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Promoting Social Justice, Human Rights, and Peace

Lessons from a Distant Road: Center for Global Education Travel Seminars

(1993: 16 minutes)

Transcribed by Darrell Gene Moen

Joel Muggge (Director, Center for Global Education): The primary goal of the center is to equip people to serve in building a more just, peaceful, and sustainable society. One of the ways we try to do this is to bring people fact-to-face with those struggling for justice and human dignity all around the world, and in that encounter with real-life experience, with the experience of others who are different from ourselves, real learning takes place.

Each of our travel seminars is a group of people, traveling together, sharing their experience with each other, so that out of that learning community a deeper experience can take place. When the Center began, our work was focused primarily in Mexico and Central America. However, in the late-1980s, we began to expand our work into the Philippines, the Middle East, South Africa, and Namibia, and most recently, into [mainland] Southeast Asia and the Indian subcontinent. Parts of the world that were important for U.S. [foreign] policy, and where there were questions of justice, questions of peace that were central to what was going on in that country.

Charles Mayhew (corporate executive, tour participant): The focus of our trip was children. The first day in Nicaragua when we went to one of those real poor sections, I remember walking down and looking down at the dirt floors and the kids with hardly any clothes, and it was really, really poor. I tried to explain it to somebody, but unless you've been there you can't really [understand and] be close to it. You can't get the depth of it unless you're there.

Constance Falvey (teacher, tour participant): It's given me a picture that I've never had before. It was just places on the map. This has really been a look at the people themselves and their issues, problems, and concerns. So, it's made it even more alive.

George Shapiro (university professor, tour participant): My best learning goes on when I can experience it for myself. Then it becomes a part of me. I not only read

about it, but it gets inside my gut. I've tasted it, I've smelled it, I've touched it. I remember the smells of Nicaragua. I remember the smells of El Salvador. They're part of that learning [experience]. That will never leave [me]. It's much richer than reading a line or even seeing a picture.

Brian Gordon (counselor, tour participant): I don't know how you can take one of these trips and not be changed by it. I can't smell wood burning without thinking of some campesino on some farm somewhere.

Mark Lester (CGE Program Coordinator): We don't try to tell people what to think or what they should get out of this experience. We think it's important for people to discover, on their own. It's their experience. We're trying to facilitate their encounter with the people here. The things that they discover, the things that move their hearts, that's not something that we control.

Geraldine Carter (social service agency executive, tour participant): Taking the trip with a group of people, and particularly with an educational focus, I think it's so broadening in the sense that you're given background information that you possibly would not receive otherwise. And then the whole sharing, collective sharing of the experience as you go along. I feel that we learn from one another as well as learning from the people by looking at each others' experience. But secondly, I don't think that I would have had the opportunity to get in some of the places as an individual that we got into as a group.

Kathy McBride (CGE Program Coordinator): People have the opportunity to meet first-hand with people in different sectors of society, from a governmental level and also people working at the grassroots level. If a person comes on their own, they would not be able to set up, for example, government meetings because you have to have a point of reference. Landowners need to know who they're talking with. And since the Center is known in the different countries, we're able to set up a program that allow people to understand a whole cross-section of perspectives.

Jose Solorzano (Nicaragua Staff, Center for Global Education): I believe that in the United States, there's not a lot of information available to people as to what's happening in our country. And when people come to Nicaragua, they see with their own eyes what is truly happening here.

Carol Fairbrother (employee assistance consultant, tour participant): I will be taking quite a bit of time, as I return home, to process the information that I have experienced here because it's quite profound, the emotional intensity, the direct contact with the individuals, the actual true-life stories that people are sharing regarding the suffering, regarding the pain, regarding the impact, for instance, of the [U.S.-backed Contra] war.

Pam Keesey (librarian, tour participant): We were just standing and talking to some women. The woman with two daughters has been coming here [to the garbage dump] for four or five years and has brought both of her daughters here. They come during the day, and the daughters go to school in the afternoon and in the evening. And they come here to find clothing, to find shoes, to find notebooks so that they can use them in school. It's just very depressing.

Geraldine Carter (social service agency executive, tour participant): I really needed the personal support that the group was able to give to me, because we were all experiencing the same thing. You could see that everyone was disturbed about the poverty and about the pain that the children were going through.

William Falvey (attorney, tour participant): Everybody views something a little differently. I look at a problem or an issue or a people one way, and somebody like Debbie in a different light. Using the eyes and minds of other people, to me, is a very helpful thing.

