessings.

We traveled by bus on the Autobahn in some of the beautiful parts of Germany.

## Linda Robel

*(Linda passed in 2018)*

The first time I went on a Friendship Force trip was to Germany in 1982. There were 240 people on board a plane from Des Moines to Berlin. A newly-formed club of 77 participants deplaned in Berlin and 77 Germans boarded our plane for the return to Des Moines where they met the FFGDM club members who home hosted them. We were to spend two weeks with our German hosts, most of whom we had corresponded with prior to our departure.

My American friend was worried for me that I would not have suitable accommodations as I had acknowledged on my application that I was a farmer. She assumed that all farms had outhouses in other countries. I was assigned to a German farm family. I assured her I would be fine. I was not opposed to using an outhouse; I had used one before. However, she insisted on arranging a plan by phone that would bring her immediately to me if I found my conditions not acceptable as she assumed her accommodations would be.

We arrived in Berlin. The German man who was pairing ambassadors and home hosts, pointed at my name badge, "Robel", and then pointed to his own, they were the same. Wow! How about that – all the way to Germany to find someone with my husband's family name. He called out my name and Gertrude stepped forward to claim me. Another WOW! Because it was a great pairing. She was smiling pleasantly, I knew I would like her. We soon left for her home.

Getting out of her car, I saw an immense two-story home and beautiful grounds. She had told me she lived on a farm – a farm of two acres! Her father was a steel manufacturer in Berlin during WWII and had sent Gertrude, her mother and sister to the farm for safety. The farm was on the 'outskirts of Berlin' and within a block of the Berlin Wall. After leaving my suitcase in a very large bedroom, she showed me the bathroom. It contained a modern stool with a water closet above, a sink and a four-footed tub. There were luxurious towels and carpet.

Gertrude was a gardener like me. The next morning, we walked in the garden on 'the farm'; it was all flowers, no tomatoes, or other vegetables. The house had been used by the Soviets and the Germans as housing because it was so large. She, as a sixteen-year-old, had escaped the amorous attention of the Soviet soldiers by hiding in the garden. Later, when the Germans occupied the house, she was again forced to hide in the garden. She survived the occupation of Berlin by serving as a housemaid for American officers. She was well educated and spoke English.

We talked constantly. I am from a German family and we discovered we shared a lot of traditions and ideas of farm life. One day I was showing her pictures of my family – a son, a daughter, and my husband. She said, "Your daughter looks just like your husband, but your son doesn't look like either one of you. Doesn't that bother your husband?" At first, I didn't comprehend what she meant and I must have looked bewildered. Finally, I said, "I don't know, I'll have to ask him when I get home." I smiled. I got it. "That would bother a German man" she replied. That was how I learned to laugh and accept the differences in cultures.

Another lesson came when my friend, who had proudly announced upon our arrival that she was going to stay with "a doctor's family in the city", called daily to see if you could stay at Gertrude's. She had only a sofa to sleep on within the doctor's apartment. It was a small room with a Great Dane as a companion who often welcomed her with liquid kisses, a lot.

I have learned so much – so many things from others I have met. Gertrude and I have gone to many places together since 1982 but the most important thing I know is that everyone everywhere is the same. We all want peace and happiness for ourselves and our children.

## Barb Royal

Jon (my husband at the time) and I were on the second Friendship Force trip from Iowa, in April 1978. This was an exchange that brought Venezuelans to Des Moines at the same time. Part of our commitment was to find hosts for those people visiting Des Moines.

When we signed up, and even when we learned we'd been selected as part of the delegation of 250 Iowans, the destination city was still unknown. We were eventually told where we would be going (Maracaibo, Venezuela), and who we would be staying with: a university professor and his wife (Oswaldo and Yully Rosero) and their children.

Our first shock was showering – no hot water. Maracaibo is such a hot place; they just don't see the need and take the cold water straight from the mountains. I actually learned to love cold showers. During our stay we were highly scheduled by the Venezuelan government and had guards with our buses whenever we went anywhere as a group. In addition to informative tours and lectures, we were entertained and well fed.

Our first full day there (Thursday, 04/13) we had a bus tour of Maracaibo and then a lunch stop that included music and dancing. That night there was a big outdoor party for us with our hosts at Club Alianza.

On Friday we toured an oil company, where we learned about drilling and processing and took launches through the oil fields to Tiajuana, where we had an enormous lunch. There was music by a group of drummers, and a swing choir sang. After we were bussed back to Maracaibo, our hosts took us to a birthday party for a child whose family were friends of theirs. They served drinks and tequeños and pastelitos, and provided a pinata of Raggedy Ann before serving ice cream cones and cake.

