

9-1-2004

Cultural exchange

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Recommended Citation

Stewart, Jim '76 (2004) "Cultural exchange," *Furman Magazine*: Vol. 47 : Iss. 3 , Article 32.
Available at: <https://scholarexchange.furman.edu/furman-magazine/vol47/iss3/32>

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Cultural exchange

Rotary-sponsored trip to Brazil has decidedly Furman flair

They came together as part of a Rotary International Group Study Exchange program, chosen through a competitive application process to take part in a five-week cultural and vocational trip to Brazil.

The group consisted of five Greenville area residents — four young professionals, none of them a Rotary Club member, and their team leader, a respected Rotarian.

Before their first meeting, the participants knew that they shared an interest in travel and in learning about different ways of life. What they did not know until that initial gathering was that all but one of them had something else in common: They were Furman graduates.

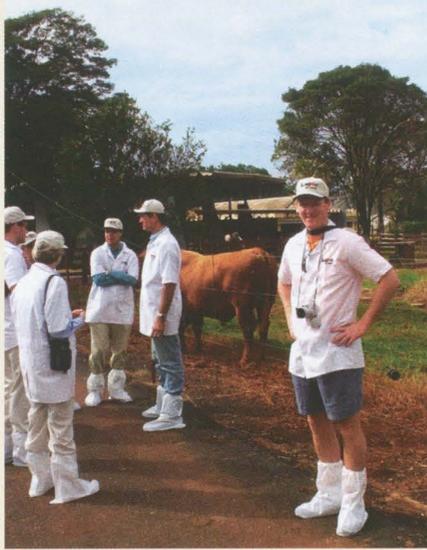
“Being a Furman alum wasn’t among the criteria for selection,” says team leader Rebecca Clay Faulkner ’69, an education professor at the University of South Carolina Upstate. “But maybe it really wasn’t such a coincidence.”

The selection committee was, after all, looking for top talent, so the Furman pedigree likely came into play for Kirby Mitchell ’96, managing attorney for the South Carolina Centers for Equal Justice; Chu Yon (Pak) Smith ’01, a market resource consultant with Right Management Consultants; and Mark Davis ’00, a businessman and farmer. Davis actually wasn’t among the original applicants but was invited to interview and then to join the others after two alternates were unable to participate.

“It probably didn’t hurt that I speak Spanish and Portuguese,” says Davis, a Francis M. Hipp intern to Rio de Janeiro during his student days.

The Furman connection extended even to the alternate team leader, Bert Strange ’68, who took part in the pre-trip preparation in case Faulkner was unable to go. And according to the Furman folks, the “outsider” in the group — Kathleen King, an accountant and controller — fit in perfectly and proved worthy enough to be named an honorary Furman graduate by her travel mates.

Before their departure in mid-May, the quintet spent months in team-building exercises and cultural discussions while also studying Portuguese with Furman professor Christina Buckley and three Brazilian exchange students. After arriving in Sao Paolo, they embarked



During a tour of Lagoa da Serra, a leader in bovine genetics and semen production, Kirby Mitchell models the booties the travelers wore to avoid picking up unwanted souvenirs; the group visits an Embraer aircraft manufacturing plant in Gavião Peixoto. From left: Mark Davis, Kathleen King, Mitchell, Chu Yon Smith and Becky Faulkner.

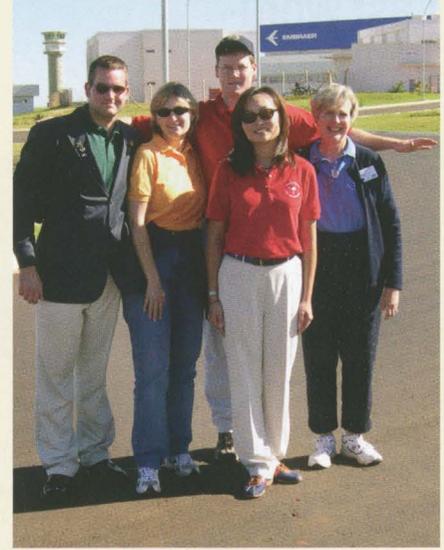
upon a five-week odyssey to assorted cities, where they lived with local families, met dignitaries, spoke to Rotary clubs and learned how their professions are practiced abroad. In the process they toured everything from tanneries and chicken hatcheries to automotive research parks and aeronautic centers.

Brazilians are known for their hospitality, as the GSE members readily attest, and the graciousness of their hosts added much to the visitors’ understanding of native lifestyles and culture. Their accommodations ranged from spacious homes to one-bedroom apartments, but wherever they stayed they found acceptance and warmth.

“We felt a real connection with all of our host families,” says Smith. “They wanted us to be a part of their lives. We were treated like royalty, and living in their homes added another dimension to our trip.”

Their hosts’ desire to please was evident as well in the group’s intense daily schedules, during which they were afforded an in-depth, often behind-the-scenes look into Brazilian business and cultural practices.

For example, lawyers are held in high regard in Brazil, so in most towns Mitchell was granted permission to tour the local jails, despite their somewhat notorious reputations. He attended trials, met judges and was invited to speak at a law school — with the help of a translator who introduced him as “one of the best 35 lawyers in the United States.” (He had actually been named one of Greenville’s “Best and Brightest Under 35” by *Greenville* magazine, but as Mitchell jokes, “She wasn’t that far off.”)



COURTESY CHU YON SMITH (2)

Faulkner reveled in the opportunity to be an observer in schools and other educational facilities. “Not a day goes by that I don’t mention something about Brazil in my classes,” she says. Through visits to companies and ad agencies, Smith was able to examine firsthand the differences in marketing practices between the United States and Brazil, and Davis was so impressed by Brazilian business and technological practices that he decided to change jobs upon his return home. He now works for Synnex, a global information technology company.

The travelers were also required to make formal presentations to Brazilian Rotary clubs. They delighted their hosts at these gatherings by delivering their talks in Portuguese; indeed, after one event they were told they were the first GSE team to speak in Portuguese in 30 years.

Since their return to Greenville, they’ve been spreading the word about their experience to area Rotary clubs.

“Rotary truly opens doors, and I think it’s really up to those of us who benefit from this program to share our stories,” says Davis. Faulkner adds, “Next to the U.S. government, Rotary is the second largest distributor of scholarships of any organization in the world. It really is designed to build goodwill and understanding, and it exemplifies that ideal.”

— Jim Stewart

To learn more about the program, visit www.rotary.org/foundation/educational and click on the Group Study Exchange link, or e-mail Ken Tucker, Greenville district Rotary GSE chair, at ktucker25@juno.com.