Debra Tunland (purchasing agent, tour participant): The group seems to be very close; we've become family. It helps to have people that relate to the same thing you're going through.

Comments of unidentified tour participant: Well, I think that the kind of people who usually come on this type of delegation are people who are willing to take that extra step, to risk a little, to find out a little bit, to look and see the world outside the small community that they live in.

Comments of unidentified tour participant: I came with the fear that I would just be overwhelmed by what I would see here. But it hasn't been that way. Little by little, it's sinking in what the realities are.

Melinda Wagner (pastor, tour participant): For me, the world is bigger now, than what it was. And it's not only bigger in terms of statistics or learning from books, but in terms of individuals I have met and situations I have seen.

Comments of unidentified tour participant: When you stand beside a seven-, eight-, or nine-year-old kid, that in order to get by the difficulties of that day, the hunger pains in the stomach, [and see that kid] get high on glue, [you know] there's something wrong with the world. These are children.

Comments of unidentified tour participants: "Along with seeing the places with needs, we have always seen a person making a difference. And those places, where

people are trying to make a difference, really give us some hope, to offset the suffering."

"I have travelled extensively, and I generally have done that either alone or with one or two other people. So this was my first experience with a group. It was the most unique discovery process that I have ever experienced."

"Things seem so desperate, yet in the eyes, particularly of the mothers, you could still see a sense of hope for their children. A commitment to education, trying to do whatever they could do to help their children even though the situations were desperate. In the U.S., we do have resources, at least, even though the situations that I face every day are similar, with children in poverty, it was beneficial to me personally. It rejuvenated me. Now, I'm ready to go back home where I can make a difference. I know that there's not much that I can do here, but there are things that I can do at home."

"When I first planned on going down there, there were moments where I thought, "I don't have time." And maybe you could rationalize why another time would be better. But now that's we've gone and come back, how can you put anything above that, as far as importance?"

George Shapiro (university professor, tour participant): We went to El Salvador, we went to Honduras, and we went to Nicaragua. This is in 1985. That was probably the most significant learning experience that I have ever had in my life. Staying with a family; they gave up their bed for us. And the next morning, having breakfast with the few eggs that they had, and seeing the little children standing around the corner.

The eggs and the rice, do we share it with them? Does that humiliate them? And my wife Jan and I had to share it. We couldn't do it alone. And you can see that I'm still very moved by that experience. It occurred in 1985, I still remember those people deeply.

Donald Fraser (former Mayor of Minneapolis and U.S. Congressman): The last trip was to Israel and the Occupied Territories, and it involved opportunities to talk to Israelis and also to Palistinians and people who were in the Occupied Territories. I used to take trips when I was a member of the United States Congress, and I found quite a contrast.

The Center is able to really communicate at an individual level free of the mantle of government. I found the communication much freer and much more open. I don't know of anybody else that does this. If I contemplated going to a country now as a tourist, there's no way I could have the opportunities to get the diversity of perspectives that we get when we're on one of these trips.

Karin Larson (college program director, tour participant): We went to Southeast Asia: Thailand, Laos, and Hong Kong. The trip was mainly focused on refugees and refugee issues. I was hearing the statistics all the time, and after awhile I felt really numbed to the whole situation. It really took going into Laos and seeing the hills and seeing the valleys that they had to cross and looking at the Mekong River that they all had to swim across while being shot at by snipers, to really understand the courage, the tremendous courage that each one of the refugees that we see here [in the U.S.] have gone through. I think the whole [travel] experience is really uplifting in a lot of ways.

It does pull your heartstrings, but you also remember the smiles of the kids and you remember the tremendous depth and perception of certain individuals and that's the sort of thing that gives you hope. You know, you can explore some serious issues with people, but being there with a group makes it easier somehow because you are able to share and you're able to talk through it.

Mary Lou Williams (college professor, tour participant): We went to South Africa and Namibia. It was a growth process for me, and the growth started the first day of the trip, from the minute we arrived as we drove through Alexandria. You could see the anger and the pain and the poverty. They were people; they weren't just someone on a newscast or someone in a book or in a newspaper. They were flesh and blood people.

And I saw myself over and over, and I cried when I heard a woman, a South African black woman, use my same words to talk to us, words I've used with my students. It was so moving, and I wasn't prepared for that. You don't, in your orientation sessions, there's nothing that will tell you how you will connect with the humanness of the people you will meet. There isn't any other way to travel. I'm sorry, but monuments don't do it; people make this a unique experience.