Saturday morning, we went to the beach with the family – a club area for the professors at the university. We learned that many beach areas were privately owned by various organizations. We made several stops along the way to buy Pepsi, arepas, various melons, and bananas. At the empty beach Oswaldo made a lunch of steak, hot dogs, and fried bananas. We all had a good swim. We drove from there to El Mojan where we took a launch to Isla Toas and San Carlos. We walked and stopped more than once for beers, and were serenaded by men with cuatros. Late that evening there was a show at Baralta Theater where we saw the swing choir and dancers from the university. Later we went to Oswaldo's brother's for more food (ceviche & pepitones, and then barbecued beef and sausage), and beer and conversation. We watched movies of Merida (where we would be going) and Margarita, plus clips from American movies.

Sunday, we slept in before going to La Chinita, an old church, then a brief stop at the University swimming club, where we met more professors, and then back home for a lunch of arroz con pollo, potato salad, black beans, and melon juice. For dessert we had juevos chimbos – very sweet and tasty, made from egg yolks. In the afternoon the group went to a bullfight – not something I'll ever repeat. That night we went out for pizza – seemed strangely like home.

Monday we were bused to the farm district to see meat and milk processing plants. We had an elaborate picnic lunch at a big cattle ranch where we were served enormous steaks with lots of other food and beverages.

Tuesday (04/18) we got up at 5:30 to go with Yully and Oswaldo to Merida to visit Yully's brother and sister. We stopped along the way for breakfast, and enjoyed a beautiful drive in the Andes, though we encountered some fallen rocks. We got to Merida and the beautiful family home that backs onto the mountains around 5:15. We had coffee and then went to check in at the hotel Belensate. There was a communication problem between Yully and the desk man. It turned out he was British, so he started talking with me. There was no water, but it came on about 7:45. And then the electricity went off. We got some Cuba Libres to relax, and later we all went to visit another friend of our host. I made the mistake of admiring a beautiful Columbian wool poncho of Maria's, and

when we left, she gave it to me. I thus learned the lesson of 'mi casa es su casa.' We concluded our evening at another house for more drinking, talking and singing.

We finally got back to the hotel about 1:30 a.m. Both the lights and the water were on, so we got to brush our teeth, but the water was off by the time someone wanted to take a shower.

Wednesday the desk called to get us up at 7:00. The water was still off so we brushed with thermos water. There was a big argument at the desk because they were trying to charge 5 times what had been agreed upon, and Oswaldo also thought we should get a discount for the lack of water. After breakfast at an American style restaurant, we were going to ride a cable car, but it was closed for repairs. And then we had to go get the brakes on the car fixed – a good idea, especially when driving in the mountains. After some shopping we paid a final visit to Yully's brother and sister before heading for home around noon.

And then the next adventure began. About 45 minutes from Merida the road was closed – and would only open for an hour at 6:00 in the evening. We went back to take an alternate route. It was a beautiful drive on a decent road, though we had to clear occasional rock slides – until we came to one, we couldn't clear. So back to Merida, where we had barbequed chicken before returning to our original road to get through at 6:00. Finally got home about 2:00 in the morning.

Thursday we were bused to the Goajira area for a great boat ride. We stopped at an open market for dances and shopping, and went to a party at the police beach club, where they made 10 in our group honorary policemen.

Back at Club Nautico we stayed for a long time for singing and talking and telling jokes. That night we went to Teatro Bellas Artes for a concert of classical, some lighter pieces, and ended with An American in Paris.

Friday Yully and I spent time together shopping, having lunch and swimming, while Jon and Oswaldo went to take pictures of the city. Then we all went to Teatro Bellas Artes for a final program of music, dancing, and many speeches. After dinner at a Chinese restaurant and one drink at a disco club we called it a night.

Saturday (04/22) We all gathered at Club Nautico around 10:30 and loaded our bags on the buses. We visited with people, took pictures and ate. As we were about to board the buses, we were told there would be a long delay, so Jon and Oswaldo took off to buy a hat for Jon's dad. Then we were told it was a mistake and we should go ahead and board. Jon and Oswaldo made it back just in time!

When our plane finally arrived to take us home, we went out to greet the Maracuchos who had just returned from Des Moines. We were able to meet the people who had stayed with the hosts we had lined up. When we finally went to board the plane, we went through a long line of handshaking, and to our surprise, Oswaldo and Yully were at the end of the line. It seems Jose, one of our guards, had snuck them in.

A year or two later, Oswaldo was teaching in the US temporarily and they and the kids came to visit us for a week.